

Where Nothing Happened: The Experience of War Captivity and Levinas's Concept of the 'There Is'

Introduction

In June 1940, a year into the Second World War and long after the Nazi persecution of Jews had begun, something remarkable happened. A Jewish officer in the French army, openly declaring his faith to his captors in the expectation of a certain death, was taken into German war captivity and detained there in accordance with international law. He was released unharmed five years later.

The officer in question was Emmanuel Levinas. He was not an exception; just amongst the French forces that fell into German hands were 55,000 Jews (Spoerer, 2005: 505; Annette Wieviorka (2001: 106) gives a much lower figure of 10,000-15,000), and nearly all survived German war captivity. In this respect, the Jewish members of the French armed forces were in no different position than their non-Jewish colleagues, as both Jews and non-Jews were equally protected by the French uniform. Nor was Levinas alone amongst 20th century French thinkers to count war captivity amongst his wartime experiences. Fernand

Braudel, Jean-Paul Sartre and Paul Ricoeur, to name only a few, were also in German war captivity.

And yet, Levinas's experiences are of specific *legal* interest in a way that the experiences of others may not be.¹ This interest stems not so much from the particular details of his captors' (often less than perfect) compliance with the laws of war than from the particular juridico-political space (in the sense in which Agamben (1998) applies this term to the concentration camp) in which Levinas found himself as a protected Jew in Germany. Jewish prisoners of war ('POWs') were in a special position because they were excluded from two fronts, that of the limited war fought between Germany and its enemies on the Western front and that of the unlimited 'war' between Germany and those whom it regarded as its racial foes. While all members of the French armed forces could expect their exclusion from further involvement in the conflict after they had surrendered, this being required by the rules of the war in which they were engaged, Jewish members were at the same time part of a conflict to which no such rules applied. Hitler's persecution of Jews did not just go to their national but to their religious and biological identity; resisting him was not just a fight in which one risked one's life to win, but a fight for life or death. There should have been no middle ground between these poles, and yet the Jewish prisoners

found themselves in the midst of German territory, their lives protected by the very same people who absolutely wanted them dead.

The difficulty of situating the space of the POW camp within the order of war also applies to its legal co-ordinates. Surely, the camp *was* a legal space (rather than a space outside of law), as it excluded the Jewish prisoners from the extra-legal force of the persecutions. But it also excluded them from exercising their legal agency both in war and in civilian life, to which POWs were not permitted to return until the end of the war. If the camp was not a space that permitted the exercise of legal agency, yet did not release the prisoners into an extra-legal space of freedom, where and what was it? Was it a prison, as its name suggests, even though there was no intention on the part of the law to punish or reform those within it? Was it a protective space, even though this protection was not aimed at prisoners' individual agency (on the contrary, this was suspended) and merely ensured their collective survival as living bodies for the purpose of limiting war? What did this absence of engagement that prisoners experienced – whether by law or by other forces – mean for their existence in the camp?

In addition to these questions about the status of the camp and the kind of existence it afforded, Levinas's war-time experiences can also be singled out for another reason. He wrote a philosophical work in captivity that he published after the war under the title *Existence and Existents*. The main concept developed in this work in a section entitled *Existence Without Existents* is the 'there is' (*il y a*), a concept that Levinas all but abandoned in his post-war turn towards the ethical relation to the other.²

The 'there is' has been described as 'one of Levinas' most fascinating propositions' (Blanchot, 1986: 49), leading Jacques Derrida, who 'discovered *Existence and Existents* by chance in a Paris bookshop in the early 1960s' (Bernasconi, 2001: vii), first to engage with Levinas's work (see Derrida, 1978). However, the 'there is' has also been described as elusive – 'Levinas can barely say even what it is not' (Bernasconi, 2001: xii) – and this may explain the concept's 'inherent impenetrability' (Bernasconi, 2001: xv). Indeed, it is not uncommon to regard the 'there is' as reflecting no experience at all, even as something that is by definition beyond experience. Hent de Vries (2005: 388-389) thus regards the 'there is' as the result of a pure thought experiment by which persons and things are subtracted from the world until nothing is left that could be phenomenologically accessed or represented. De Vries writes that even though Levinas philosophically reflects on the

impersonal, undifferentiated being – the ‘there is’ – that remains after the world has been emptied of persons and things, ‘he admits that there can be no representation of this dimension.’ De Vries consequently questions whether it is possible for Levinas to keep a place in his discourse ‘for this shadow side of our existence.’

This article makes no claim of being able to engage with these philosophical theories on their own terms; however, it does offer the description of a legal space (the POW camp) in which people experienced non-experience. It is true, for a small minority of Western forces German war captivity turned out to be a time of study, sporting endeavours and attempts to escape. However, for the vast number of Western POWs, the years of their captivity were filled to varying extents with drudgery and boredom, a seemingly endless wait on the prisoners’ part to be released into a life once more of their own making.

On the basis of this experience by the majority, war captivity and the legal space of the POW camp could perhaps simply be dismissed as uninteresting, particularly when compared with its ‘big brother,’ the concentration camp (‘big’ in terms of the amount of relevant scholarship, not in terms of the number of people who passed through it; this is dwarfed by the estimated 35m people in war captivity in the Second World War (Davis,

1977: 162)). When Levinas (2009: 201) begins a short piece on his experiences as a POW by stating that '[e]verything has been said of captivity,' he thus means that there is really nothing interesting to add, that it is simply a matter of 'the greyness of the barbed wire enclosure' and 'foggy mornings when one leaves for work' (Levinas, 2009: 201).

However, at least from a historical perspective, it seems that not much has been said *yet*. It has thus been noted that despite significant progress in this respect over the last decades, historical scholarship from a global comparative perspective on war captivity in the Second World War is only in its beginning stages, most historians having concentrated on the Holocaust in its wider sense, including the fate of Soviet POWs in Germany (Bischof et al., 2005: 14-15). And although there is a sizeable amount of legal scholarship on the laws relating to POWs, most of it is narrow in focus, concentrating on specific norms and legal arrangements (Overmans, 1999a: 487).

One is thus left with biographical, mostly descriptive, accounts of war captivity. While these sometimes appear to offer little more than an enumeration of minor hardships and prison life anecdotes, seemingly confirming that for Western forces, war captivity was a largely unremarkable, even if unpleasant, experience, readers will however find themselves

struck by a sense of unease and melancholy that pervades all these accounts, and the cause of which is often difficult to locate. There is a sense that *something* happened in the camps after all, that war captivity was an experience that was not just unpleasant, but in some way *disturbing*. After the war, many ex-POWs thus found it difficult to talk or write about their time in captivity until much later in life. Like many others, Levinas and his fellow inmates did not keep in touch (Malka, 2006: 78), and Levinas himself hardly ever spoke about this time and only rarely mentioned it in his work. Can this really be attributed merely to survivor's guilt or the urge of prisoners to forget and move on after the war (Malka, 2006: 78)?

This article asks what happens to subjectivity in a space of exclusion devoid of engagement by others. It will first set out the conditions of Levinas's war captivity, before then mapping the imagined interruption of relations to persons and things set out in *Existence and Existents* onto the real interruption of relations experienced by Levinas in the camp. It will argue that in the camp, prisoners were left in a state of suspension between life and death in which their subjectivity progressively dissolved until there was only impersonal existence:

For where the continual play of our relations with the world is interrupted we find neither death nor the 'pure ego,' but the anonymous state of being . . . the Being which we become

aware of when the world disappears is not a person or a thing, or the sum total of persons and things; it is the fact that one is, the fact that *there is*. (Levinas, 2001: 8)

The project of reading a philosophical concept into a historical situation and from there into a space conditioned by law does not come without its own problems. One of these is the existing philosophical and literary genealogy of the ‘there is,’ which reaches back to the thought of Martin Heidegger and Maurice Blanchot before the war (see, for example, Bernasconi, 2001; Caygill, 2002: 49-69; Davies, 1990; Fagenblat, 2005; Large, 2002; Robbins, 1999: 91-116 and Rolland, 2003.) Indeed, Levinas himself writes in the preface to *Existence and Existents* that even though ‘these studies . . . were . . . written down for the most part in captivity,’ they had been ‘begun before the war’ (2001: xxvii). Without contesting the significance and interest of these connections and continuities, as well as the philosophical interpretations and analyses that have been advanced of the concept generally (for very different examples of these, see Bergo, 1999; Caygill, 2002; Critchley, 1997; Fagenblat, 2002; Large, 2002; Morgan, 2007; Rose, 1992; de Vries, 2005; Wood, 2005), this article proceeds on the understanding that philosophical concepts may draw their life from more than one source, and that adding to these sources enlarges the range of theoretical possibilities that a concept may offer. After all, Levinas himself (in Levinas and Robbins, 2001: 96-97) states that ‘[i]t is incontestable that in every philosophical reflection,

in every philosophical essay, there are memories of a lived experience which is not rigorously intellectual.’

Another hurdle that a project such as this may encounter is the sometimes-held view of Levinas as a post-Holocaust thinker. In this respect, one can distinguish between those who claim that Levinas’s work offers a response to the Holocaust as an event of his time (in which he was involved through the death of a number of family members as well as through his position as a philosopher and Jewish thinker) and those who claim that Levinas personally experienced the Holocaust and that some of his thought is directly attributable to that experience. The former view is held, amongst others, by Robert Bernasconi (1995: 81), who states that Levinas’s work responds to the Jewish experience of being ‘universally persecuted’ (also see Plant, 2014). The latter view is exemplified by Sarah Hammerschlag’s description of Levinas’s writings immediately after the war as ‘an attempt at re-appropriating the experience of being persecuted’ (2012: 394) and Seán Hand’s statement that Levinas’s wartime writings refer to a ‘period of persecution and endurance’ (2013: 45, footnote omitted). Didier Pollefeyt (2015: 323) specifically regards the ‘there is’ as ‘based on the traumatic experience of the Holocaust.’

It is the latter account, not the former, which this article disputes, both through the historical material that it offers and through its proposal to read the ‘there is’ as the evil arising in the face of *no* other rather than in the face of violence and persecution. The fact that Levinas himself at times appears to blur the line between what he experienced and the experiences he felt to be rightly his,³ only highlights how difficult it was to carry forward the memory of a time where nothing happened.

In German war captivity

In the years leading up to the Second World War, Levinas felt himself part of a movement of religious affirmation and political opposition that had arisen as a result of the hatred directed against Jews in the first half of the century. Henri Bergson may serve as an example of the sentiments and choices this involved. To Levinas’s admiration, Bergson (in Malka, 2006: 24) offered in 1937 the following explanation for his decision not to convert to Catholicism despite an attraction to the faith: ‘I would have converted had I not seen the formidable wave of anti-Semitism which broke out over the world taking shape over the years. I wanted to remain among those who would be persecuted.’

Underlying this wish ‘to remain amongst those who would be persecuted’ was not just a feeling of solidarity but also the belief that for Jews, an active association with their faith had ceased to be a matter of choice. As Levinas (1990a: 69) had already explained in his 1934 essay *Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism*, the kind of truth bound to one’s physical embodiment that was expounded by Hitlerism left no escape. In 1935, Levinas (in Rolland, 2003: 74) then came to think of Hitlerism as ‘the greatest trial – an incomparable trial – through which Judaism has had to pass. . . . The pathetic destiny of being Jewish becomes a fatality. One can no longer flee it. The Jew is ineluctably riveted to his Judaism.’

Once the war started, the fight against anti-Semitism was one, but not the only motivation for Levinas to join the army on the side of France. According to his son Michael (in Malka, 2006: 263), Levinas held ‘a Napoleonic image of France against the Russia of pogroms,’ an image he saw confirmed in 1931 when the French state granted him citizenship, and which now contributed to his readiness to join the army. For Levinas, the war had taken on ‘a double meaning’ (Berg, 1990: 197) both as the fight against Hitler’s anti-Semitism and against his territorial ambitions.

Levinas was deployed as a translator with non-commissioned officer ('NCO') status. After only a few months of action, he entered war captivity in June 1940, having been captured at Rennes together with hundreds of thousands of other French forces. At that point, Levinas firmly expected to become the subject of persecution; he assumed a stance of defiance and, unlike many others, declared his faith openly. According to his son, Levinas then spent the next five years in the expectation of imminent deportation and death, accepting this to be his fate as a Jew (Malka, 2006: 262).

However, Levinas's German captors had no intention of sending him to a concentration camp. As evidenced by the low mortality rate amongst Western POWs (Overmans, 1999b: 14), Germany largely observed the requirements of the Geneva Convention in relation to its enemies on the Western front (Britain, France and the USA) and included within this compliance their Jewish members. Yves Durand (1999: 73) thus writes that 'the German armed forces by no means followed national socialist principles in this case, but complied with the general rules of the laws of war.' He rightly calls this a 'most astonishing' circumstance (Durand, 1999: 73).

As astonishing as it was, the reasons for the protection of Jewish POWs should be sought in politics and strategy rather than in moral scruples. There were considerations of reciprocity on the German side, as well as the perceived need to maintain an atmosphere in which collaboration with France remained possible. There was also, perhaps most crucially, the fact that POW camps were administered and overseen by the German military rather than the SS. Although the German military was by no means innocent of the murder of Jews elsewhere, the survival of *Western* POWs of Jewish faith can be said to have been largely attributable to its refusal to allow Germany's security and paramilitary forces to interfere in matters of POW administration. In this respect, the recognition by the military that the type of war fought on the Western front could not be practically combined with Nazi ideology without damaging the military's interests and objectives played an important part. After all, the war on the Western front was – particularly in the early stages – still conducted as a limited, 'gentlemanly' (Best, 1980: 218) war between equals, and Western POWs attracted the professional solidarity of German military personnel. Durand (1982: 324 and 354) even states that there was an 'effective respect of the quality of Jewish soldiers' despite their occasional bullying by the Germans.

This meant that Jewish POWs found themselves in a peculiar situation, in which ‘[d]e facto the safest place for a Jew in the German sphere of influence was in an *Oflag* or a *Stalag*’⁴ (Overmans, 2005: 872). Although Jewish POWs were often separated from their non-Jewish compatriots and, where they were required to work, were sometimes discriminated against and harassed,⁵ they were generally not in danger of their lives (Overmans, 1999a: 503) (although an exception to this occurred in instances where Jewish doctors were tasked with looking after those that had fallen ill in epidemics without receiving prior vaccinations; see Stelzl-Marx, 2000: 770, Durand, 1982: 354 and Berg, 1990: 201.) The camps thus became islands of protection within a doubly hostile territory.

One million French prisoners of war, Levinas amongst them, remained in Germany until the end of the war. The POWs were divided amongst a large number of camps across Germany (there were almost 250 POW camps in Germany by the end of the war, each with countless satellite work camps, in total numbering in their thousands (Overmans, 2005: 853). Levinas is commonly said to have been held at the POW camp Stalag XI B at Fallingbommel near Hanover. Stalag XI B was established in 1939 on the site of a German military training ground that stretches over the Lüneburg Heath. The POWs were accommodated in wooden temporary barracks, around which fences were drawn. These

barracks had initially been erected for the workers who were building the training ground in 1935, and Stalag XI B and the cluster of other camps that arose in the area of Fallingbostal (including the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen (not Buchenwald, as Salomon Malka (2006: 263) mistakenly notes)) were now surrounding the training ground, which remained active during the war.

A large number of prisoners were held in the camps at Fallingbostal; at its peak in 1944, the cluster of camps held 96,000 POWs of different nationalities (Fallingbostal Military Museum),⁶ thereby constituting one of the largest POW camp complexes in Germany at the time (Stiftung niedersächsische Gedenkstätten). General living conditions are likely to have been similar to most *Stammlager*, with overcrowding, rudimentary sanitation and medical care, insufficient or non-existent heating, infestation with vermin, and inadequate food and clothing being the norm (Tyas, 2010: 180).

It is unlikely, however, that Levinas was held at Stalag XI B itself. Affiliated to each *Stalag* were a myriad of smaller satellite camps – in the case of Stalag XI B, these numbered more than 2,000 (Stiftung niedersächsische Gedenkstätten) – that often consisted of little more than some barracks adjacent to a factory or farm. Levinas and his seventy or so Jewish

comrades-in-arms (Levinas, 1990b: 152) appear to have lived in such a satellite camp, a disused farm called 'Stelterhof' located in the vicinity of the forest in which they were put to work (Levinas, 2011: 27). This was nothing unusual; many POWs were accommodated near to their place of work, as there was often no transport available and the daily return to the main camp would have been impracticable or impossible on foot.

While no information is available on the precise capacity in which Levinas worked in the forest (his son describes him as having been a 'lumberjack' (in Malka, 2006: 261)), it is known that the workers in his detail got up at dawn and worked until about six o'clock with one lunch break. After that, they had time to themselves (Malka, 2006: 77). They also had one day off each week, which placed them in a better position than many ordinary foot-soldiers, whom Stephen Tyas (2010: 200) reports as having been 'forced to work 12 hours a day, day after day, every week of every month for years.'⁷ Although the work detail was restricted to Jewish prisoners, there is no indication that the work its members carried out was any more degrading or punishing than that of other details. POWs are said to have generally preferred work in the agricultural sector over that in the mining and production industries, as working and living conditions in the countryside were thought to be better (Bories-Sawala, 1996: 216-217). It is therefore reasonable to assume that Levinas's work

did not belong amongst the harshest types of work even amongst French POWs (not to mention POWs of other nationalities and other types of foreign workers, which were often treated much worse). The fact that Howard Caygill (2010: 28) writes that Levinas ‘as a Jew was set to work in a “Forestry Commando Unit” specifically assembled for Jewish POWs,’ and that this meant ‘that his experience of the camp was even more insecure and traumatic than that of his fellow non-Jewish POWs’ should therefore not, without more evidence, be taken as an inference of hardship or maltreatment that may have been targeted specifically at Jews. All French NCOs were effectively required to work, and while the legality of this requirement under international law was disputed even at the time (for more details, see Bories-Sawala, 1996 and Durand, 1982 and 1999), there was no distinction made in this respect between Jews and non-Jews.⁸ It is true that Levinas and his fellow Jewish POWs perceived their general protection by the Geneva Convention as less secure than did their non-Jewish colleagues, a perception to which the segregation of Jewish prisoners from other POWs undoubtedly contributed (Levinas, 2009: 210). But the actual living and working conditions of Levinas’s detail do not appear to have been particularly hard, and are unlikely to have reached the ‘cruel reduction to the minimal conditions necessary for survival’ that Jeffrey Bloechl (2011: 116) refers to. And while Levinas may have technically been a forced labourer, he was in a far better position than many of the civilian

forced labourers employed in Germany at the time. Indeed, one might say that Levinas's position emerges as one of 'relative privilege' (Bories-Sawala, 1996: 215) in this respect.

The work in the forest, for instance, appears to have left free time that Levinas and his fellow prisoners were able to fill with other occupations. Prisoners in Levinas's group are reported to have been able to send letters and receive parcels, have access to books and stage theatrical events (Malka, 2006: 76f). Levinas continued to be philosophically occupied during his time in captivity, reading a number of philosophical works, scribbling from time to time into a little notebook and reading to the other prisoners 'from texts that would make little sense to them' (Malka, 2006: 78).

Prison life also appears to have afforded Levinas an escape from bourgeois existence. After the war, he thus recalls the 'romantic' aspects of war imprisonment, in which prisoners were experiencing 'an exceptional present,' 'a new rhythm of life' due in large part to the freedom from concerns of bourgeois existence that war captivity entailed (Levinas, 2009: 201-203). This freedom was involuntary – after all it was *imprisonment* that had resulted in the loss of connection with families and peers, possessions and projects – but despite this

involuntariness, the prisoners felt that their lives were expanding as soon as the weight of ordinary existence had been lifted off them:

Paradoxical as it may seem, they [the prisoners] experienced in the narrow expanse [*dans la close étendue*] of the camps a magnitude of life larger and, under the eye of the sentinel, an unexpected freedom. They were not bourgeois, and that is their real adventure, their true romance. (Levinas, 2009: 201-202)

The Jewish prisoners were able to celebrate their religious holidays, even if only clandestinely, and Levinas (2009) experienced a spiritual awakening during his time in the camp. In a departure from the often sombre tones elsewhere in his captivity diaries, he describes a sense of floating created by the detachment from the world prisoners had left behind, as if existence had become unmoored:

Drunkenness is not only the effect of wine. It is this stage of detachment, the output of the life that we can know in every kind of excitement. The commando Sunday evening. The ease of everything because we are detached from everything. (Levinas, 2009: 83)

Critchley interprets this sense of freedom in the light of Levinas's later thought, where freedom also occurs under constraint, namely under the investment of freedom 'by responsibility to the infinite demand of the other' (Critchley, 2015: 62). In the camp, however, the constraint enabling the prisoners' 'freedom' was the opposite of a relation in which the other always already calls the self to responsibility. Here, imprisonment followed from the exclusion from all relations of accountability. Cut loose from the world, prisoners found themselves in a space in which *no* demands were made of them, in which there was no rehabilitation to accomplish and no redemption to hope for. Far from a 'condition for liberation' (Critchley, 2015: 62), the camp revealed itself as a space in which the freedom from the demands of bourgeois existence was soon crushed by '[t]he absence of everything [that] returns as presence . . .' (Levinas, 1987a: 46): the 'horror' and 'evil' (Levinas, 2001: 4-5) of the 'there is.'

The 'there is'

In *Existence and Existents*, Levinas (2001: 51-52) introduces the 'there is' as follows: 'Let us imagine all beings, things and persons, reverting to nothingness. . . . [W]hat of this nothingness itself? Something would happen, if only night and the silence of nothingness.' This 'nothing' does not just appear, but develops in three stages: First, like in Levinas's

captivity diaries, there is detachment from the world, the 'reverting to nothingness' of people and things that give one's world meaning. Unlike in his captivity diaries, however, this detachment does not lead to freedom in this instance, and there is no mentioning of 'romance' and 'excitement.' On the contrary, the loss of access to the world becomes the absence of light, a darkness in which the subject finds itself alone, without support for its existence. Second, in the absence that surrounds it, the subject senses a presence in which the negation of people and things returns as the 'silence of nothingness.' Third, the subject itself takes part in this nothingness, its life faltering in the 'heavy atmosphere' (Levinas, 2001: 53) and 'suffocating embrace' (Levinas, 2001: 9) of the 'there is.'

It is tempting to equate the scenario that Levinas (2001: 7) describes at the beginning of *Existence and Existents*, where he uses phrases such as 'the twilight of a world' or 'the end of the world,' with the death of 'Justice' or the 'world put in question by Hitler's triumphs' that he refers to after the war when he imagines the world from the perspective of Holocaust victims (Levinas, 1996a: 119). It is important to realise, however, that for the purpose of the 'there is,' the world that is sinking away from the subject is not the world the subject believes in, but the world as constituted by the subject's interlocutors, its meaningful others. Once these relations are cut, the world disappears from the subject's

view, but it does not thereby cease to exist. The issue with the 'there is,' in other words, is not the end *of*, but the exclusion *from* the world.

This becomes clear from the examples of the 'there is' that Levinas provides. These examples describe what happens when one attempts to sever the relation to another or when such severance is forced upon one. The examples express the surprise that freedom nevertheless does not ensue, followed closely by the realisation that the space created by the absence of the other has filled with a horrible presence. Levinas (2001: 56) thus remarks about the return of Banquo's ghost to Macbeth after the latter has murdered him: 'To kill, like to die, is to seek an escape from being, to go where freedom and negation operate. Horror is the event of being which returns in the heart of this negation, as though nothing had happened.' In later interviews it is a child, perhaps Levinas himself as a child, who senses an indefinite presence in the room after having been '[torn] away from the life of the adults and put . . . to bed a bit too early' (Levinas, 2001: 45): 'One sleeps alone, the adults continue life; the child feels the silence of his bedroom as "rumbling"' (Levinas, 1985: 48).

Although the 'there is' appears when others disappear, it does not thereby represent what happens in mourning, nor is it an expression of abandonment or homesickness. Rather, it

represents a different relation to the world that emerges only in the absence of others and the meaning they give to one's life. As such, the 'there is' is neither an objective aspect of the world – i.e., the world absent of meaning – nor a subjective feeling on the part of the subject. It is an absence of meaning that has materialised as a new relation to the world, a relation with nothing, a non-relation.

In the POW camp, prisoners were excluded from two momentous events of their time, the Second World War and the Holocaust. This proved problematic for some prisoners. Those who in joining the war had been out for “[t]he chop or the top” – death or glory’ (Smith, 1968: 27) felt themselves ‘neutralised’ in captivity, realising that they were now permanently excluded from a war whose significance had determined their existence. For Levinas, too, who had joined the war with enthusiasm (Malka, 2006: 25), hearing news about the ongoing hostilities during his time in the camp caused him to realise that ‘[h]is true destiny, his true salvation, was being carried out elsewhere’ (Levinas, 2009: 202). As to the Holocaust, Jewish POWs effectively missed an event that was to become of unparalleled significance for modern Jewish identity, an event that to Levinas’s mind was ‘[t]he great “experience” of Judaism,’ the ‘*passion* in the same sense as one speaks of the suffering [*Leiden*] of Christ under the Romans’ (Levinas, 2001: 137) and ‘the Passion of

Israel at Auschwitz' (Levinas, 2001: 226). As Joseph Lador-Lederer (1980: 71) writes, 'for the Jewish prisoner of war of a Western country who benefited from the provisions of the Geneva Convention of 1929, his sufferings measured against yardsticks of Jewish martyrology, were a matter *de minimis*.'

However, exclusion was not the only feature of war captivity, which was also pervaded by a sense of indifference on the part of others. Both the war and the persecutions involved the same enemy figure, but while prisoners and camp guards nominally remained enemies in a state of war, they no longer opposed each other, as Germany continued to direct its efforts to the front. The prisoners' existence – an existence which until recently had been judged to warrant the application of lethal force – was now a matter of indifference to their captors, who looked at the prisoners without interest or hatred. If their existence mattered at all, it did so only in so far as it could support the war effort through the maintenance of reciprocal relations between Germany and France and the provision of labour to the war economy. Sydney Smith (1968: 133) thus recounts how one long-term POW told him he had 'felt sometimes that the war had left him behind like a piece of useless wrack on the tideline of 1939.'

Not only was war captivity *not* an extension of combat *nor* amounted to persecution that could be resisted, it was also *not* something that the law imposed either as a punishment or as a measure of protecting prisoners' agency, whether out of humanitarian concerns or otherwise. It was in fact not directed at the prisoners at all. As a legal institution, the function of war imprisonment at this time was still primarily to protect war, not its participants. The law excluded those who surrendered or were defeated from further violent action only to ensure that war would end at defeat rather than annihilation. Plurality was a guarantee for war, as it kept open the possibility of future wars. The beneficiary, i.e., that which law *intended* to protect, was therefore war itself and not the prisoners. The latter were merely the living proof that limited war was being conducted, their collective lives constituting the border between limited and unlimited war (Jacques, 2015).

As such, the POW camp was a neutral space, even though this was not the benevolent and provisional sense of neutrality commonly conceived. The camp did not constitute a ground from which prisoners could freely proceed to choose sides; it was not a basis *for* but an exclusion *from* agency. War captivity excluded prisoners from all the meaningful categories of agency in war (enemy, friend, foe, neutral), reducing the prisoners to an indeterminate existence and confining them to a space in-between whose co-ordinates suddenly appeared

uncertain. Where was one if one was no longer on the human map of enmity, could no longer even reach the ground from which one could choose sides? Was one still amongst humans, still human? Levinas writes about the 'inhuman neutrality' (in Rolland, 2003: 27) of the 'there is,' its 'horrific neutrality' (Levinas, 1990b: 292).

Some of the prisoners sought to escape from this state of forced neutrality. They hatched out plans to provoke their captors by playing pranks on them ("goon-baiting" (Smith, 1968: 78)), or more seriously, attempted to escape from the camp altogether. At stake in these attempts to turn the enemy's attention back towards them was not only the participating prisoners' sense of identity and purpose, but also their individuality. War imprisonment meant prisoners were permanently condemned to the anonymity of their number and unit, as they no longer had the opportunity to distinguish themselves individually through action; in escaping, they saw a chance to regain this individuality in front of their fellow inmates as well as their home nation.⁹

However, it was mainly English and American officers, a small minority of all POWs, who engaged in these activities. For those who had to work as well as for Jewish prisoners whose uniform constituted the only protection from being sent to a concentration camp,

such pastimes were not a realistic option. Nevertheless, Levinas's open declaration of his faith to his captors can be regarded as an individual act of defiance in this sense, and may be an indication of his resistance to the forced neutrality of war captivity.

There was no response to this act of defiance, at least not one that measured up to the strength of Levinas's own feelings of opposition. It is likely that it was this lack of response that created a sense of insecurity for the Jewish prisoners more so than the fact that the Geneva Convention constituted a fragile means of protection. As Levinas (2001: 53) writes about the 'there is,' absence 'becomes insecurity. . . [n]ot because things covered by darkness elude our foresight and . . . it becomes impossible to measure their approach in advance . . . [but because] nothing approaches, nothing comes, nothing threatens . . .'

This lack of response must have also heightened Levinas's perception of in-difference on the part of his captors, i.e., the feeling of no longer constituting a difference. Is it still possible to have a relation with one's foe when he no longer recognises one's difference, and be it only for the purpose of assimilation or annihilation? What happens to the subject outside of such a relation, when it finds itself confronted by nothing, or rather, nothing other than 'the fact that *there is*' (Levinas, 2001: 8)? For the early Levinas (2001: 45,

emphasis added), existence means being *in* the world while at the same time being ‘able to withdraw *from* the world.’ Existence needs interiority, a place of self set apart from the difference of the other. The ‘there is,’ however, offers no difference, and therefore no place to hide: ‘Before this obscure invasion it is impossible to take shelter in oneself, to withdraw into one’s shell’ (Levinas, 2001: 54). The subject, William Large explains, loses its footing in the ‘there is,’ unable to retain its subjectivity:

For what holds me to my existence is my relation to things and people; when this relation disappears, my own existence as something personal is also extinguished. As a pure interiority, it cannot be said to be mine at all. It is the impersonality of existence outside of any specific relation to things and people. Yet if this interiority is no longer mine, in what sense is it interior? (Large, 2002: 138)

When Levinas talks about the ‘unbearable indifference’ of the ‘there is’ (Levinas, 2001: 45), this is therefore unlikely to have been a matter of bemoaning the indifference of the world to one’s own suffering, or indeed, of celebrating the ‘benign indifference of the world’ that goes on while oneself has to die (Camus, 1982: 117). Rather, indifference *itself* is the source of suffering. In the ‘there is,’ where ‘anything can count for anything else’ (Levinas, 2001: 54), one literally does not ‘bear’ anything, as there are no particular beings

or things against which the self can establish its difference. As in the camp, in which prisoners were merely one part of a larger unit and private existence was impossible – impossible to the extent that solitary confinement became a treat rather than the punishment as which it was intended (Kochavi, 2005: 56) – the subject drowns in the undifferentiated being of the ‘there is,’ the ‘I’ becoming a mere ‘one,’ participating in being ‘without having taken the initiative, anonymously’ (Levinas, 2001: 53). When Levinas was asked after the war whether Stalag XI B was the face of evil, he responded: ‘Evil has no face’ (in Malka, 2006: 75).

The idea of facelessness implies not only the absence of a face or a face turned away, but also the inability to ‘read’ the intentions of the other. In the ‘there is,’ whatever happens – and strictly speaking, *nothing* happens – happens without an author that can be determined. ‘Like the third person pronoun in the impersonal form of a verb, it [the indeterminateness] designates not the uncertainly known author of the action, but the characteristic of this action itself which somehow has no author’ (Levinas, 2001: 52). Levinas (2001: 64, emphasis added) writes about existence in the ‘there is’ as having ‘no master’ and as a ‘being that *belongs to no one.*’ For the prisoners, this meant that once their existence had merged with the indeterminate being around them, they could not own their experience,

which was neither self-determined nor attributable to the actions of others. Not only was there no-one else to blame, there was also no agency they themselves could lay claim to. Although they were working during the day, this work appeared senseless: '[T]hey perform actions in the real world without reality,' Levinas writes about the POWs, 'not only an absence of objects but an absence of progress, of achievement' (Levinas, 2009: 126).¹⁰

The loss of ownership of one's life in the camp, the draining away of one's subjectivity, could only be stemmed by recourse to the camp's physical and temporal outside. Mail and news about the on-going war temporarily pierced the emptiness, reminding prisoners that there was an outside world after all, a world which contained – paradoxically, it was the outside that contained, while the contained space of the prison camp was empty – a meaningful past and future.

However, both past and future became more difficult concepts for the POWs the longer their captivity lasted. The trauma of action and capture distanced prisoners from their past life, and interrogators were skilled in further reducing prisoners' emotional ties to the world they left behind in order to increase their control over them. Sooner or later, prisoners discovered that they were no longer able to remember details about their past. 'Every

prisoner finds that his memory fails him in some way. He cannot remember dates, names, streets, addresses or his own phone number in his home. The past seems to fade out and there is only the present' (Lunden, 1948-1949: 731). As to the future, which 'alone could finally date and give meaning to life' (Durand, 1987: 137-138), it moved ever further away as it became more difficult for prisoners to imagine how they could take up the severed threads of their lives. Without the hope of a future ('because one never knows when it will finally begin' (Durand, 1987: 137)) the present turned into 'a miserable present' (Durand, 1987: 137), its usually fleeting character replaced by permanence. As one POW describes, the immediacy of this present was overwhelming, 'melting' (Spanos, 2010: 57) any remaining hopes and memories. In the words of another POW (in Kochavi, 2005: 57): 'At the moment I feel there is no future, I have forgotten the past and am just living in a dream from day to day.'

For Levinas, this dream turned out to be a nightmare. What had at first been a sense of liberation, a floating present freed from bourgeois constraints, became the empty weight of meaninglessness. He writes in his prison diaries: 'The sense of nightmare. Reality still – absolutely foreign. Night in daylight' (Levinas, 2009: 87). This was not a nightmare of the kind concentration camp inmates lived. Rather, if the 'there is' is to be taken as

representative, it was akin to a state of insomnia from which one is unable to escape through either sleep or consciousness. To the insomniac, Levinas (1987a: 48) writes, insomnia appears as if ‘it will never finish,’ it is the present become permanent. The absence of others and of time – and thus of meaning – causes being to become undifferentiated, being without beings, without a physical or temporal beginning or end. The ‘there is’ is ‘irremissible existence’ (Levinas, 2001: 58), ‘the horror of the unceasing, of a monotony deprived of meaning’ (Levinas, 2001: 45). What happens, Levinas might have asked more concretely when introducing the ‘there is,’ when meaningful life ends and yet one does not die? As the son of a fellow POW of Levinas recalls (in Malka, 2006: xxxi), the prisoners felt they lived suspended ‘between the living and the dead.’ In his captivity diaries Levinas (2009: 126) describes the members of his unit as ‘phantoms;’ in *Existence and Existents* he uses the same term for the ‘there is’ (Levinas, 2001: 56).

One would think that the importance Levinas ascribes to the absence of the possibility of death within the ‘there is’ would have led him to affirm rather than dispute the status of death in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. However, Levinas (2001: 58) contrasts his own account of the horror of the ‘there is’ as pure *being* with the anxiety before death as *nothingness* he attributes to Heidegger:

The horror of the night, as an experience of the *there is*, does not then reveal to us a danger of death, nor even a danger of pain. . . . There is horror of being and not anxiety over nothingness, fear of being and not fear for being; there is being prey to, delivered over to something that is not a “something.” (Levinas, 2001: 57-58)

Levinas then claims that the ‘there is’ as pure being is not just the primordial object of fear, but also the real ‘nothingness’ – a nothingness that can be experienced as an interruption in the middle of one’s life and should therefore no longer be located at its limits:

One starts with being, which is a content limited by nothingness. Nothingness is still envisaged as the end and limit of being, as an ocean which beats up against it on all sides. But we must ask if “nothingness,” unthinkable as a limit or negation of being, is not possible as interval and interruption . . . (Levinas, 2001: 60)

Nothingness conceived as an interval means that being is no longer opposed to nothingness, but incorporates it as its central element. Unless there are relations that give life meaning, being *is* nothingness, a dying of a certain kind of death. Levinas (2001: 5) writes that ‘[e]xistence of itself harbours something tragic which is not only there because of its

finitude.’ On the basis of Levinas’s experience in war captivity, one could perhaps go further and say that this tragic aspect of existence appears *because* there is no finitude, no meaningful relations that always already entail the risk of death at the hands of the other.

Conclusion

At the beginning of his chapter on Levinas’s time in captivity Malka (2006: 64, emphasis added) writes that Levinas ‘would come to know, firsthand, the experience of the camps, *even if it was only* a prisoner camp to which he was deported and not an extermination camp.’

One might take issue with this statement for implying a dubious hierarchy of martyrdom, a hierarchy which may explain the tendency of some commentators to present Levinas’s time in war captivity as an experience of persecution. More importantly, however, one might take issue with this statement because it holds up Levinas’s experiences as a prisoner of war against what appears to be regarded as the paradigm of camp experience, namely that afforded by concentration camps.

This article has sought to describe the historical and legal conditions of Levinas's imprisonment in a bid to establish the experience of war captivity as one of interest in its own right. It attempted to show that the law excluded prisoners such as Levinas from all meaningful relations, holding them fast in a space in which their agency was suspended and which, although surrounded by others, was regarded by no-one. By reading the experience of war captivity through Levinas's concept of the 'there is,' this article sought to articulate the impact of this exclusion on prisoners' subjectivity.

Although one cannot but recognise that it was law which saved Levinas's life during the Second World War, it was also law which, through its mechanisms of exclusion, was responsible for the loss of world and ensuing meaninglessness that he and his fellow prisoners experienced. It is hoped that the above analysis will contribute to understanding the impact of law on those whom it neither enables to live a meaningful life nor entirely excludes from its remit, but simply holds in a space of indifference until such time as it chooses to release them.

References

- Agamben G (1998) *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford, CA: Stanford

University Press.

- Berg R (1990) Juifs de France, combattants de la Seconde Guerre mondiale 1939-1945. *Pardès* 12: 196-210.
- Bergo B (1999) *Levinas Between Ethics and Politics: For the Beauty that Adorns the Earth*. Dordrecht and Boston, MA: Kluwer Academic.
- Bernasconi R (1995) 'Only the Persecuted . . .': Language of the Oppressor, Language of the Oppressed. *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature and Religion*. In: Peperzak AT (ed.) London and New York, NY: Routledge, pp 77-86.
- Bernasconi R (2001) Foreword. In: Levinas E *Existence and Existents*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, pp.vii-xv.
- Best GFA (1980) *Humanity in Warfare: The Modern History of the International Law of Armed Conflicts*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Bischof G, Karner S and Stelzl-Marx B (2005) Einleitung. In: Bischof G, Karner S and Stelzl-Marx B (eds) *Kriegsgefangene des Zweiten Weltkrieges: Gefangennahme – Lagerlgen – Rückkehr*. Wien: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, pp. 9-19.
- Blanchot M (1986) Our Clandestine Companion. In: Cohen RA (ed.) *Face to Face with Levinas*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, pp. 41-50.

- Bloechl J (2011) Captivity and Transcendence. *Research in Phenomenology* 41(1): 109-154.
- Bories-Sawala H (1996) *Franzosen im 'Reichseinsatz': Deportation, Zwangsarbeit, Alltag: Erfahrungen und Erinnerungen von Kriegsgefangenen und Zivilarbeitern*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Camus A (1982) *The Outsider*, London: Penguin.
- Caygill H (2002) *Levinas and the Political*. London: Routledge.
- Caygill H (2010) Levinas's Prison Notebooks. *Radical Philosophy* 160: 27-35.
- Critchley S (1996) Il y a – Holding Levinas's Hand to Blanchot's Fire. In: Gill CB (ed.) *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing*. London and New York, NY: Routledge, pp. 108-122.
- Critchley S (1997) *Very Little. . . Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. London: Routledge.
- Critchley S (2015) *The Problem with Levinas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Davies P (1990) A Linear Narrative? Blanchot with Heidegger in the Work of Levinas. In: Wood D (ed.) *Philosophers' Poets*. London: Routledge, pp.37-69.
- Derrida J (1978) Violence and Metaphysics. In: Derrida J *Writing and Difference*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, pp. 79-153.
- Durand Y (1982) *La captivité: histoire des prisonniers de guerre français, 1939-1945*.

Paris: Fédération nationale des combattants prisonniers de guerre et combattants d'Algérie, Tunisie, Maroc.

- Durand Y (1987) *La vie quotidienne des prisonniers de guerre dans les Stalags, les Oflags et les kommandos: 1939-1945*. Paris: Hachette.
- Durand Y (1999) Das Schicksal der französischen Kriegsgefangenen in deutschem Gewahrsam (1939-1945). In: Bischof G and Overmans R (eds) *Kriegsgefangenschaft im zweiten Weltkrieg: Eine vergleichende Perspektive*. Ternitz-Pottschach: G. Höller, pp.71-78.
- Fagenblat M (2002) Il y a du quotidien: Levinas and Heidegger on the Self. *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 28(5): 578-604.
- Fagenblat M (2005) Back to the Other Levinas: Reflection prompted by Alin P. Toumayan's 'Encountering the Other: The Artwork and Problem of Difference in Blanchot and Levinas.' *Colloquy* 10: 297-313.
- Fallingbostal Military Museum (date unknown) *Stalag XIB / 357*. Available at: <http://fallingbostelmilitarymuseum.jimdo.com/stalag-xib-357/> (accessed 23 March 2016).
- Hammerschlag S (2012) 'A Splinter in the Flesh.' Levinas and the Resignification of Jewish Suffering, 1928-1947. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 20(3): 389-419.
- Hand S (2013) Salvation through Literature: Levinas's Carnets de captivité. *Levinas Studies* 8:

45-65.

- Jacques J (2015) From Nomos to Hegung: Sovereignty and the Laws of War in Schmitt's International Order. *The Modern Law Review* 78(3): 411-430.
- Kochavi AJ (2005) *Confronting Captivity: Britain and the United States and their POWs in Nazi Germany*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Lador-Lederer J (1980) World War II: Jews as Prisoners of War. *Israel Yearbook of Human Rights* 10: 70-89.
- Large W (2002) Impersonal Existence: A Conceptual Genealogy of the 'There Is' from Heidegger to Blanchot and Levinas. *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 7(3): 131-142.
- Levie HS (1977) Prisoners of War in International Armed Conflict. *Naval War College International Law Studies* 59.
- Levinas E (1969) *Totality and Infinity*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Levinas E (1985) *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Levinas E (1987a) *Time and the Other*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Levinas E (1987b) God and Philosophy. In: Levinas E *Collected Philosophical Papers*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, pp. 153-173.

- Levinas E (1990a) Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism. *Critical Inquiry* 17(1): 62-71.
- Levinas E (1990b) *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*. London: The Athlone Press.
- Levinas E (1996a) *Proper Names*. London: The Athlone Press.
- Levinas E (1996b) Transcendence and Intelligibility. In: Peperzak AT, Critchley S and Bernasconi R (eds) *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, pp. 149-159.
- Levinas E (1998) *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Levinas E (2001) *Existence and Existents*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Levinas E (2009) *Carnets de captivité: suivi de Écrits sur la captivité et Notes philosophiques diverses*. Paris: Bernard Grasset/IMEC.
- Levinas E (2011) Lettre d'Emmanuel Levinas envoyée au Grand Rabbin René Gutman de Strasbourg. In: Cohen-Levinas D (ed.) *Levinas et l'expérience de la captivité*. Lethielleux: Collège des Bernardins, pp.27-30.
- Levinas E and Robbins J (ed.) (2001) *Is it righteous to be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Lunden WA (1948-1949) Captivity Psychoses Among Prisoners of War. *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 39: 721-733.

- Malka S (2006) *Emmanuel Levinas: His Life and Legacy*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Mattiello G and Vogt W (1986-1987) *Deutsche Kriegsgefangenen- und Internierteneinrichtungen 1939-1945: Handbuch und Katalog, Lagergeschichte und Lagerzensurstempel*. Mailand und Koblenz: Selbstverlag Dr. G. Mattiello und Wolfgang Vogt.
- Morgan, ML (2007) *Discovering Levinas*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Mortley R (1991) *French Philosophers in Conversation: Levinas, Schneider, Serres, Irigaray, Le Doeuff, Derrida*. London and New York, NY: Routledge.
- Overmans R (1999a) Ein Silberstreif am Forschungshorizont? Veröffentlichungen zur Geschichte der Kriegsgefangenschaft. In: Overmans R (ed.) *In der Hand des Feindes: Kriegsgefangenschaft von der Antike bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg*. Köln: Böhlau Verlag, pp.483-506.
- Overmans R (1999b) 'In der Hand des Feindes:' Geschichtsschreibung zur Kriegsgefangenschaft von der Antike bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg. In: Overmans R (ed.) *In der Hand des Feindes: Kriegsgefangenschaft von der Antike bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg*. Köln: Böhlau Verlag, pp.1-39.
- Overmans R (2005) Die Kriegsgefangenenpolitik des Deutschen Reiches 1939 bis 1945. In:

Echternkamp J (ed) *Die Deutsche Kriegsgesellschaft 1939-1945*. München: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, pp.729-867.

- Pegasus Archive (date unknown) *Stalag XIB*. Available at:
http://www.pegasusarchive.org/pow/cSt_11B_History1.htm (accessed 23 March 2016).
- Plant B (2014) Levinas and the Holocaust: A Reconstruction. *Journal of Jewish Thought & Philosophy* 22: 44-79.
- Pollefeyt D (2015) Theology as Ethics: Emmanuel Levinas as Jewish Post-Holocaust Thinker. In: Zank M and Anderson I (eds) *The Value of the Particular: Lessons from Judaism and the Modern Jewish Experience*. Brill Online, pp. 322-339.
- Ricoeur P (1998) *Critique and Conviction: Conversations with François Azounvi and Marc de Launay*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Robbins J (1999) *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Rolland J (2003) Getting Out of Being by a New Path. In: Levinas E *On Escape*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, pp. 3-48.
- Rose G (1992) *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Smith S (1968) *Wings Day: The Man who Led the RAF's Epic Battle in German Captivity*. London: Collins.

- Spanos WV (2010) *In the Neighborhood of Zero: A World War II Memorial*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Spoerer M (2005) Die soziale Differenzierung der ausländischen Zivilarbeiter, Kriegsgefangenen und Häftlinge im Deutschen Reich. In: Echternkamp J (ed.) *Die Deutsche Kriegsgesellschaft 1939-1945*. München: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, pp.485-576.
- Stelzl-Marx B (2000) *Zwischen Fiktion und Zeitzeugenschaft: Amerikanische und Sowjetische Kriegsgefangene im Stalag XVII B Krems-Gneixendorf*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag.
- Stiftung niedersächsische Gedenkstätten (2013) *The POW Camp (1940-1945)*. Available at: <http://bergen-belsen.stiftung-ng.de/en/history/pow-camps.html> (accessed 23 March 2016).
- Tyas S (2010) Escapes of Allied Prisoners of War and Forced Labourers from German Captivity. In: Soleim MN (ed) *Prisoners of War and Forced Labour: Histories of War and Occupation*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp.180-204.
- de Vries H (2005) *Minimal Theologies: Critiques of Secular Reason in Adorno and Levinas*. London and Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Wieviorka A (2001) Femmes juives en France. In: Morin-Rotureau É (ed.) *1939-1945: Combats de femmes, Françaises et Allemandes, les oubliées de l'histoire*. Paris: Autrement,

pp.100-110.

- Wood D (2005) *The Step Back: Ethics and Politics after Deconstruction*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Notes

¹ Their experience of war captivity may, of course, be interesting for a variety of other reasons, not least for its potential impact on the subsequent work of these thinkers. The significance of war captivity for 20th century thought – and not only French thought, as one might also think of, for example, Niklas Luhmann’s detention as a POW in the USA after the war – has not yet been systematically explored.

² The role that the ‘there is’ plays in Levinas’s mature work, where it re-appears occasionally (see, for example, Levinas, 1969: 263; 1987b: 165-166; 1996b: 159; 1998: 176 and 183) is complex and beyond the scope of this article (for one particular view on this question, see Critchley, 1996). What seems clear is that Levinas sought (and found) ‘deliverance’ from the ‘there is’ in the ethical relation to the other: ‘I distrust the compromised word “love,” but the responsibility for the Other, being-for-the-other, seemed to me, as early as that time, to stop the anonymous and senseless rumbling of being. It is in

the form of such a relation that the deliverance from the “there is” appeared to me’ (Levinas, 1985: 52).

³ For Levinas’s views on the significance of the Holocaust for Jewish identity, see the section on the ‘there is’ below. Sometimes Levinas himself comes close to suggesting that he was a victim of persecution. For example, he ends the statement quoted above about the lived experience present in every philosophical work by saying about his own work: ‘I do not contest that it is a Jewish ordeal which is translated’ (in Levinas and Robbins, 2001: 96-97). For other examples, see Mortley, 1991: 21 and Levinas, 1996a: 119. However, when Levinas (1990b: 291) states that his life has been ‘dominated by the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror,’ it is all too obvious that the space between ‘presentiment’ and ‘memory’ that might otherwise be taken up by experience remains empty.

⁴ An *Oflag* or *Offizierslager* was a POW camp for commissioned officers, while a *Stalag* or *Stammlager* was a camp for all lower-ranked personnel. An *Oflag* generally afforded prisoners better living conditions than a *Stalag*. Furthermore, because commissioned officers could not be required to work under the Geneva Convention, it also afforded them a better experience of war captivity as a whole.

⁵ It is difficult to establish the precise extent of this discrimination and harassment. Howard Levie (1977: 175 n324, reference omitted) states that ‘Germany attempted . . . to separate

Jewish prisoners of war from the other prisoners of war of the same nationality, with the admonition that “in all other respects” they were to receive treatment identical to that received by their fellow nationals.’ Similarly, Ricoeur (1998: 19-20) states: ‘I know that a certain number of Jews were sent into separate camps, sometimes with prisoners reputed to be subversive; but I have not read that these Jewish prisoners who were moved were made to suffer harsh treatment.’ However, Roger Berg (1990: 201) finds that the special work units to which Jews were assigned were ‘in most cases’ disciplinary in nature, and Durand (1982: 354) states that Jews had to carry out especially strenuous work.

⁶ Gianfranco Mattiello and Wolfgang Vogt (1986-1987: 22) as well as the Stiftung niedersächsische Gedenkstätten (2013) cite a figure of 95,000 prisoners under their information on Stalag XI B, Malka (2006: 68) a figure of 32,000 prisoners, and the Pegasus Archive of 49,138 prisoners. These lower figures are likely to refer either to the main camp on its own (without its satellite camps) or to the total number of prisoners at certain points in time.

⁷ There are other former Western POWs who have given hellish accounts of German war captivity (see, for example, Spanos, 2010), attesting to the fact that the conditions and experience of war captivity varied widely even amongst Western POWs.

⁸ From a conversation with Ricoeur, Simon Critchley (2015: 65) reports that Levinas had to work because he was a Jew, while Ricoeur as a non-Jew did not. However, the relevant distinguishing factor between them is more likely to have been that Levinas was a NCO while Ricoeur was an officer.

⁹ The anonymity of POWs continued after war. While the nation concentrated on the actions of the *résistance*, whose members became the ‘individualised, heroicised elite of 1945,’ ex-POWs were still presented as the defensive units they had been in 1940-41, i.e. as an ‘anonymous mass’ (Durand, 1987: 17).

¹⁰ In this context, one may also note that work did not constitute a means of escape for Levinas. Caygill (2010: 28) thus writes that ‘the experience of forced labour in the Stalag, accompanied by a critical reading of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* in the prison camp reading room, led Levinas to an extreme degree of scepticism about the liberatory potential of work . . .’ Also see Caygill, 2002: 59-62.