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Review Article

Sounds of Captivity: Prisoner-of-War Recordings in the First World War

BRIAN FAIRLEY

Britta Lange, *Captured Voices: Sound Recordings of Prisoners of War from the Sound Archive 1915–1918*, translated by Rubaica Jaliwala. Kaleidogramme, 176. Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2022. 401 pp. ISBN 9783967500080 (ebook).

Anette Hoffmann, *Knowing by Ear: Listening to Voice Recordings with African Prisoners of War in German Camps (1915–1918)*. Sign, Storage, Transmission. Duke University Press, 2024. x + 209 pp. ISBN 9781478030027 (paperback); 9781478024842 (hardcover); 9781478059028 (ebook).

Before a cyberattack in October 2023 knocked out most of the British Library's online resources, audible voices from the First World War were only a click away: sixty-six British soldiers, recorded in prisoner-of-war camps in Germany between 1915 and 1918, all reciting the biblical parable of the Prodigal Son.[1] In their erstwhile digital home, these recordings sat alongside other surveys of English accents and dialects, offering a taste of the variety and richness of vernacular speech across the British Isles before the influence of radio and television began to iron out regional idiosyncrasies. In the prevailing mood of historical curiosity and uncanny self-recognition surrounding these recordings — English used to sound like *that*? — little attention was paid either to the conditions of captivity that shaped these men's lives or to the scholarly project that produced these sounds. Recordings of English speech, in fact, made up only a small fraction of the massive wartime output of the Prussian Phonographic Commission, an interdisciplinary team of German scholars who conducted anthropological, linguistic, and musicological research on soldiers and internees from Allied countries and their colonial territories. In total, some 2600 sound recordings, comprising speech, song, and

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[1] A British Library blog post discussing the First World War collection survived the attack, though the embedded links are broken: <https://blogs.bl.uk/sound-and-vision/2011/03/berliner-lautarchiv-recordings-from-1915-18-the-voices-of-british-prisoners-of-war.html> [accessed 26 April 2025]. As of April 2025, a handful of these recordings were still available on the *Guardian*'s website: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/nov/09/world-war-british-accent-recordings> [accessed 26 April 2025]. The Prodigal Son was a sample text often used in large-scale linguistic studies, including the early twentieth-century *Linguistic Survey of India* (available online: <https://dsal.uchicago.edu/books/lsi/> [accessed 26 April 2025]).

instrumental music, were made in German POW camps or nearby recording studios (Lange, p. 70). Forgotten or ignored for the better part of a century, the recordings held today in institutions in Berlin and Vienna have been the subject of increased critical attention over the past fifteen years.[2] Thanks to this work, we are getting closer to understanding one of the most ambitious yet fatally flawed research projects in the history of world music.

The first years of the First World War produced a staggering number of prisoners, captured amid huge clashes of armies on the eastern and western fronts. As the conflict dragged on, a long-term housing solution was needed, leading to the construction of POW camps across the European continent. In Germany and Austria-Hungary, these camps housed soldiers and civilian internees not only from Britain and France, but also from their colonial territories in South Asia and West Africa, respectively. From the Russian army, at the time the largest in the world, there were many non-Slavic soldiers from the Caucasus, Crimea, the Urals, and the Volga Basin. It was those prisoners considered racially or linguistically exotic that especially piqued the interest of linguists and anthropologists in Germany and Austria, whose empires had few overseas colonies of their own.[3] Commissions were formed, in the words of the president of the Anthropological Society of Vienna, to take advantage of this 'extraordinarily favourable, likely never-to-be-repeated opportunity' to study this abundant 'human material' in such 'orderly conditions'.[4]

In Vienna, the driving force for the POW research was the anthropologist Rudolf Pöch; in Berlin, it was the linguist Wilhelm Doegen. Both Pöch and Doegen maintain reputations today as media pioneers, Pöch for his early use of film, photography, and sound recording in the study of racial characteristics, Doegen for his use of the phonograph in phonetic research and language instruction.[5] Yet as Anette Hoffmann argues in *Knowing by Ear*, telling the story of the POW recordings as a tale of intellectual creativity and technological innovation 'has systematically erased the history of epistemic violence in colonial linguistics and musicology' (p. 3). With Hoffmann's new book and the recent ebook translation of Britta Lange's *Captured Voices*, which first appeared in German in 2019, we now have substantial work in English that turns our ears not to the people who made the records but to the prisoners whose voices they captured in wax.[6]

[2] Monique Scheer, 'Captive Voices: Phonographic Recordings in the German and Austrian Prisoner-of-War Camps of World War I', in *Doing Anthropology in Wartime and War Zones: World War I and the Cultural Sciences in Europe*, ed. by Reinhard Johler, Christian Marchetti, and Monique Scheer (Transcript, 2010), pp. 279–309; Judith Kaplan, '"Voices of the People": Linguistic Research among Germany's Prisoners of War during World War I', *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 49.3 (2013), pp. 281–305; Britta Lange, *Die Wiener Forschungen an Kriegsgefangenen 1915–1918: Anthropologische und ethnografische Verfahren im Lager* (Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2013); Christiane Fennesz-Juhasz, 'Sound Recordings of Romani Soldiers in German and Austrian Prisoner-of-War Camps, 1915–1918: Protagonists, Contexts and Contents', in *Das amen godi pala Lev Čerenkov: Romani historija, ahib taj kultura*, ed. by Kirill Kozhanov, Mikhail Oslon, and Dieter W. Halwachs (Grazer Linguistische Monographien, 2017), pp. 188–209; Irene Hilden, *Absent Presences in the Colonial Archive: Dealing with the Berlin Sound Archive's Acoustic Legacies* (Leuven University Press, 2022). See also the proceedings of a conference on POW recordings at the Phonogrammarchiv in Vienna, published as a special issue of the *International Forum on Audio-Visual Research*, 9 (2018), ed. by Christian Liebl and Gerda Lechleitner.

[3] Andrew D. Evans, *Anthropology at War: World War I and the Science of Race in Germany* (University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[4] Carl Toldt, quoted in Lange, *Wiener Forschungen*, p. 67.

[5] Doegen studied for a time with the English linguist Henry Sweet, inspiration for George Bernard Shaw's character of Henry Higgins; Lange, *Captured Voices*, p. 63.

[6] Britta Lange, *Gefangene Stimmen: Tonaufnahmen von Kriegsgefangenen aus dem Lautarchiv 1915–1918* (Kadmos, 2019). The English translation of Lange's book is only available as an ebook.

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Lange and Hoffmann have been at the forefront of research in colonial sound archives for many years.[7] Both of their monographs, which speak to each other in subtle and explicit ways, are the culmination of research done with material from the Lautarchiv at the Humboldt University in Berlin. The Lautarchiv (Sound Archive) today houses the shellac discs containing the recordings of spoken language collected by Doegen and his team in the POW camps. Recordings of singing and instrumental music were done with Edison wax cylinders, rather than gramophone discs, and were absorbed into the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv (Phonogram Archive).[8] Lange's book ranges widely across the languages and geographies represented in the Lautarchiv collections, while Hoffmann's is limited to a handful of soldiers and civilians from Africa. Yet both authors embrace the fragmentary as method and ethic, eschewing the drive to comprehensive knowledge and mastery that lay behind Doegen's desire to amass a complete museum of the world's languages. It is a testament both to the enormous quantity of material still unexamined in these archives and to Lange's and Hoffmann's intellectual generosity that these volumes offer such a wealth of detail while leaving space for rich avenues of future investigation.

Translating the Archive

In *Captured Voices*, Lange organizes her material in twenty short chapters, each one, apart from an introduction titled 'Translations', linked to an audio track on the publisher's website.[9] This format allows Lange to touch in passing on the disciplinary and theoretical questions raised by the recordings. Thus a recording of a word list in the Tatar language leads to a discussion of transcription practices and the logics of cataloguing; a heartrending song by a Tunisian prisoner prompts an examination of censorship in the camps; a first-hand account of a Romanian soldier's wartime experiences offers a window into the treatment of Roma during the war; another autobiographical story, from a Bengali seaman captured on a British merchant vessel, sparks an extended reflection on how to read and hear the traces of subaltern subjectivities in the colonial archive. In these vignettes, Lange gives the full name of each prisoner, often correcting mistakes in the archive's written documentation — that is, the protocols and personal information forms generated in the camps, which appear as scanned images throughout the book. She also reconstructs what she can of their life stories, both before and after their

[7] Britta Lange, 'Poste Restante, and Messages in Bottles: Sound Recordings of Indian Prisoners in the First World War', *Social Dynamics*, 41.1 (2015), pp. 84–100; Britta Lange, 'Archival Silences as Historical Sources: Reconsidering Sound Recordings of Prisoners of War (1915–1918) from the Berlin Lautarchiv', *Sound Effects*, 7.3 (2017), pp. 47–60; Britta Lange, 'Archive, Collection, Museum: On the History of the Archiving of Voices at the Sound Archive of the Humboldt University', trans. by Benjamin Carter, *Journal of Sonic Studies*, 13 (2017), <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/326465/326466> [accessed 26 April 2025]; Anette Hoffmann and Phindezwa Mnyaka, 'Hearing Voices in the Archive', *Social Dynamics*, 41.1 (2015), pp. 140–65; Anette Hoffmann, 'Close Listening: Approaches to Research on Colonial Sound Archives', in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Sonic Methodologies*, ed. by Michael Bull and Marcel Cobussen (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), pp. 529–41; Anette Hoffmann, *Listening to Colonial History: Echoes of Coercive Knowledge Production in Historical Sound Recordings from Southern Africa* (Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2023).

[8] Both the Lautarchiv and the Phonogramm-Archiv are now part of the Humboldt Forum in Berlin. The musical recordings made as part of the Phonographic Commission were overseen by the comparative musicologist Carl Stumpf, with assistance from Georg Schünemann.

[9] <https://www.kulturverlag-kadmos.de/material/captured-voices> [accessed 26 April 2025]. The physical edition of the book in German includes an audio CD.

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captivity. In this way, Lange undoes some of the erasure of individual identity perpetrated by the German scholars, who rarely included the names of their informants in their publications and who were above all interested in producing 'supra-individual' examples of language (p. 22).

If there is a guiding problematic in *Captured Voices*, it is the question of translation. Throughout the book, Lange dwells on the ambiguities and difficulties involved in making sense of what the POWs said on record. She also scrutinizes the way that Doegen and his colleagues approached the matter of translation: what words and sounds they left out of their transcriptions, what assumptions they made about the speakers' ability to communicate, what cultural context they lacked to understand the genres and references in the recordings. Although she is convinced of the value of translation itself — comparing the recorded voices to wronged spirits who demand to be heard, she asserts that 'their speech, if it sounds unintelligible, must be translated' (p. 353) — Lange is also circumspect. Drawing on media theorist Wolfgang Ernst's notion of the 'rumour of the archive', she admits 'this book is not about understanding everything [the prisoners] murmured or said. That may perhaps never be possible. However, it is about making their rumours audible' (p. 82).[10]

To make audible these traces and echoes, Lange foregrounds her own translation process, one which necessarily involves collaboration with specialists in languages she does not speak herself. While other authors may relegate the work of translators to footnotes or acknowledgements, Lange includes her conversations with collaborators in the main text, as they go back and forth in their attempts to produce translations that are never fully definitive. Some of these collaborations go back many years, as in the case of the book's translator into English, Rubaica Jaliwala. Jaliwala's own involvement in POW research began with the 2007 experimental documentary *The Halfmoon Files*, in which the director Philip Scheffner tries to find out what happened to Mall Singh, a Sikh prisoner whose voice was recorded in 1916 at the Halbmondlager ('Half-Moon Camp') outside Berlin.[11] Jaliwala, born in Mumbai but long based in Germany, was hired as Scheffner's research assistant, tasked with finding Mall Singh's village in the Punjab and locating his relatives or descendants.[12] In the film, her voice plays several times over a black screen, one half of a telephone conversation with Scheffner, who is likewise never seen in the film. Jaliwala's English translation of *Captured Voices*, despite scattered inconsistencies and some holdovers from German usage (names of First World War battles, etc.), is fluid and clear. Most importantly, it is attuned to the book's constantly shifting perspective as it moves from one language, one genre, one epistemological framework to the next.

This same work of conscious positionality informs the sound recordings that accompany Lange's text. She does not offer the POW recordings unmediated, as it were. Rather, she and her research associate Sebastian Schwesinger, a media historian and journalist, have assembled 'an auditory meta-archive' (p. 33), in which we are made constantly aware of the scene of listening. As Schwesinger explains in a thoughtful preface titled 'Making Listening Audible', their approach emphasizes the mediated quality of these historical recordings, placing them 'at the centre of a chain of transmissions' (p. 10). Sometimes we hear Lange in conversation with Schwesinger or another collaborator as they listen to one of the recordings; other times we hear the rustling of record sleeves, the thump of a stylus hitting a disc, or interruptions from a staticky, unintelligible voice coming from radio interference at a nearby construction site. On

[10] Wolfgang Ernst, *Das Rumoren der Archive: Ordnung aus Unordnung* (Merve Verlag, 2002).
[11] *The Halfmoon Files: A Ghost Story*, dir. by Philip Scheffner (Germany, 2007; released on DVD by Filmgalerie 451, 2013).
[12] For Jaliwala's biography, see <http://jaliwala.de/en/> [accessed 26 April 2025].

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one track, the literary historian Santanu Das gives a real-time translation of the Bengali sailor's narrative, as he listens on headphones to a recording we cannot hear (p. 277).[13] Overall, Lange's 'meta-archive' of site-specific sounds is evocative and thought-provoking, a creative response to the unavoidable question hanging over all research on POW recordings: who should be listening to them?

Inscribing the Voice

Anette Hoffmann elects not to make the sounds of African POWs available to readers of *Knowing by Ear*, noting that the prisoners did not give permission for the circulation of the recordings (p. ix). Additionally, the subject content of many recordings remains unknown or untranslated, further complicating any decision to make them public.[14] Such acts of refusal distinguish Hoffmann's approach from Lange's at certain points in her study. For instance, Hoffmann refrains from including transcriptions or translations of certain 'secret languages' (*Geheimsprachen*) that had fascinated the German linguists. These include a code of drum signals performed by Albert Kudjabo, a Belgian soldier from the Congo region, and a speech delivered by a civilian internee, Stephan Bischoff, in a ritual language spoken by initiates in Yeve, a religious practice associated with Ewe groups in West Africa. Hoffmann here invokes the idea of *opacity* theorized by Édouard Glissant, for whom the demand for 'total transparency' is a precondition of colonial control and must be resisted (p. 102).

Throughout *Knowing by Ear*, Hoffmann draws our attention to moments of rupture, when chains of signification break down, when the prisoners' speech acts are misunderstood, miscategorized, or simply dismissed by the German linguists on the other side of the gramophone horn. By bringing in scholarship on semiotics, the voice, and genres of oral performance and oral literature ('orature'), Hoffmann identifies a 'double inscription' at work: the prisoners' voices were inscribed according to the logics and limits of colonial knowledge production even as they managed to communicate forms of knowledge and performance that escaped these logics. Like Lange, Hoffmann aims not to understand everything in the Lautarchiv but rather to 'weave together' these voice recordings and thereby form 'a new constellation of enunciations' (p. 8).

There are four POWs whose names appear in Hoffmann's chapter headings: Abdoulaye Niang, Mohamed Nur, Albert Kudjabo, and Stephan Bischoff. While other prisoners occasionally enter the story — as in five brief 'Fragments' interspersed among the chapters — these four men acquire a depth of character and historical specificity not possible in Lange's impressionistic survey. While all the POWs involved in these studies were categorized according to early twentieth-century ideas of race, soldiers and civilians from Africa were the object of special fascination. One of Hoffmann's subjects, Mohamed Nur, knew this fascination intimately, as he arrived in Europe not as a colonial soldier but as a performer in a *Völkerschau.* These colonial exhibitions, sometimes humiliatingly known as 'human zoos', were immensely popular in cities like Berlin and were often the site of early research in comparative musicology. Nur, who was highly educated and had served as a member of a political delegation to Mecca,

[13] See Santanu Das, 'The Singing Subaltern', *Parallax*, 17.3 (2011), pp. 4–18.

[14] The recordings of both the Lautarchiv and the Phonogramm-Archiv may be listened to on site. While the Lautarchiv itself has not published the recordings discussed by Lange, most of the recordings by African prisoners appear on CDs accompanying *Black Europe*, ed. by Jeffrey P. Green, Rainer E. Lotz, and Howard Rye (Bear Family Productions, 2013).

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worked as a schoolteacher for the children in a staged 'Somali village'. In the POW camp, he came to the attention of Carl Meinhof, the member of the Phonographic Commission responsible for African languages. Meinhof later arranged the release of Nur and other prisoners, whom he hired as language assistants; they helped him compile grammars of various languages and offered instruction to German students.[15] Informants like Nur made vast, essential, and largely unrecognized contributions to the growth of linguistic knowledge in the early twentieth century. The fact that so many of these informants had endured captivity and coercion of various kinds is still little understood in the history of linguistics.[16]

Hoffmann identifies the POW recordings as 'the most systematic project of linguistic recording conducted in Germany in the twentieth century' (p. 147); her work stands to make a significant contribution to the study of linguistics as an extension of colonial enterprises of taxonomy and control. At the same time, she shows what work these recordings can do in other spheres of historical enquiry. In several cases, the stories told by African POWs seem to refer to significant historical events and figures: the Dervish Movement for independence in late nineteenth-century Somalia, the violent extraction of natural resources in the Congo, specific moments in the Christianization of Togo and Ghana. Only recently have the experiences and words of colonial soldiers begun to be incorporated into histories of the First World War.[17] Imagine what more could be known if the stories, songs, oral histories, and poems held in these sound archives were also taken seriously as documentary sources, not only for the history of the war, but for local histories of twentieth-century change. If the voices of the POWs were subjected to a kind of double inscription, in Hoffmann's words, the recordings today suffer from a double obscurity: no longer useful as pure linguistic samples, and therefore invisible to the scholarly discipline that generated them, they cannot even be recognized for their value as historical sources, since the archive was not designed to accommodate the prisoners' individuality. The majority of the Lautarchiv recordings, as Lange writes, 'are still captured in terms of content today, as the recordings were not and are not listened to, not translated, not understood, not contextualized, not returned to the people or institutions in the regions of their origin' (p. 18).

Music in the Camps

Both Lange and Hoffmann, in the best tradition of cultural studies, draw from a wide range of disciplines across the humanities and social sciences to make their arguments. While music scholars have much to gain from reading their work, music itself remains somewhat at a remove in both of their monographs. This is perhaps not surprising, given that their focus is on the spoken-language collections in the Lautarchiv, which contain much less singing than the music-oriented POW recordings held in the Berlin Phonogramm-Archive. Yet the fact that so few of their interlocutors are in music studies — compared to sound studies or postcolonial theory — perhaps points to a reluctance in musicology at large to look critically at the POW

[15] As Hoffmann discusses, Nur also served as an artist's model for the painter Max Slevogt.

[16] In my manuscript in progress, I explore the contributions of a Georgian POW named Lavrosi Mamaladze, who contributed more than half of all the linguistic material in Robert Bleichsteiner's *Kaukasische Forschung: Georgische und Mingrelische Texte* (Verlag des Forschungsinstitutes für Osten und Orient, 1919).

[17] *Race, Empire and First World War Writing*, ed. by Santanu Das (Cambridge University Press, 2011); Alaka Atreya Chudal, 'What Can a Song Do to You? A Life Story of a Gurkha Prisoner in World War I', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 43.3 (2020), pp. 392–406.

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recordings as part of their own disciplinary history.[18] That is not to say that music scholars have ignored the POW archives entirely; what studies exist, however, tend to be dedicated to the documentation and celebration of particular national traditions.[19] Ignazio Macchiarella and Emilio Tamburini's *Le voci ritrovate* (Rediscovered Voices, 2018) is the most substantial of these yet to appear, an account of the recordings of Italian POWs that includes detailed musical analysis of many songs.[20] There is a great deal of music yet to be studied, if one can access it.

Though Lange and Hoffmann make principled decisions not to share the original versions of the recordings they discuss, similar material has already been made public: over the past decade, the Vienna Phonogrammarchiv has released on CD its full collection of POW recordings from camps in Austria-Hungary.[21] Institutions in Berlin, by contrast, have been more reticent, with the Lautarchiv only occasionally sanctioning publication of selected tracks (as in the Macchiarella and Tamburini volume) and the Phonogramm-Archiv having released only two CDs of POW recordings thus far, with songs by Armenian and Georgian soldiers from the Russian army.[22] Being able to listen to most of these sounds, in short, still requires a physical trip to Berlin, a challenge for many scholars outside of Europe, including those most likely to have expertise in music and languages from Africa and Asia.[23]

It is common to hear the POW recording project described as a failure or a dead end, at least as far as future scholarship was concerned. As Hoffmann observes, recordings were made 'for languages that were to be studied at a later date but that mostly never were' (p. 148). The conditions in the camp were far from ideal for finding all the languages Doegen dreamed of documenting — prisoners were often absent on work detail, recording materials became scarce as the war dragged on, many speakers were not considered suitable for making recordings. In the following years, a handful of publications would make use of the POW research, including

[18] Philip V. Bohlman, in two works addressed to a broad or student readership, offers brief and generally admiring discussions of the POW recording projects: *Focus: Music, Nationalism, and the Making of the New Europe*, 2nd edn (Routledge, 2011), pp. 44–46 and 132–33; *World Music: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 140–42. None of the recent works on music in the First World War reviewed in this journal make any mention of the POW recordings: Michelle Meinhart, 'Oh, What a Musical War! A Retrospective after the First World War Centenary', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 146.1 (2021), pp. 231–47.

[19] Susanne Ziegler, 'Recordings of Georgian Prisoners in Germany 1915–1919', in *Proceedings of the Sixth International Symposium on Traditional Polyphony*, ed. by Rusudan Tsurtsumia and Joseph Jordania (Vano Sarajishvili State Conservatoire, 2014), pp. 418–24; *Encapsulated Voices: Estonian Sound Recordings from the German Prisoner-of-War Camps in 1916–1918*, ed. by Jaan Ross (Böhlau Verlag, 2012); Nice Fracile, 'Some Phonographic Recordings of Traditional Music Performed by Romanian Prisoners of War 1916–1917', *International Musicology Conference*, 3 (2016), pp. 11–17.

[20] Ignazio Macchiarella and Emili Tamburini, *Le voci ritrovate: Canti e narrazioni di prigionieri italiani della Grande Guerra negli archivi sonori di Berlino* (Nota, 2018). Britta Lange contributed a preface to this volume.

[21] *Recordings from Prisoner-of-War Camps, World War I*, The Complete Historical Collections 1899–1950, Series 17, ed. by Gerda Lechleitner, Christian Liebl, and Ulla Remmer (Austrian Academy of Sciences, 2018–19). The six volumes in this series contain audio CDs and accompanying texts on CD-ROM.

[22] *Echoes from the Past: Georgian Prisoners' Songs Recorded on Wax Cylinders in Germany 1916–1918*, ed. by Susanne Ziegler and Rusudan Tsurtsumia (Phonogramm-Archiv, 2014); *1916–1918 Voice Imprints: Recordings of Russian Armenian POWs in German Camps*, Historic Sound Documents, 15 (Phonogramm-Archiv, 2019).

[23] Mèhèza Kalibani, 'World Music Practices? The Use of Historical Sound Recordings from Colonial Contexts and the Accessibility of European Sound Archives', *Lied und populäre Kultur/Song and Popular Culture*, 68 (2023), pp. 123–37.

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an edited volume by Doegen proclaiming 'a new ethnology' (*eine neue Völkerkunde*), but the concrete influence of the linguistic recordings was slight.[24] So too with the musical recordings: cylinders from the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv were only rarely consulted by later scholars.[25] In Vienna, the comparative musicologist Robert Lach made a career from his research in the camps, ascending all the way to Guido Adler's former chair in musicology at the University of Vienna.[26] But Lach's reputation was already in decline by the time of the Second World War, and his patently racist theories of musical evolution fell quickly out of fashion.

The era after the Second World War saw a general shift away from the large-scale collecting projects and global taxonomies that had characterized comparative musicology as a discipline. Following trends in anthropology, scholars in the emerging field of ethnomusicology focused more on long-term fieldwork in discrete social contexts, embracing cultural relativism over explicit racial hierarchies. After the horrors of the Second World War, which featured the large-scale murder and mistreatment of POWs, to say nothing of medical experimentation and extermination camps, the work of the Phonographic Commission took on a more sinister sheen. It became easy to dismiss and ultimately forget these recordings as relics of a benighted age.

To properly place the POW phenomenon in the history of musicology, as Lange, Hoffmann, and others have done for linguistics and anthropology, we must not cordon them off as an unsavoury detour belonging to the now-defunct branch of comparative musicology. We must listen, rather, for echoes and continuities. These recordings, made under conditions of constraint, coercion, and occasionally collaboration, can help us understand the ideas behind the prison recordings of John and Alan Lomax, made a mere fifteen years after the end of the war, as well as more recent collaborative ethnographic work with incarcerated people.[27] They can also inform the study of sound and sonic violence in wartime, especially as theorized in the post-9/11 context.[28] The obsession with racial difference that drove much of the POW work also warrants further investigation as a symptom of racialized ideologies that cut across musical subdisciplines in the early twentieth century. Yet many of the writings by Robert Lach, Georg Schünemann, and other musicologists in the camps — scholarship that, however flawed in methodology and world view, would enrich our historical knowledge of the period — are still untranslated and unanalysed. Just as Lange and Hoffmann rely on deep networks of translators and colleagues to make sense of the recordings they study, future work on the musical side of the POW projects must be similarly interdisciplinary and collaborative, especially across ethnographic and historical subfields.

[24] *Unter fremden Völkern: Eine neue Völkerkunde*, ed. by Wilhelm Doegen (Otto Stollberg, 1925).

[25] Siegfried Nadel used recordings of Georgian prisoners from the Phonogramm-Archiv for his *Georgische Gesänge* (Harrassowitz, 1933). The musicologist Fritz Bose used recordings of African prisoners from the Lautarchiv for an article published in a Nazi journal of racial science; 'Klangstile als Rassenmerkmale', *Zeitschrift für Rassenkunde und die vergleichende Forschung am Menschen*, 14.1 (1943), pp. 78–97.

[26] Lach wrote two preliminary reports on his POW-camp fieldwork in 1917 and 1918, followed by nine volumes under the title *Gesänge russischer Kriegsgefangene*, published between 1926 and 1952.

[27] Velia Ivanova, 'Defining the Songs of Incarceration: The Lomax Prison Project at a Critical Juncture', *Journal of the Society for American Music*, 16 (2022), pp. 92–114; Benjamin J. Harbert, 'Only Time: Musical Means to the Personal, the Private and the Polis at the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women', *American Music*, 30.2 (2013), pp. 203–40.

[28] Suzanne G. Cusick, '"You Are in a Place That Is Out of the World…": Music in the Detention Camps of the "Global War on Terror"', *Journal of the Society for American Music*, 2.1 (2008), pp. 1–26; J. Martin Daughtry, *Listening to War: Sound, Music, Trauma, and Survival in Wartime Iraq* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

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Representation and Repatriation

Hanging over this research is the abiding question: what do we do with these recordings now? What are the public ends to which they can be put? Given the challenges of accessing the sound recordings in their archival repositories, let alone on the defunct British Library website, most people are likely to encounter the sounds of First World War prisoners either in museum exhibitions or on film. In these domains, too, Lange and Hoffmann offer experience and expertise, both having worked as curators and advisors to filmmakers and artists. Hoffmann is critical of the way sound recordings often serve as 'acoustic wallpaper' (p. 19) in exhibits featuring photographs and other artefacts from POW camps. When presented without translation or contextualization, the prisoners' voices often do little more than set a mood, suggesting an exotic world beyond language or reason. In their own curatorial work, Lange and Hoffmann have set the prisoners' voices in counterpoint to other sounds — Kaiser Wilhelm II's declaration of war, for instance — and have worked diligently to incorporate accurate translations of their words, so the prisoners appear as communicative subjects, not mere ethnographic curiosities.

The POW sound recordings have also proved attractive to filmmakers, sound artists, and theatre directors. Indeed, it was *The Halfmoon Files*, the 2007 film by Philip Scheffner mentioned above, that set off 'an echo in the academic world' (Lange, p. 19) and helped inspire the last decade-plus of academic work. Some of the exact recordings discussed by Lange and Hoffmann have also found their way to new media environments. In the 2010 film *Boulevard d'Ypres*, the Belgian filmmaker Sarah Vanagt used a recording of a song by a prisoner known as Jámafáda, from present-day Burkina Faso, as a vehicle to explore recent experiences of immigration and displacement. More recently, two sound artists, Marie Guérin and Anne Kropotkine, followed the trail of Sadok Ben Rachid, a Tunisian prisoner who sang his original poetry for Wilhelm Doegen in 1916 (see Lange, pp. 235–51). In a series of concert pieces, radiophonic documentaries, and audio travelogues, Guérin and Kropotkine remix Sadok's voice with field recordings taken at the Half-Moon Camp site and narrative accounts of their journey to the city of Monastir, in Tunisia. There they found members of Sadok's extended family and played his recordings at the local radio station.[29]

Guérin and Kropotkine's radio essay raises the question of repatriation, a matter of ongoing debate and protest at colonial-era institutions that plays a relatively small role in Lange's and Hoffmann's books, though they have addressed the subject elsewhere.[30] It is especially complicated in the case of the POW collections, given the difficulty of tracing these prisoners back to their regions of origin. In many cases, we cannot be sure about the exact spelling of names or the correct identification of languages and geographical locations, due to the inconsistent and error-filled documentation prepared in the camps. Many prisoners came from countries that no longer exist or belonged to ethnolinguistic groups that have moved or

[29] 'Sur la piste de Sadok B.', *Micro-sillons*, 28 March 2019 <https://micro-sillons.fr/sur-la-piste-de-sadok-b/> [accessed 26 April 2025]; Marie Guérin and Anne Kropotkine, 'Chanteuses', *Micro-sillons*, 6 March 2021 <https://micro-sillons.fr/chanteuses/> [accessed 26 April 2025]. William Kentridge's 2018 theatre piece *The Head & The Load* and Heiner Goebbels's 2022 composition *A House of Call* have also incorporated First World War POW recordings of African and Georgian soldiers, respectively.

[30] With the anthropologist Margit Berner, they co-edited a volume on 'sensitive collections': *Sensible Sammlungen: Aus dem anthropologischen Depot*, ed. by Margit Berner, Anette Hoffmann, and Britta Lange (Philo Fine Arts, 2011).

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been displaced from their homes in the intervening century. Simply handing over copies of these recordings to a particular country's Ministry of Culture — which is sometimes the form such repatriation projects take — would be an inadequate resolution to their stories. Lange, Hoffmann, and others have shown that it is possible to work with the fragments available to us to reconstruct bits and pieces of the experiences, often traumatic, that brought these men before the recording horns. In this way, the families and communities to which they belonged can eventually be brought into dialogue about whether and how the recordings should be made public. But we must first know what — or rather, who — is on those recordings, before that dialogue can even begin. This is the work of close listening, careful historiography, and engaged ethnography that remains to be done on one of the most fraught archives of twentieth-century sound.

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