

## The transformation of agency and emotion in war

### **Introduction:**

The 'theatre of war' (Coldwell 1942) can shape an actor's agency and elicit a range of emotions. This essay will explore how war impacts the individual by analysing the testimony of Sergeant Len Coldwell, who wrote a letter from a Prisoner of War (POW) Camp in 1942. Firstly, a brief description of the testimony will be provided. This will give a necessary context to the argument put forward in this essay. Following this, the agency that Len is missing when writing this letter will be discussed. He is limited by space provided and the stamp of censorship on the front which indicates that there is a lack of agency. Secondly, this essay will focus on what is present in the testimony, in terms of emotion. This will be achieved by discussing the unexpected happiness of the testimony. At these points Len is giving a description of a true part of his experience, but also is looking to bridge the gap between himself and Chas. This will lastly be contrasted with the negative emotions that are also present in the testimony. However, due to the context of which the letter was written these negative emotions are, in part, blamed on the receiver or when a negative emotion is stated it is quickly spun into a positive one. Throughout this essay will refer to appropriate literature thus concluding that war transforms the agency and emotion

of the individual. Lastly, a copy of the original letter is in Appendix A and transcribed in Appendix B.

### **The Testimony:**

This letter was written just before Christmas in 1942 but in fact only reached the receiver in March 1943, as shown by a stamp on the front (See Appendix A). Also, on the front of the document we see various stamps and markings, but the key ones are the censor's stamp, this will be highlighted further when discussing agency, and the heading of the letter 'Kriegsgefangenpost' (POW Post). Furthermore, as will be discussed when exploring the topic of agency, or the lack of it, there is very limited space afforded to Len to write. Also, the paper has lines already printed on it which further prescribes how much can be written. The letter itself is on thin paper, due to the war and supplies being scarce. This letter was most likely part of a series of letters sent between two friends, Chas in Cairo and Len in Germany.

### **Missing Agency:**

The primary aspect that restricts Len's agency is the physicality of the document. As previously mentioned, there are a defined amount of lines that Len can write on. This can be viewed as a form of subtle censorship that is imposed

by the Germans. By defining the amount of lines that Len is given a structure is created. Subsequently, Len then participates in this structure since he keeps to this limit. It is at this point Len is 'embedded in social relation' where he is reliant on others to gain legitimacy (King 2000, p.421). The notion of the 'gift exchange' which has been renegotiated (ibid) can be applied by considering the importance of letters during war. As Hanna (2003, p.1339), indicates war letters were an avenue through which soldiers could remain connected to civilian life, making them an important resource for soldiers. This letter can be regarded as part of a gift exchange between individuals in which Len is given legitimacy. He is able to maintain some agency through an action that all soldiers would have recognised as a desire when away from home. This in part renegotiates the present social relation as Len finds himself with agency from his captors within a structure. A level of agency is possible even if it is heavily constrained it is not totally determined (King 2000, p.426). By gaining agency the social relation is adapted into a new one. Yet because the 'subjects' within this relation are unaware of it, they become unable to control their intentions let alone the structure of social relations (King 2000, p.424). Lacking control, in turn, creates 'rules' that are 'unknown' and therefore unquestioned by Len (ibid, p.424-425). Len shows himself to be unknowingly restricted. He is therefore missing agency, as he only writes on the lines provided (apart from signing off). Len does this despite the fact there is space around the lines where more information could be written. Furthermore, the letter does not specify that he should keep to the lines.

A second aspect of the letter that impacts on Len's agency is the Deputy Chief Field Censor stamp on the front of the letter. As Hanna (2003, p.1340) identifies two types of censorship, carried out by the state or by the individual themselves. Since soldiers would have been aware that letters would be read by censors, many soldiers would have been inclined to divulge only certain information (ibid). As can be seen, when reading the letter, no information has been redacted; thus, the letter has not been censored by a state. It may be argued that Len's agency has not been lost. However, this ignores the structure that Len would have been a part of. In other words, knowing the letter would not be kept private.

Therefore, it is likely that throughout the letter Len is missing agency but the state gains in agency. As is argued by Mabee (2007, p.435), those on the individual level can have their agency restricted whilst the state as a 'collective agent' can have its agency widened. In this case the, German and to some extent the British, state has power over Len even if this power may be symbolic. 'Symbolic power' reinforces relations that form the 'structure' of the social world in which this letter is written (Bourdieu 1989, p.21). As we know that censors at times could be liberal when deciding what should be allowed (Leary 1968, p.238). The fact that Len seemingly kept to what was expected, showed since the state(s) held symbolic power. The current social structure was reinforced by Len's actions, not his interactions (King 2000, p.423). Considering the above we can

see that through this process Len's individual agency has been restricted; whereas the state's collective agency has been widened.

### **Expected Happiness:**

Having discussed missing agency, this essay now turns to focus on the emotion that is present throughout the letter and its role. Firstly, Len puts forward positive emotions. For example, Len states that he is better off in this camp than he was in a previous one, how much money he has earned and that he is looking forward to Christmas as he will get a special ration parcel (Coldwell 1942). This positivity is not too dissimilar to many other soldiers who were hopeful and prone to fantasising (Bourke 1999, p.xxii). This happiness is part of Len's experience as a POW even if unexpected (ibid). This 'upbeat' presentation of conditions was typical of many POWs (ibid). It went against what may be expected but was the POW making sense of being 'out of the war' (Makepeace 2017, p.54). The positive emotion presented by Len may appear to be irrational but for many POWs, this was how they experienced the conflict. Therefore, as Mercer (2005, p.77) argues, in certain situations a 'physiological approach' is more appropriate to understand reason when emotion is involved. Applying this idea to Len's testimony we are able to understand why Len is writing positively; it is to maintain a reputation of managing. Thus, we are not looking at how Len should function according to what is rational, but it is more useful to understand how

Len reasons (Mercer 2005, p.81). Furthermore, Len seeks to uphold an identity of being like any other regular soldier or citizen. Again, this was common when soldiers wrote letters (Makepeace 2017, p.69). Len does this by mentioning he still reads newspapers and is gaining some form of education (Coldwell 1942). This is Len's "representation of 'normal' life" and more importantly his experience of being a POW (Makepeace 2017, p.69). The primary reason for Len's unexpected happiness is not because he has become irrational. It is because this is his experience and this experience has shaped how he now reasons.

Secondly, Len's unexpected happiness can be explained by considering how he looks to bridge the gap between himself and Chas. This was another common trait among POWs where letters provided a real connection with others (Makepeace 2017, p.132). From the outset, Len says how glad he was to receive a previous letter but notes that mail is still rare (Coldwell 1942). The rarity of mail was familiar to POWs so to receive a letter was important to them and lifted their spirits (Makepeace 2017, p.129). Furthermore, it was not necessarily the contents of the letter that was important, merely receiving a letter made POWs feel connected (ibid). This is reflected in Len's letter as he explicitly mentions that he was glad to receive a previous letter (Coldwell 1942). Therefore, influencing his experience of war. His experience changes because he has a connection to someone who is physically distant. The letter changes the social context of war for Len.

We can understand the above through the lens of social constructivism. This theory posits that culture and context explain emotional responses (Crawford 2000, p.128-129). If we apply this theory to Len's testimony we assume, for example, that if the letter initially sent to Len contained a photograph, Len's emotional response would change. This is because the context and value of the letter will change (Makepeace 2017, p.131). Consequently, this would also influence Len's experience of war. In addition, social constructivism argues that 'emotions are learned' (Crawford 2000, p.129). So, if Len was around other soldiers who felt positively about receiving letters he would too. Accordingly, the similarities that we see between Len and other POWs should be expected as they are in similar social situations. By reflecting on what is known about POW letter writing and psychological theory we can understand that Len's unexpected happiness is actually to be expected. This is due to the specific social context that Len is in, which not only shapes his behaviour in but also his experience of war. By analysing this testimony of war we have come to understand how positive emotion can fit into the context of war.

### **Negative Emotion:**

Whilst there are points of positivity through the letter there are also undertones of negativity. These are not as explicitly acknowledged by Len compared to the positive emotions. Furthermore, when negative emotions are

mentioned they are immediately countered by a positive one or blame is not placed on his captors. Firstly, Len writes of Red Cross rations being reduced and how this is due to Chas or the British as a whole (Coldwell 1942). Even though it is likely that Len did not bemoan the Allied victories, it shows that he had felt the direct impact of the war in his new context. The new context caused an alteration of circumstances and emotion. As a result, the combination of these factors transformed Len's experience of war.

As Makepeace (2017, p.77) indicates, rations had become an integral part of a POWs 'new life'. In addition, the rations that were available to POWs were considered to be insufficient and it was the Red Cross that aimed to top-up these standard rations (Makepeace 2017, p.77). Therefore, to see and feel the reduction in rations would have transformed the emotion of Len through the experience of pain. Scarry (1985, p.165), identifies the process of humans sensing pain this being hunger for Len. This then transforms into the imagining of pain and becomes part of experience and emotion. Subsequently, when addressing hunger specifically Scarry (*ibid*, p.167) argues that hunger transforms into eating. However, if there is no food 'a new object' becomes incorporated 'into the body' (*ibid*). The new object for Len is 'good news' (Coldwell 1942). By shifting his imagination from food to good news a 'cancellation' process occurs (Scarry 1985, p.168). This may appear radical but as has been shown the life of a POW meant

a radical change for a soldier who now had a ‘unique existence’ (Makepeace 2017, p.76) and therefore a unique experience.

Secondly, Len discusses the limited bias of German newspapers and how it means he is ‘better off’ now compared to previously (Coldwell 1942). This respect of the German press and how it juxtaposes previous conditions shows, for Len, the ‘captor-captive power relationship’ being undermined as was common (Makepeace 2017, p.66). It can be argued that this has occurred due to social conditions transforming experience and thus emotion. Unlike when discussing positive emotions, emotional transformation can be an individual process (Coicaud 2014, p.490). Therefore, in Len’s case, this conflicting statement can be attributed to how Len relates his previous position to his current one.

In addition, by combining these two emotions Len may be concealing his true feeling towards his current circumstances. This is because he does not explicitly say conditions are good; just that they are better than before. Also, to argue that they are better simply because of access to news access seems to be peculiar. Since a small change has instigated a larger one. However, as Scarry (1985, p.174-175) argues, alteration of one object to another is a powerful ‘lever’ where a small change is ‘magnified’ creating a large change at the end. If we apply this notion to Len’s testimony, we can comprehend how this ultimately negative emotion is transformed. In this case, the small change is a somewhat wider knowledge of life outside his camp, which was highly valued. This

satisfaction of knowledge effects a larger transformation in emotion towards Len's captors. This is because the emotion of hunger for knowledge is displaced by internal 'incorporation' of knowledge into the mind (Scarry 1985, p.167). Ultimately it is the specific social conditions that war presents which alters the emotional response of an individual. Len's emotion appears to conflict with what we may expect. But when we consider his specific context and view it as part of a wider change in context, rather than an isolated situation, we can understand how through a transformation of experience emotion is also transformed.

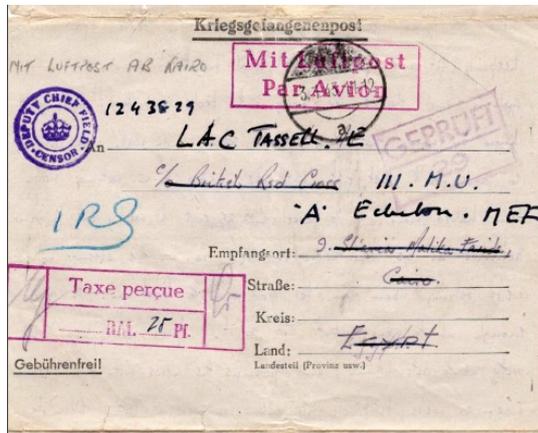
### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, this essay has analysed a letter of Sergeant Len Coldwell as a testimony of war. It has been shown that war transforms agency and emotion which in turn alters how war is experienced on the human level. Firstly, the issue of agency was discussed where it was argued that the small action of putting lines of the page restricted Len's agency, this was an explicit change. In contrast, agency was restricted implicitly as Len is confined to a structure which influences the way he writes. It would have been known that letters would have been looked at by censors, therefore, Len may have self-censored so that his letter would get through. Secondly, the emotion found within the testimony was considered. Initially by focusing on happiness within the letter and how it should not be unexpected. The essay then turned to the negative emotion in the letter.

Negativity was constantly veiled behind positive emotions due to Len forming new objects which could satisfy his hunger, both for food and knowledge. This testimony only provides Len's experience of war on the 15<sup>th</sup> December 1942. It would be of significant value to analyse the series of letters that this one was a part of to fully understand how 'the theatre of war' (Coldwell 1942) transformed agency and emotion for Len.

# Appendix A

Front:



Inside:

Same Old Place.  
December 15<sup>th</sup> 1942.

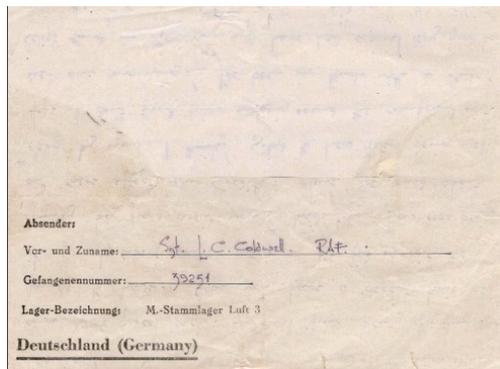
Dear Chas.

Had your 15<sup>th</sup> - 10 letter today. Must have come by pigeon post, I guess! Hope it keeps like it. Was very pleased to hear all your gem, for mail is still very scarce. Glad you're keeping fit and well, despite local hazards - sand, sun, and squalor, and thanks for trying with books and food; guess you'll know by now, that food too, is taboo. Oh well, we've managed so far, we'll last out, methinks. Our R.C. rations have been halved now, to 1/2 parcel and 25 cigs. a week, due to your activities in the new theatre of war! So, in the absence of food we're relying upon you for good news to feast on. It's good enough up to now, but 'Go to it!' Jimmy newspapers are pretty up-to-date I think, and give us the news with only reasonable bias, so we're better off here than we were at ITC. Bless it's little heart! Xmas will be OK. For we've an extra issue of a Xmas parcel each, and will find plenty of fun and games to have. Hope you have a decent time of it, for I expect you're getting a bit fed up with the country by now, arnt you? Incidentally, how does being out there affect your credits? Mine are round about £200 by now, I think! Glad to hear Peter's doing well. Hope I don't find him walking round the compound with me one morning! I've been in touch with a Student Relief Fund in Geneva, and have had several very good books from them, so am not in such a bad way. Am expecting to sit 3 tough exams. here next day. That go now. -

Very best of luck. Write Often. Remember me to all at home P.S. Had a Xmas card from the R.C.V. the other day, but without sender's address. -

Yours  
Ken

Back:



## Appendix B

Dear Chas,

Had your 15th – 10 letter today. Must have come by pigeon post, I guess! Hope it keeps like it. Was very pleased to hear all your gen, for mail is still very scarce. Glad you're keeping fit and well, despite local hazards – sand, sun, and syph! and thanks for trying with books and food i guess you'll know by now, that food too is taboo. Oh well! we've managed so far, we'll last out, methinks. Our R.C rations have been halved now, to ½ parcel and 25 cigs. a week, due to your activities in the new 'theatre of war'. So, in the absence of food we're relying upon you for good news to feast on. It's good enough up to now, but 'Go to it!' Jerry newspapers are pretty up-to-date I think, and give us the news with only reasonable bias, so we're better off here than we were at IXc. bless its' little heart! Xmas will be O.K. for we've an extra issue of a Xmas parcel each, and will find plenty of fun and games to have. Hope you have a decent time of it, for I expect you're getting a bit fed up with the country by now, aren't you? Incidentally, how does being out there affect your Credits? Mine are round about £200 by now, I think! Glad to hear Peters' doing well. Hope I don't find him walking round the compound with me one morning! I've been in touch with a Student Relief Fund in Geneva, and have had several very good books from them, so am not in such a bad way. Am expecting to sit 3 tough exams. here next May. Must go now, —  
Very best of Luck. Write Often. Remember me to all at home.

P.s. Had a Xmas Card from the R.e.v the other day, but without sender's address.

— yours.

Len

## **Bibliography**

Bourdieu, P. (1989) "*Social Space and Symbolic Power*" *Sociological Theory*, vol.7 no.1, pp. 14-25.

Bourke, J. (1999) *An intimate history of killing: Face-to-face killing in twentieth century warfare*. New York: Granta

Coicaud, J. (2014) *Emotions and Passions in the Discipline of International Relations*. *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, vol.15 no.3, pp. 485-513.

Coldwell, L.C. (1942) Letter to Chas. 15th December.

Crawford, N. (2000) *The Passion of World Politics: Propositions on Emotion and Emotional Relationships*. *International Security*, vol.24 no.4, pp. 116-156.

Hanna, M. (2003) A Republic of Letters: The Epistolary Tradition in France during World War I, *The American Historical Review*, vol.108, no.5, pp. 1338-1361.

King, A. (2000) "*Thinking with Bourdieu against Bourdieu: A 'practical' critique of the habitus*", *Sociological theory*, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 417-433.

Leary, L.M (1968) *Books, Soldiers and Censorship During the Second World War*. *American Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 237-245.

Mabee, B. (2007) "*Levels and Agents, States and People: Micro-Historical Sociological Analysis and International Relations*" *International Politics*, vol.44, pp. 431-449.

Makepeace, C. (2017) *Captives of War: British Prisoners of War in Europe in the Second World War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mercer, J. (2005) Rationality and Psychology in International Politics. *International Organization*, vol.59 no.1, pp. 77-106.

Scarry, E. (1985) *The Body in Pain* Oxford: Oxford University Press.