Subject Headings 
(Mis)Informing Memory

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Abstract

In recent years the Library of Congress has reclassified the subject heading for the World War I civilian detention camp in Ruhleben, Germany from an internment camp to a concentration camp. While etymological research supports this change, its impact both on an emotional level, and on society's collective memory is profound. The camp's records, housed by Harvard Law School Library's Special Collections, offer evidence that the term "concentration camp" may be misleading and reveal a camp that is considerably different than one might expect. I argue that the Library of Congress's reclassification of Ruhleben from internment camp to concentration camp will influence how the camp is remembered by modern society.

Because library subject headings serve as a gateway for researchers to related resources, they have the power to shape
people’s ideas about the resources being described, thus feeding into societal memory and chipping away at the objectivity of history. Archives are the repositories of primary sources, objects, unadulterated by interpretation. Yet, in our effort to describe archival holdings, information professionals need to interpret the items and therefore risk misrepresenting them to the public. In light of this, there is significant need for greater access to historical collections, allowing researchers the opportunity to effectively study these historical events, and to contribute to society’s collective memory.

The concept of collective memory is explored through an anthropological lens, connecting its role with cultural evolution. I look at how memory is created and informed, and the role archival collections can play in this process. Additionally, I explore the impact archivists have on memory and our understanding of historical events through their own descriptions.

Introduction

In November 1914, there were approximately 4,300 male British civilians between the ages of seventeen and fifty-five in Germany (Stibbe, 2008). On November 6, 1914, a few months into World War I, the German government ordered these men to report to the internment camp at the Ruhleben racetrack in Spandau, Germany. Those who obeyed the order remained interned in Ruhleben for the next four years. Ruhleben, its camp administrators, and its internees have been largely forgotten by history; however, traces of this chapter in history still exist in a few archives. Recently, Ruhleben enjoyed the attention of one historian, Matthew Stibbe, who published British Civilian Internees in Germany: The Ruhleben Camp, 1914-18. Until the publication of this work in 2008, Ruhleben represented an unfamiliar subject to most people, including information professionals.

Upon publication of the book, Ruhleben was given a name authority record, graced with the qualifier “(Concentration camp)” (Library of Congress, 2009). The classification of Ruhleben as a concentration camp by an authority such as the Library of Congress came as a surprise to the staff of the Harvard Law School Library’s (HLSL) Special Collections department who had begun preparing the Law School’s archival collection of records from Ruhleben for digitization in
the fall of 2008. The surprise stemmed from the department’s general understanding of the term ‘concentration camp’ compared to what they had come to understand were the experiences of prisoners in Ruhleben. In the finding aid for the collection, Ruhleben had been described in two ways: with the German term Gefangenenlager or prison camp, and with the term British Civilian Internment Camp. These two terms were drawn from a previous archivist’s understanding of the collection when the finding aid and catalogue record were created. Since the library catalogue is the first point of entry for users of these materials, the terminology used by information professionals to describe Ruhleben is significant. At a time when we experience an over-abundance of information, first impressions are crucial, and information professionals must work to provide researchers with vocabulary that most accurately reflects historical events.

The language assigned to resources by library cataloguers should reflect the current language used by their patrons. Through this exhibition of currency, cataloguers reveal their role as both consumers and producers of collective memory. One sociologist who has written extensively on the idea of collective memory, Jeremy Olick (1999), offers the following thought on the concept:

Groups provide the definitions, as well as the divisions, by which particular events are subjectively defined as consequential; these definitions trigger different cognitive and neurological processes of storage. Moreover, as political historians of memory have demonstrated, contemporary circumstances provide the cues for certain images of the past (341).

In this paper, I will explore the events that took place at Ruhleben as compared to other camps assigned a similar classification. I visit the topic of language and how its role in our understanding of a collective memory, as described above. Finally, I look at where archives fit into the schema of collective memory.

**Ruhleben**

Ruhleben was a place for the imprisonment primarily of British civilians who were in Germany at the outbreak of World War I. The purpose of the imprisonment by the German government was twofold: to reduce the threat of uprisings by citizens of an enemy nation from within their own borders, and to diminish the pool of men available to fight on the side of Great Britain and its allies.

Between November 1914 and the end of the war in November 1918, 5,500 Britons had been imprisoned at Ruhleben. At its height, Ruhleben held 4,273 men, and at its lowest, during the armistice, it held 2,300 men
From the outset, conditions at the camp were less than ideal. Prisoners were divided among eleven horse stables, referred to as barracks. They lived six men to a horse box, complete with the original hay, and the overflow of men, about 200 per barrack, lived in the loft spaces above the boxes. Neither form of accommodation was desirable, with significant overcrowding being a universal problem. In one prisoner’s account of his initial impressions of the living conditions at Ruhleben he describes his disbelief upon seeing the hay loft:

We blundered through the narrow door and then pulled up dead. The interior was as black and forbidding as a coal hole. It was some minutes before our eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, and then we descried upon the floor a seething, misshapen mass of humanity, tumbling and jostling restlessly for elbow room in which to settle down (Mahoney, 1918, 23).

In the beginning, personal hygiene also posed a challenge to the prisoners. There was one water tap per barrack, meaning that about 300 men shared one water source for their bathing needs. As expected, little of the water from the tap was hot since the facilities were not originally built to meet the needs of 4,000 men. Again, prisoner Henry C. Mahoney (1918) provides a description of camp conditions, in this instance of the sanitation facilities in the early days of Ruhleben. “The only makeshift [sic]…was to stand stark naked upon the stone floor of the passageway near the taps and submit to have a bucket of ice water thrown over by a comrade.” Fortunately for the inhabitants of Ruhleben, vast improvements in sanitation were introduced within the first few months of the camp’s existence.

As some of the basic comforts improved, the prisoners of Ruhleben established recreational activities to pass their time; over the next four years they established sports teams, an education system, a drama society, and a series of camp publications. The internees created a civil society within the confines of their prison. As Stibbe (2008) observes, “Ruhleben, in fact, was not only a prison camp; over the four years of its existence it was or became an ‘imagined community’ with its own unique cultural institutions and forms of self representation.”

The records from Ruhleben, which were collected and sold to the Harvard Law School Library by Dr. Maurice Ettinghausen circa 1932, consist of a variety of documents and visual resources. These include administrative announcements, playbills from camp productions, a daily newsletter, and advertisements for different laundry services. An accompanying photograph collection provides visual evidence of how the prisoners lived. Overall, the collection is a rich resource.
for those seeking information about the Ruhleben experience.

**Definition of Concentration Camp**

Having defined Ruhleben’s purpose and the experience of its prisoners, it is important to illustrate how Ruhleben was not, by today’s understanding of the term, a concentration camp. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989), **concentration camp** and **internment camp** are nearly synonymous, though there are important distinctions between the two. A concentration camp is “a camp where non-combatants of a district are accommodated such as those instituted by Lord Kitchener during the South African War of 1899-1902; one for the internment of political prisoners, foreign nationals, etc. esp. as organized by the Nazi regime in Germany before and during the war of 1939-1945.” An internment camp is “a detention camp for prisoners of war and aliens.” Where the two terms differ is in the evolution of the social understanding of a concentration camp.

*Concentration camp* took on a new meaning in America in the last half of the 20th century. As the truth of the Holocaust seeped into the American consciousness, the term became synonymous with the Nazi death camps of World War II. The evolved definition is evidenced in the “democratic encyclopedia,” Wikipedia:

In the 20th century the arbitrary internment of civilians by the state became more common and reached a climax with Nazi concentration camps and the practice of forced labor camps of the Soviet Union. As a result of this trend, the term ‘concentration camp’ carries many of the connotations of ‘extermination camp’ and is sometimes used synonymously (2009).

The Wikipedia entry also recognizes the original definition of the term according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but juxtaposes it with the more common understanding.

Some academics, when writing about wartime internment camps, have addressed the issue of the semantics regarding concentration camps. For example, Robinson, a historian and expert in the area of Japanese-American internment, includes a note on the use of terminology in his book about World War II American internment camps:

I use the word ‘internment’ to describe the government’s wartime policy toward the West Coast Japanese Americans as a whole as well as their placement in confinement in the interior following their removal from the coast. The facilities in which the ‘internees’ were held I call ‘camps.’ I have elected not to use the phrase ‘concentration camp.’ As a result of its association with the Holocaust and the
sites of mass murder set up by Nazi Germany, the term ‘concentration camp’ evokes such powerful and emotional responses that its use obscures rather than clarifies the nature of the Japanese-American camps (2001, 261, emphasis added).

Robinson’s illustration of the power that terms have is key to recognizing the argument against classification of resources about internment camps under the term ‘concentration camp’. The designation of WWII American Japanese camps as concentration camps fuelled the debate over the definition of a concentration camp into the 1990s. When the director of the Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation invited the Japanese-American National Museum to mount an exhibit at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum in 1995, it was with the understanding that the exhibit bear the title “America’s Concentration Camps” (Ishizuka, 2006). The curator, Karen Ishizuka, argues that the museum was titled to match the terminology used by the American government at the time the camps were established by U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The National Park Service, which oversees Ellis Island, strongly opposed the use of “Concentration Camps” in the exhibit title due to the then-current understanding of the term. Ralph Applebaum, the exhibition designer, reported to Steven Briganti, the executive director of the Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, and to the National Museum, that “an issue has come to my attention from a number of sources which is that the title ACC [America’s Concentration Camps] will be soundly criticized by the N[ew] Y[ork] press as it implies a moral equivalency between the camps and ignores the current accepted meaning of concentration camps as death camps” (Ishizuka, 2006) A series of intellectual debates followed this announcement, in which a majority of participating Jews, Japanese Americans, scholars and museum professionals urged the National Museum to keep the original title. Those who argued against the title did so on the grounds that it would be worse to lose the opportunity to mount the exhibit at Ellis Island, as was threatened, than to change its title. In the end the museum won the fight to keep the original title, but had to display a label at the beginning of the exhibit to explain its use of the term:

A concentration camp is a place where people are imprisoned not because of any crimes they committed, but simply because of who they are. Although many groups have been singled out for such persecution throughout history, the term ‘concentration camps’ was first used at the turn of the century in the Spanish American and Boer Wars.
During World War II, America’s concentration camps were clearly distinguishable from Nazi Germany’s. Nazi camps were places of torture, barbarous medical experiments, and summary executions; some were extermination centers with gas chambers. Six million Jews and many others, including Gypsies, Poles, homosexuals, and political dissidents were slaughtered in the Holocaust.

In recent years, concentration camps have existed in the former Soviet Union, Cambodia, and Bosnia.

Despite the difference, all had one thing in common: the people in power removed a minority group from the general population and the rest of society let it happen (Ishizuka, 2006, 167).

The debate over the application of the term to describe the Japanese-American camps was not limited to the public act of memorializing the events decades later, but had also played a role in a 1944 case that came before the U.S. Supreme Court. Filed by Fred Toyosaburo Korematsu against the United States, this case involved the orders of curfew, confinement, and relocation of Japanese Americans soon after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. In Chief Justice Hugo Black’s written opinion, he addresses the problems of connotation when referring to concentration camps:

Our task would be simple, our duty clear, were this a case involving the imprisonment of a loyal citizen in a concentration camp because of racial prejudice. Regardless of the true nature of assembly and relocation centers – and we deem it unjustifiable to call them concentration camps with all the ugly connotations that term implies – we are dealing specifically with nothing but an exclusion order (Korematsu v. U.S., 1944).

Ruhleben and Collective Memory

I have offered many viewpoints on the use of the term concentration camp; however, the Ruhleben experience did not contribute to the intellectual debate. Ruhleben was a mostly-forgotten chapter in World War I history; aside from a few men who published their memoirs of Ruhleben, there was a public silence about the camp. Stibbe (2008) argues the cause of this silence was that “many returned from Germany fully aware of the ‘relativity’ of their suffering, and [were] somehow ashamed of their enforced inactivity during the war”. In a notable exception to the silence, there was a major public commemoration of Ruhleben in London – the Ruhleben Exhibition at Westminster Hall. The exhibition opened in January 1919 to an audience that included the British Royal Family, as a means to participating in the remembrance of Ruhleben (Stibbe, 2008).
Ninety years later, in 2009, those who wish to remember and understand what happened at Ruhleben during World War I have few resources on which to draw. There are a few archival collections in the world, with the collection at HLSL being the largest. To date, little scholarship has been pursued with the archival collections, though Stibbe’s history of Ruhleben serves as a notable exception.

The publication of Stibbe’s book acts as the catalyst for discussion about meaning of the term concentration camp in American culture, and how the American collective memory informs our understanding of such historical events. What remains unclear is whether library cataloguers, or other information professionals who describe published and archival resources, should strive to reflect the cultural understanding and nuances of cataloguing terms, or if they must abide by strict and static definitions.

**Classification**

Library catalogues are the primary tool with which library users find the resources necessary for their research. Cataloguers create metadata records to describe items and make them accessible to patrons, which include authoritative forms of names and subject headings. By drawing from an established list of approved names and subject headings, or a controlled vocabulary, library catalogues can share records, and researchers can search the catalogue more effectively.

However, *standardized* is not synonymous with *static*; as Lois Mai Chan of the University of Kentucky’s School of Library and Information Science explains, “The ideal of currency in a catalog or index requires that terminology be updated when it is no longer current” (Chan, 2005). She points to David Haykin, who also emphasizes the need for constant revision:

[The cataloguer] must use the term in the sense in which it is currently used, regardless of the older literature in and out of the catalog. This leads inevitably to a policy of constant change in order to maintain the catalog up to date. To put this policy into effect the cataloger must substitute the latest heading for the one which is obsolescent or obsolete and must refer the reader to the current heading from the headings which have fallen into disuse. (Haykin in Chan, 2005)

Indeed, such revisions of the Library of Congress subject headings have occurred over the years. The evolution of the subject heading for *African Americans* is a good example of this phenomenon. In this case, the language used to classify African Americans had to change because the original language was determined to be racist. The idea of a term becoming obsolete due to offensiveness
is different from a term becoming obsolete because its nuance and association has evolved over time, as has happened with concentration camp. This is why I present the argument that collective memory can inform library cataloguing, and, vice versa, that library cataloguing can affect collective memory.

However, Library of Congress Rule Interpretation (24.1A) indicates that after July 1996, cataloguers are to “establish all concentration camps as name headings,” rather than subject or name headings, as the rule stated previously. The Library of Congress has made it clear, through the use of controlled language, that they are oblivious to the nuances of the difference between a concentration camp and an internment camp in collective memory. According to the authority record for concentration camps, the following terms all fall under that heading: death camps, detention camps, extermination camps, and internment camps.

Collective Memory

According to Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan (1999), collective memory is achieved through collective remembrance which “is public recollection. It is the act of gathering bits and pieces of the past, and joining them together in public. The ‘public’ is the group that produces, expresses, and consumes it.” In a sense, information professionals – librarians, archivists, and museum curators – are all participants in the act of collective remembrance. When creating resources, such as metadata records, that describe historical works, information professionals interpret the collective understanding of their patrons, users, or visitors, to make the historical works accessible. Likewise, patrons, users, and visitors are the consumers of collective memory made accessible by information professionals. Once patrons have used metadata to access an historical work, they can complete the cycle of producing and expressing collective memory. As patrons and visitors interpret the historical works and make their interpretation public through some sort of expression, such as a publication, the collective memory may shift slightly. Essentially, the work of information professionals can have tangible implications for subsequent stages in the process of collective memory-making: how a work is described by its metadata will influence how a patron approaches, or does not approach, the work. Therefore, assigning the subject heading ‘concentration camp’ to historical works about sites of internment that do not meet the society’s current understanding of the term will influence researchers’ understanding of those works.

Part of belonging to a culture is understanding the vocabulary used by it, and its nuances. Anyone who has attempted to
learn a foreign language knows that learning the vocabulary is only part of the process. The true measure of one’s fluency in a language is an understanding of the nuances of words and phrases within the language. By gaining such knowledge, one enters into the collective memory of that group, since the experiences of that culture produce the nuances in language. The act of assigning language to an idea or an event contributes to the collective memory of a society. Today, many understand the term ‘concentration camp’ as a synonym for ‘death camp’, as I have shown above. Winter and Sivan (2001), authors of War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century, support this argument as well. Their reasoning behind excluding the Holocaust from their study contributes to my argument on the assignment of the term concentration camp:

Winter and Sivan (2001), War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century, support this argument as well. Their reasoning behind excluding the Holocaust from their study contributes to my argument on the assignment of the term concentration camp:

The history of the Death Camps is the history of industrial murder, remote from war of the kind we consider in chapters on Europe in 1914 to 1918, on Spain in 1936 to 1939, on Algeria in 1954 to 1962, in the Middle East, and so on. (4)

Two of the key components of collective memory are acts of remembrance and language. Acts of remembrance encompass more than physical acts such as commemoration ceremonies, parades, and forums. Acts of remembrance also include the documentation of an event through written accounts, oral accounts, or visual resources. Consequently, when all of the participants in an event are gone, the act of remembrance will continue.

Only those who were present at an event will possess the true memories of that event. However, by creating documentation, through diaries, letters, photographs, oral histories, or memoirs, witnesses allow others, including future generations, to relive that memory through reading, listening, or watching. If many witnesses to an event produce some form of documentation regarding their memory of the event, their conversation about it will continue, albeit passively, through a surrogate collective memory. For example, the memoirs written by prisoners at Ruhleben can be read and compared, providing researchers a multi-vocal perspective on Ruhleben. From this point, they can better assign Ruhleben to its proper place within our contemporary understanding of wartime camps. This keeps the collective cultural memory alive in future generations.

The act of collective memory does not have to end when the final survivors of an event die. To supplement the memoirs of Ruhleben survivors there are archival records from the camp. The records serve to inform the historical record more than the collective memory. Yet the records may be interpreted to further inform the current understanding of the event – as the meaning of an event may
shift over time, just as the classification of Ruhleben changed after World War II. During World War I, Ruhleben was a concentration camp in the original sense of the term, but after the atrocities of the Holocaust became known, the term concentration camp was inextricably linked to Nazi death camps. Subsequently, the popular understanding of wartime internment camps that were not extermination camps was no longer synonymous with concentration camps.

Archives

The Ruhleben documents held by the Harvard Law School Library provide evidence that Ruhleben was not a death camp. These records, which include theatre programs, course catalogues, and daily newsletters, instead serve to inform the collective memory of those who use the collection by informing the negotiation regarding the language used to describe Ruhleben. Below I will further explore the role of archives in informing collective memory.

Terry Cook, a Canadian archives expert, asserts that archivists are uncomfortable with the idea that they shape collective memory. His argument is that as archivists, the most essential part of our job is appraisal, or the picking and choosing of what is worthy of our archive. The chosen records are treated to climate controlled environments, housed in acid-free folders, and arranged and described so as to be accessible to researchers. Those records of society not selected for the archives have an uncertain future, will not as easily remembered in the historic record, and will probably be forgotten altogether.

So, in view of Cook's argument, what does it mean that the Harvard Law School Library acquired the Ruhleben collection? A librarian purchased the collection for the library 75 years ago because he thought it was important to have in the school’s manuscript collection. Since then, this wonderful collection of manuscripts, camp publications, photographs, and more, has been processed and reprocessed, and is now being digitized. It is one of the more heavily used collections, though its relevance to the Law School is minimal. The collection complements the Library’s World War II collections, which document war crimes, most significantly through the Nuremberg Trials and the International Military Tribunal of the Far East (IMTFE).

What makes the Ruhleben collection fascinating is the way the records reveal a rich cultural life filled with educational, cultural, and athletic opportunities. It is easy to see how a researcher might forget that Ruhleben was an internment camp and that prisoners suffered in their living conditions and in their separation from their families. Thankfully
there are memoirs and historical accounts to remind researchers of the context in which these records were created.

The notion that archives may play a critical role in the formation of social or collective memories is neither familiar to many archivists nor well understood by many historians. As a construct, memory is much broader than history. This is not simply because archivists decide through the process of appraisal ‘what is remembered and what is forgotten, who in society is visible and who is invisible,’ as Canadian archivist Terry Cook suggests…, but also because the notion that social memories can be shaped so directly undermines established notions of historical ‘truth’: the cultural assumptions about what counts as knowledge (Blouin and Rosenberg, 2006, 165).

Blouin and Rosenberg’s recognition that social memory is so easily shaped can and should be extended from the appraisal of archival records to the classification of such records. If archivists shape history by dictating what is remembered and what is forgotten by the records they preserve, then cataloguers who categorize library holdings shape how such records are first understood and approached by researchers.

**Conclusion**

Cataloguers in American libraries feel compelled to use the approved vocabulary as set forth by the Library of Congress when creating metadata records. I asked M. L. Person, the cataloguer in the Harvard Law School Library's Special Collections department how she felt about having to apply the new authoritative name form to the Ruhleben Collection, and she answered, “Hog-tied and frustrated. I can technically change the record, but I would be wrong to do so” (personal communication, February 19, 2009).

I am surprised that in this day and age of social tagging and folksonomies, where a democratic language scheme creates better representation of the current usage of language can emerge; the Library of Congress would use the term concentration camp for such a broad range of types of war time camps.

Researchers bring their own knowledge to the OPAC when searching for resources. Thus, cataloguers should make an effort to use current terminology that is widely accepted and understood by researchers. Otherwise subject headings and authority names, like ‘Ruhleben (Concentration camp)’, potentially misinform the library patron such that places like Ruhleben run the risk of being forgotten by history.
References


