Sound Memory: A Critical Concept for Researching Memories of Conflict and War

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7 Sound memory

A critical concept for researching memories of conflict and war

Carolyn Birdsall

In recent geographical literature, there has been an increased sensitivity to sound in urban space and everyday life, with particular interest in the intersections between music, identity and place (Reviil 2000; Connell and Gibson 2003; Boland 2010). In the wake of non-representational theory, cultural geographers have paid additional attention to affect and embodiment, and to the role of the senses in remembering (Anderson 2004; Thrift 2004). This chapter contributes to the interest in the study of embodied and emotional geographies, in which emotion is understood terms of ‘its socio-spatial mediation and articulation rather than as entirely interiorized subjective mental states’ (Bondi et al. 2005: 3). Where my previous work evaluated the figure of the ‘earwitness’ for researching historical soundscapes (Birdsall 2009, 2012), the present chapter is centred on the concept of ‘sound memory’ as a tool for understanding performances of past war experiences in the present, and establishing these acts as (re)constructions of the self in relation to others and to place.

While non-representational theory was an important touchstone for my earlier investigations, this chapter’s treatment of sound memory and the remembrance of war may be better described in terms of the more-than-representational (Lorimer 2005). In opting for ‘more-than-’ rather than ‘non-’, this analysis will maintain an interest in the affective, expressive and performative, without necessarily dismissing the role of social discourse and cultural practices in acculturating the body (Bondi 2005). Given this interest in both the affective and discursive, and the individual and social dimensions to remembering, I will develop the concept of sound memory with the aid of psychologist Pierre Janet’s theorization of memory, narration and trauma. Janet’s tripartite model distinguishes between habit memory, narrative memory and traumatic memory (Janet 1973). The first, habit memory, comprises the habitual bodily skills acquired over time, and through routine, whether unreflective or acknowledged by the subject. The second category, narrative memory, refers to the act of creating a story or description of past events. These memories are often intentionally given emotional significance, but can even encompass those memories that seem to emerge by chance. The final category described by Janet, traumatic memory, requires critical reflection on the specificity of trauma and modes of traumatic recall in interview situations.
Sound memory will be explored here as a tool for understanding the role of sounds — both past and present — in acts of remembering war in German cityscapes. The first section will establish the significance of sound in war and its remembrance, and processes of identity and place-making in relation to the remembrance of war. The oral history methodology allows for memories to be activated and constructed during the present moment of recall, facilitating a composite of truth and fiction (Thomson 1992: 64; Hartleb 1994). In turn, recent oral history research has stressed that, not only offer insights into how past oral history research involves narrating the past events, but also into the role of place and memory involvement. The first significant perspective on place for my oral history project can be identified in the location of the interviews conducted at the Stadtsarchiv Ratingen in the north of Düsseldorf. A full-page article in a daily regional newspaper, entitled ‘Die Klangwelten des Krieges’ (‘The soundscapes of war’), invited potential interviewees to leave their details with the archive (Hartleb 2004a). A colour photograph depicted me standing in the archive stacks with the director, Erika Münster-Schröer, foregrounding both the site of the archive and legitimizing my project in the context of a familiar local institution. The interviews at the archive were conducted in a room (at ground level), which looked onto the playground of the Anne-Frank-Schule, a primary school behind the archive. The frequent school hall rings and sounds of children playing, were commented on by several interviewees, since the building housed Düsseldorf’s regional Gesundheitshaus in the final years of the Second World War (Kaminsky 1991).}

Thirty individuals — born between the late 1930s and the 1940s — volunteered to be interviewed, and I attended two meetings of a local seniors group for women. In several exceptions, the interview was conducted in the interviewee’s home, whereas a sizeable proportion had previously produced forms of life-story narration (e.g., unpublished life stories). Among the methodologies explored in sound historical research, one approach that has remained underexplored is that of oral history. My main motivation for adopting this methodology is that the interview process encourages a mode of remembrance, that can enhance the role of sound in defining the self, belonging and identity (Ball 2000; Conner 2004; Born 2011). For the case of war and conflict, scholars have tended to emphasize the social functions of music in boosting morale and shaping cultural experience (Watt 2000; Fauser 2013). At the same time, much sound historical scholarship has focused on the role of sound (and noise) in conflict and warfare, whether in forms of social exclusion and marginalization (Deaville 2012; Cusick 2013). While such narratives have become a central element of war studies, the present-day association of the archive building with National Socialism was commented on by several interviewees, since the building housed Düsseldorf’s regional Gesundheitshaus in the final years of the Second World War (Kaminsky 1991).
memos, media interviews and local history activities). Many interviewees expressed their curiosity in an ‘intergenerational encounter’ (Vanderbeck and Worth 2015) with someone identified as a young, foreign researcher, with several citing a concern about negative perceptions of Germans as additional motivation for their participation. More broadly, the interviews appeared to represent a form of ‘making connections’ that also entailed a therapeutic component (for putting things in their place) (Bondi 2005). At the same time, I was mindful of the ethical issues when talking to older people about personal experiences of conflict and war; as a process that, for many, was linked to emotionally charged memories.

While most participants were similarly born in lower- to middle-class households, it became apparent that their remembering of self and place revealed an important distinction between those who grew up (and have stayed) in the Düsseldorf area, and those who experienced displacement during or following the Second World War (e.g. the mass flight and forced migration of German populations from Central and Eastern Europe).

For my semi-structured interviews, the questions first concerned general biographical information (including questions about childhood, family, school and routines) and, second, memories of sound in everyday life (including radio and other audiovisual technologies). When making appointments to be interviewed, a number of participants asked for both the permission sheet (with vital information) and a preliminary list (both questions and keywords) to be posted ahead of the interview; this prompted several interviewees to (partly) read from typed answers, or show discomfort when my follow-up questions required them to speak freely. Such strategies might be read in terms of anxiety about accuracy, which is common among elderly interviewee subjects. Nonetheless, they also reflect a more widespread concern about accurate remembering of National Socialism: often on the basis of forgetfulness (given their present older age), but also anxiety about being subject to questions about accountability (particularly on the issue of whether parents and family members were party members); many pointed out that their (non-adult) experiences were primarily limited to localized sites of the home and street, and to school, religious and youth-group participation. Recent literature has suggested the value of such localized per-spectives on how older people understood the self, as produced in a relationship to others and place. Oral histories give insights into place attachments and identities on scales ranging from the country to the region, town, street and home [and] into contests over place involving control, resistance and negotiation. This is evidenced in our case study by the breaking of safety rules and regulations by children [in the Second World War].

(Andrews et al. 2006: 170)

Such oral history interviews therefore reveal memories of place as constituted on interrelating scales (micro to macro geographies), as well as the particular conditions – as demonstrated above for the south-east English coastal town of Teignmouth – of children’s geographies.

At the same time, interview respondents – from the vantage of the present – can reflect on how this past is located and has meaning in the contemporary situation. While some mentioned everyday social geographies of the present (e.g. not wanting to greet certain people in the street due to their actions during National Socialism), others talked about how their own processes of recalling place experiences were prompted by media reporting about Iraq during 2003–2004. One such illustration comes from Ursula S. (born 1928, personal interview):

A: When my mother told me stories [about starvation, influenza and losing relatives during the First World War], I couldn’t imagine it. Just as it is for you – these stories are so impossible.
Q: Is it difficult to picture these things in your mind?
A: It’s better if you try not to. You know, when I was watching TV when the Iraq War began, would you believe that it seemed like it was there again. I woke up screaming from my bed, because the bombs were falling again and the devil knows what else.... For that reason, I don’t watch TV anymore.

Such comments are suggestive of how US aerial bombings and urban warfare in Baghdad and other cities served as a ubiquitous (and unwanted) audiovisual prompt for my interviewees when reconsidering their own experiences of military attack and urban destruction during the Second World War.

One other important discursive context at the time of my interviews was the growing acknowledgement of German civilian suffering during the Second World War, due to air attacks (Sebald 2002) or flight and expulsion from the East (Grass 2002). A study of expelled Germans (living near Hannover) argued that publications by novelists such as Günter Grass were part of a ‘genuine attempt to link flight and expulsion to a comprehensive narrative that does not omit German atrocities and does not regard everyone just as victims’ (Schulze 2006: 378). Other oral history studies in this period observed that intergenerational family narratives overwhelmingly centred on stories about aerial bombings, and frequently made use of popular-culture references as an interpretative framework (Tschuggnall and Welzer 2002). These latter findings were also subject to critique, given the tendency to focus on elderly interviewees as unreliable narrators, rather than consider the intersubjective processes by which researchers are ‘co-constitutive of narrative meaning’ (Fasulo 2002: 115). Such concerns also draw attention to the ‘emotional dynamics’ of research relationships (Bondi 2005), a theme to which I will return in the analysis that follows.

My interviews therefore not only reflect a temporal interval – with remembering filtered through their present situation and experiences since 1945 – but also the often-fraught politics of memory in post-Holocaust Germany. A remembrance process has been studied that emerged from the late 1940s onwards, in which public discourses have been characterized in terms of a ‘selective remembering’ rather than complete silence (Hughes 2000: 205). Processes of ‘normalization’...
Sound memory as habit memory: embodied routines and spatial practices

The notions of embodied habit (and habitus) have offered important components for the theorization of memory (Bergson 1988; Mauss 1979; Bourdieu 1977). Habit memories, in Pierre Janet’s understanding, involve a set of accumulated, sometimes unreflective memories based on routines or habit. In many cases, these memories are based on bodily, muscular acts that are easily recalled and performed, but involve a knowledge that is not actively acknowledged or verbalized. During remembering, habit memory involves moments where the past is reencountered in the present — by means of both sound-making and gesture — and play an important role in contributing to a sense of self and belonging (Casey 1987: 151). By drawing on Henri Lefebvre’s work, habit will be positioned as a socializing process that is often reestablished during times of social-political transition, involving a historically specific process of repeating and internalizing particular actions. The centrality of National Socialist rituals to the habit memories analysed here also serves as a reminder of how the ‘performativeness’ of ritual connects memory practices with embodied experience, as well as the intertwining of different scales of identity and place (Edensor 2002).

According to Lefebvre, by teaching children how to repeat ‘a certain act, a certain gesture or movement’ (2004: 39), they adopt a series of corporeal habits and accepted values, such as posture, attention, mannerisms, codes of conduct and etiquette. This is a process of legitimation where the interaction of acceptable habits and a value system reinforces both elements. Lefebvre determines this process to be one of force, and gives it the French equestrian term ‘dressage’. This term clearly indicates that the apparatus by which children are socially trained and acculturated is by no means gentle, as they are ‘broken in’ like animals (Lefebvre 2004: 39). Lefebvre’s concept of the dressage process can be applied to the strong National Socialist influence in both the school environment and everyday lives of children (Michaud 1997). I employ dressage here to explain the physical positions (e.g. the Heil Hitler salute) and habits (e.g. rote-learning of historical dates and slogans) taught to children, as part of a process in which certain sounds and music were performed with codified physical actions in Nazi pedagogy.

Dressage in this context can be identified in terms of collective singing, marching and ‘call-and-response’ interactions, which took place on a regular basis and were reinforced in the weekly activities led by the Hitler Jugend organization. In addition to the active performance of rituals, the dressage experienced in schools and youth organizations involved compulsory uses of radio and film propaganda (Gauger 1943: 26). Interviewees cited the introduction of Hitler portraits into every classroom as an important component of these repeated rituals; nationalist narratives in classroom teaching intensified in the lead up to, and during, the war (Johnson 2008). Following Pillemar (2004: 150), this schooling in a specific repertoire of rituals can be read as participating in a ‘collective knowledge’, which he cites as a more appropriate term than collective memory to refer to community codes of conduct and memory processes. Interviewees frequently cited the renaming of prominent streets and squares after Hitler and other figures after 1933 (Kleinfeld 1996), as one of the ways that local spaces were invoked as part of the national project. The repeated use of these streets and squares by youth groups for marching, singing and recitation — along with classrooms, schoolyards and youth-group centres — is further suggestive of how localized activities and civic service were framed as participation in the national project.

During my oral history interviews, many of the elderly respondents used physical gesture to demonstrate their experience of this dressage during their childhood. A number of interviewees recalled the repetitive or punitive nature of these routines:

On the first day of the school year we had to attend a flag-raising ceremony. With an outstretched arm — that was not allowed to be propped up [by the other hand] — we sang Deutschland über alles and Die Fahne hoch! [the two national anthems]. Once, during a flag-raising ceremony, I had a bleeding wound on my face as I had run into a post box. But only after I had taken part in the ceremony did my teacher send me home.

(Renate S., born 1928, personal interview)

At the Catholic school we still had [morning] prayers. But here [at the new school], everyone gathered in the playground at 7.55am. And then, after a saying of the day (Tagespruch), we went into class... Older kids would make a list of those who were late.

(Hannelore H., born 1927, personal interview)

Overall, it was fairly common to condemn the restrictions and requirements demanded by the Nazi system, yet also express that they enjoyed the sense of camaraderie and group activities (e.g. handicraft in the case of girls’ groups). It was clear that the dressage experienced during National Socialism remains firmly part of the respondents’ corporeal or habit memory, whereby remembering the routines and sites of school experience invokes somatic responses. Most interviewees had difficulties in acknowledging how these everyday routines — that in their daily repetition — had provided a sense of orientation and formed part of...
Sound memory as narrative memory: autobiography, collectivity, identity

Sound memory as narrative memory: autobiography, collectivity, identity

Janet’s second category of narrative memory is most commonly concerned
with explicit memories involving autobiographical experiences, events or concepts. Often
described in terms of music or music-related contexts, such memory is dependent
on and sometimes distorted by the context of reflection. As cognitive musicologist Bob Snyder (2000: 72) notes, long-term (musical) memories are constructed
largely from other memories of aspects of music previously heard, and other
most cases, individuals making their narrative accounts about experiences in their minds. In
songs, individual interviews included narratives. Such memory has been
described in terms of a deliberate use of music to reflect, remember or recreate
the content or medium of an already defined memory (Anderson 2004: 13). Such
practices may not actually represent the past but they reflect the use of music to
bring up the past for the purposes of a present moment. As a result, the category
of narrative memory can also involve the social uses of sound memory as tools
for controlling affective space, as well as for establishing or preserving a stable
sense of group identity.

One predominant instance of narrative memory was the performance of the Heil Hitler
salute often frame in terms of an exploration of adult spatial boundaries in the context of the regime.
Within Lefebvre’s concept of habit memory, the process of dressage - phrased
in terms of coercion and force - has a certain deterministic quality. However, a more
nuanced analysis of sound, performative acts and identity construction would not,
like Lefebvre, necessarily view identity as something solely determined by the
individuals, but rather as something that is also tested and played with. However, a more
nuanced analysis of sound, performative acts and identity construction would not.
As such, while all these performances reflected

Stories like this were often cited by interviewees as illustrative of how children
explored the social norms of the regime, along with various explorations and
appropriations of urban space in the context of war (e.g. collecting colourful
bomb fragments, Allied leaflet propaganda and so on). Within Lefebvre’s concept of habit memory, the process of dressage - phrased
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nuanced analysis of sound, performative acts and identity construction would not.
As such, while all these performances reflected
teacher wrote down the order of the songs to be learnt for the flag- hoisting in primary school.

The songbook provided a memory aid, which also prompted Leon to recall how his family lost their home and belongings during the large attack on Ratingen on 22 March 1945 (which buried his grandfather). The book is one of the few possessions the family kept, but he also showed how he and his sister – after 1945 – had expressed frustration by defacing the book, crossing out passages and scrawling the word ‘Nationalsozialismus’. Renate S. (born 1929) also explained her strong attachment to the book, explaining that I could photocopy its pages, but she wouldn’t leave it at the archive; after 1945 she feared it would be taken by Allied Forces, but considered herself lucky that their house was not searched. Similarly, Theresa B. (born 1925) left her book behind for me to read and return, but then phoned that she was too anxious about losing it and wanted to pick it up again from the archive. These examples illustrate how the mixed feelings about the song repertoire of National Socialist pedagogy were attached to BDM songbooks; these books had an ambivalent status as both comforting and prohibited ‘souvenirs’, which symbolized for most a concrete connection to the (sometimes lost) places from their childhoods.

While individual participants frequently sang the lyrics of well-known songs during interviews, the context of the women’s group meeting offers a vivid example of the social process of negotiating sound memories (Birdsall 2009). These women had a usual routine for their monthly meeting at a community centre: first coming together to sing (and occasionally listen to a talk), followed by a communal lunch. The group singing largely drove on traditional songs, with one participant explaining during a break that ‘we sang these as children: they are folk songs (Volkslieder) and still sung today’ (Helga S., born 1927). She and other participants went on to list the most well-known spring, hiking and morning songs, many of which were associated with the Bund youth movements that predated National Socialism.

When I accepted an invitation to this meeting, I had initially understood that I would talk separately to individual members. On arrival, the group was quite large and there was an expectation that I would speak about my home country, which I agreed to do during a subsequent visit. In addition to this expectation of reciprocity, I also realized that my attendance provoked a slight disturbance, perhaps due to my status as an outside guest or due to the sound-recording equipment and my topic of research. During the group singing of traditional songs (mainly about togetherness and community), none of the members resisted the choice of songs, nor verbally intervened when one member gave an opening cue for a song. Following this, the organizer seized my pile of copies (with the preliminary questions I used for individual interviews) and handed one to each participant. While a small group sat with me and all began speaking at once, others appeared to show a certain reluctance in writing about their memories (i.e. experiences during National Socialism and wartime, rather than more broadly about music and singing).

Two important distinctions can be observed about the women’s backgrounds: first, roughly half were from the Düsseldorf area, whereas most of the others came from Central and Eastern Europe (and one participant was born in the Dutch East Indies in 1920) and settled in West Germany in the early post-war period. This latter group provided very little information in their written responses, often giving writing evasive answers (in ‘yes/no’ form) in response to specific questions about home, schooling and other sites of past experience. The second, noticeable pattern was that roughly half were born before the National Socialist takeover (between the ages of 7 and 13 in 1933, and between 19 and 24 in 1945) and the other half were born after the takeover (and were between the ages of 3 and 13 in 1945). In the written comments, it is noticeable that the older women included ‘fond’ memories of the period between roughly 1925–1939, whereas a number of the younger women either struggled to remember details about National Socialism, or cited post-war events as stronger in their memory (e.g. a radio announcement about the foundation of Israel in 1948). As the meeting drew to a close, one of the women prompted the group to informally break into light-hearted singing of ‘Danke (für diesen guten Morgen)’, a religious song that gained pop-song status in the 1960s (Bubmann 2010).

All of these participants were in a later stage of life, with even those who were not originally from the Düsseldorf area having lived there for the majority of their lives (at least 40 or 50 years); the format of group singing allowed for a light atmosphere that facilitated a sense of shared place. As such, they were involved in the active creation of a group sound memory in the present, which drew on a shared cultural background as a means of performing – through group song – a positive a shared feeling about the past and sense of belonging. Rather than dwell on difficult memories or various forms of internal difference (e.g. accents, age group, place of birth, or even class differences), their musical participation in the group indicated the sense of consolidating shared moods and feelings based on a familiar cultural repertoire.

This group process of remembering reinvokes DeNora’s dynamic between ‘action-repertoires’ and ‘action-strategies’ that I introduced in the previous section, since there is a use of social scripts that are reworked in a present-day group situation. Indeed, the value of this discussion enables my study of sound memories to encompass both the creative processes of individual life stories and group remembering contexts, alongside the embeddedness of corporeal memories. Beyond the relationship of embodied and social practices of remembering the past – and related invocations of selfhood, intersubjectivity and place – the last aspect that needs further elaboration and qualification is Janet’s final category of traumatic memory.

**Sound memory as traumatic recall: anxiety, triggers, acting-out**

The final category described by Janet, traumatic memory, is perhaps the most contested, and is usually associated with painful events, often those that pose a
challenge to narrative integration; in much trauma theory, the patient has been posited as unable to narrate or integrate extreme or painful episodes into existing schemes of meaning. The notion that there is a lack of control, where the past ‘spills’ into the present (Caruth 1995; van der Kolk et al. 1996) has since been disputed, with numerous scholars arguing against this influential understanding of traumatic recall as involving an exact performance of traumatic memory without alteration (Leys 2000: 252; LaCapra 2001, 2004). In many cases of traumatic memory, as in the case of so-called ‘flashbulb’ memories, those affected are able to recall past experiences in considerable detail (Brown and Kulik 1977; Schachter 1995, 1996). It is important to be specific about what aspects of a testimony refer to traumatic experience, and to keep in mind that not everyone is traumatized after being exposed to (potentially) traumatizing experiences; it is thus crucial to differentiate between different types of trauma (Drozdzewski 2015: 2).

With this in mind, I will reflect on the acts of remembering by interviewees with long-term exposure to war and military attacks, and how these instances involve positionings of self and others, in relation to place. In discussing experiences of the air war, interviewees clearly engaged in a vivid remembering of the sites and physical spaces in which they experienced sirens and air attacks. The family home was a primary locus, and these narratives invoke the vulnerability of both the home and outdoor spaces. Home life was described as marked by the absence of fathers and other relatives due to military service, death or detainment. Domestic spaces were described as interrupted and permeable as a result of the compulsory billeting of soldiers and extensive observation by block wardens, who checked that individual apartments had darkened windows and cleared-out attic spaces with sandbags, fire swatters and buckets of water.

The intensification of aerial attacks from 1940 onwards were described as the most significant threat to the safety of home, symbolized by unpredictable air sirens and explosions, as well as strong smells, summarized by one of the seniors’ group members as a ‘musty basement smell, concrete dust, fire, ash, carbide waste’. Along with such smells, interview participant Leon E. (born 1929) recalled that:

In the evenings, the sky was blood-red as the cities burned. Since Ratingen is near Düsseldorf, Duisburg, Mühlheim, Oberhausen and Essen, you could always see where the cities were burning. And during the day, when the smoke clouds rose high up, ash would fall over Ratingen.

With such observations, interviewees drew attention to how they tried to make sense of their own situation by listening to sounds outside their homes; the magnitude of aerial attacks also cued via smell and strong visual impressions in the vicinity of the home and local area.

The other places that interviewees reflected on in their accounts were basement air shelters, which – in apartment buildings – were shared with other neighbours or visitors. Along with official bunkers, the confined space of basements was the predominant site in which interviewees recalled experiencing sirens and attacks, in which overwhelming sounds were associated with darkness, restricted air and high levels of anxiety. For instance, as one interview participant recalled:

The cellar walls shook when a bomb fell nearby. The worst was when the lights suddenly went out and we couldn’t see anything. It was an oppressive feeling, the women, in particular, cried. . . . It was unnerving to sit there in the cellar. First it would get really quiet. Then you would hear a very light, constant humming sound. Then it would be dead silent, until the bombs started hammering down. That was horrible. We would all kneel on the floor and pray. My mother always prayed the loudest. One had the feeling that the cellar floors were rising up.

(Charlotte S., born 1930, personal interview)

Taking shelter in basements was thus described in terms of both at risk (being underground in the event of a bombing) and enduring prolonged periods of uncertainty and boredom, before returning to bed or other activities. For those who used public bunkers during night-time attacks, an additional concern was expressed about whether one could get dressed and walk through dark streets in time to reach such locations.

The sense of being at risk while travelling to and from school was mentioned frequently, along with strong memories of spotlights and shooting by anti-aircraft stations. In this case, male interviewees tended towards enthusiastic narration of how the early stages of the war appeared exciting, describing their fascination with spotlights and the shooting down of enemy planes, along with how they explored bomb debris and swapped colourful pieces (Bombensplitter) at school. A number of women noted that they would become emotional upon seeing (or hearing about) enemy planes being shot down, for instance:

My memories of airplanes are terrible. Before the war they were not an issue, and we didn’t live far from the airport. Later, they were the things that robbed me of my rest at night, that destroyed our apartments, that made both my school and play-areas unusable, and that forced me to look for bunkers during emergency alarms. And they were the things that made me tremble when they were caught by spotlights of the anti-aircraft cannons, and about which I cried, since there were people inside when they were shot down. The air protection warden [in the public bunker] reprimanded me about this. . . . But I couldn’t handle it when I saw planes go down. I thought, ‘My God, there are people in there’ – and then it would be shot down. One cannot describe this feeling.

(Renate S., born 1929)

Recollections of attacks at school were often accompanied by discussions of school air shelters, which were then linked to discussions of frequent disruptions to schooling as classes were closed, relocated or evacuated to rural areas (Kinderlandverschickung), through which a number of interviewees recalled
being geographically separated from and worried about their families. A particular flash point for Hans H. (born 1934) was a memory of a local teacher who was responsible for delivering death notices in Ratingen; he noted his own regret at telling his neighbour that that teacher had called for her, as ‘when [this teacher] went around, people would know what it meant’.

Such remembering also served as a prompt for reflections on the vividness of these memories and the occasional concern about being overly emotional: ‘I hope I didn’t talk too much. It all came back to me because of these questions. I can really see it before me now: the beds in air-raid shelters (Luftschutzbetten) and so many other things’ (Jenny E., born 1929). For one of my youngest interviewees, Hans M. (born 1938), sirens figured as a flash point for recalling several incidents in which bombs fell close to their home: ‘Even today I can still hear the sirens.’ After describing living permanently in the cellar in the last war months, Renate S. (born 1929) paused momentarily and then observed that ‘these are all those situations that only occur to you again when you open the cupboard [of your memories]’. When talking about this last part of the war, interviewees recalled that they became increasingly aware of the failure of the war effort, with a number of interviewees described how – with westerly winds – it was possible to hear fighting in the Eifel region from late 1944. In the case of Ratingen, memories of the final period of the war usually refer to the severe bombing attack on 22 March 1945, during a period of six weeks of artillery fire prior to the arrival of US tanks and troops. A number of interviewees recalled their fear that active party members in their local neighbourhood would stage solo attacks upon the arrival of Allied Forces, whereas one of the youngest respondents (Hans M., born 1938) noted that he associates the end of the war with a memory of the rattling sounds of chain tracks, as the military tanks rolled into town.

During the interviews, there were several cases indicating that the sounds of alarms and bomb explosions in the present were a cause for inducing fright and shock, due to the acoustic similarities felt between present-day alarms and the Second World War air-raid sirens. For instance, Therese B. (born 1925), who noted that she had rarely spoken at length about the events of her childhood and adolescent years, became increasingly emotional when interviewed. She explained that, upon hearing alarms or emergency sirens in the present day she experiences panic and has to hold her chest, before reminding herself that it is no longer wartime. The experiences of feeling overwhelmed in the present described here, among other aspects of Therese B.’s behaviour, appeared to be a strong indicator for an ongoing struggle to contain herself when hearing present-day sounds of sirens or loud planes. In such cases, the sirens create a trigger for the traumatizing sounds heard during childhood, and the ensuing panic experience can disrupt past–present distinctions.

A related instance occurred with the use of vocal sound effects in the moments when interviewees could not easily describe or narrate the felt experience of wartime aerial attacks. When talking about their memories of attacks on German cities, most interview participants were able to describe the sirens and safety precautions taken for air raids, but often could not describe the actual event of bombings. In contrast to the description of routines and preparations, many interviewees used their arms to act out the flying over of planes and used their voices to mimic the sounds of gunfire (‘ra-ta-ta-ta’-) or bombs exploding, as though occurring in the present moment. Mimicking the sounds of gunfire was, in some cases, linked to individual experiences of being shot at by low-flying aeroplanes, as in the case of Leon E. (born 1929), Renate S. (born 1929) and Charlotte S. (born 1930). Other imitations of sound were used to refer to radio fanfare (‘dadada’ or ‘tic tic tic’), signal jamming (‘chk chk chk’) or the sound of illegal BBC radio (‘boom boom boom’). The use of the present tense to enact the actual event of the bombing was sometimes performed as occurring in the present. Such vivid recollections also test the efficacy of language for describing the auditory and sensory inscriptions of the repeated exposure to aerial attacks.

In recent years, the psychoanalytic conceptualization of trauma, repression and working through has been criticized as an insufficient explanatory framework for cultural or national memory (Langenbacher 2003), while other scholars have similarly expressed doubt about whether the loss of community should be framed as trauma (LaCapra 2004: 106–142). Nonetheless, as sociologist Kai Erikson (1995) has argued, it is imperative to acknowledge that trauma can be generated by isolated and sudden events, as well as over a sustained or prolonged period. Erikson’s understanding of collective trauma concerns how, when community ties are severed, individuals are subject to a ‘gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared’ (1995: 187). Research on the specific role attributed to noise and explosions for children exposed to aerial bombings, along with the aftermath of these attacks, may support Erikson’s expanded definition of trauma (Somasundaram 1996: 1466, 1470; Gibson 1989). Such studies show a striking correspondence with the intense bombings of the Düsseldorf area, which were highly unpredictable, involved a complete overwhelming of the senses, and occurred over an extended period.

Indeed, the most striking recollections discussed here were those concerned with the sounds of sirens, planes and the attacks, with present-day triggers having the potential to elicit anxiety or panic. In this case, at least, it did not seem to be the case that these interviewees have had long-lasting traumatic symptoms. Most interview participants were able to provide a fairly coherent narrative about their life experiences and their volunteering to participate in my project suggests that they were not avoiding these experiences. While prior engagement in memoir-writing or other life-story activities might indicate well-rehearsed narration, the interview situation often still elicited affective responses or emotional expressions when discussing childhood experiences of war. As discussed above, the narration of overwhelming events and the complete breakdown of social order involves recollections about the self and the family (and community) that are inflected by questions of physical space and place.

This chapter has elaborated on sound memory as a concept to capture both the specific memories of sounds and the incidental sounds performed during the process of remembering. In studying the embodied and interpersonal qualities of
the interview context, I have used Janet’s theoretical framework as a means of teasing out different aspects of how remembering in interviews depends on physical expression and sound-making. Since most of the interviewees were children or young adults during the period in question, I have focused on how they narrated their experiences in terms of the home and neighbourhood, the educational system and National Socialist youth organizations. Such a task should not detract attention from Holocaust survivors and other victims of National Socialism and their acts of testimony (Morris 2001). In examining how interview participants negotiated difficult memories of the past, I have drawn attention to the specific social and spatial dynamics of remembering National Socialism in the present.

Note

1 After the initial article, a follow-up was published six months later (Hartleb 2004b). The interviews were recorded with a minidisc recorder with a lapel microphone. The average birth year of individual interviewees was 1928, with an average age of 11 when the Second World War began in 1939.

References


