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Italian prisoners of war in the South African imagination: Contemporary memory, history and narrative

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Abstract

This thesis offers a critical exploration of the ways in which South Africans remember the Italian Prisoners of War who were detained in South Africa during the Second World War. It proposes that the material traces and narrativising of their experiences by South Africans reveal tiers of memory-making that speak to successive social, historical and political contexts in South Africa since the end of the Second World War. In tracing the connections between these tiers, the thesis engages questions of history- and memory-making by constituting the memory of the Italian Prisoners of War as a 'site of memory'. The implications of constituting memory thus are mapped as the research investigates processes of narrative at play in the writing of history, the writing of fiction and the telling of stories in relation to the Italian Prisoners of War. The thesis is at once a theoretical reflection on these questions of history, memory and narrative and a contribution to heritage studies more broadly, in that it questions the value of memory and memorialisation of events that are less central to current national discourse. The dearth of critical work on South Africa in the Second World War prompts questions of who remembers what and why, as well as what becomes of memory when the primary repositories and places of memory are passed on to subsequent generations and to communities indirectly involved with the subject of that memory.