

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

The Holocaust and Beyond. Learning from History at Historic Sites

Austrian Academy of Sciences, in cooperation with the Austrian Delegation to the ITF

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Concept:

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Objectives of the Conference

In recent years memorials have evolved into principal sites for the process of learning from history. With the new role that the historical sites of Nazi persecution and extermination now play, memorial education (Gedenkstättenpädagogik) have become significant agents of pedagogical exchange, but have also been confronted with new challenges.

The question, what exactly should these sites from the past teach us in the present, or, how is the conveying of these historical acts relevant today, has lead to a pluralization of approaches in memorial work. This development forms the background to the conference, “The Holocaust and Beyond. Learning from History in Concentration Camp Memorials.”

Our starting point is the transformation process of social memory, including concentration camp memorials. The following considerations are relevant:

1. The change in social and political context: In the postwar decades, it was the „first generation“ (Erfahrungsgeneration) that shaped these sites according to their own need for creating meaning – the exhibits, the monuments, the commemorations corresponded to the identity needs of former prisoners, or rather, their related political organizations. The state politics of history assigned these sites their within the inventory of symbols. In contrast to the Federal Republic of Germany and Austria, countries that had been occupied by the National Socialist regime were able to more smoothly integrate former concentration camps into a national sense of meaning. Especially in communist states, concentration camps were exploited as shrines of the struggle against fascism.
2. De-nationalization and the end of the „Grand Narrative“: Memorials were incorporated into the national and political creation of “post-war myths” (Tony Judt). Since the 1980s, a new interest in the historical sites has evolved, one that corresponds to the fading of the political myths of postwar Europe. The loss of influence of the „Grand Narrative“ of the national and political resistance against Fascism was reinforced by the collapse of the communist bloc.
3. Holocaust memory and the globalization of historical sites: In this transformation process, the Holocaust has emerged as the pivot of the history of National Socialism, camps primarily being perceived of now as “sites of the Holocaust.” With the globalization of the “rupture in civilization” the Holocaust/Shoah has become a reference point for a transnational, universal human memory. This global meaning has

, the array of interpretations of history has changed again, with a focus now on education in concentration camp memorials (and memorial museums).

The responses to these transformations are complex. The following key approaches, which have become increasingly relevant in the conveyance of history, are of particular interest:

- Concepts of political and historical education that ask, in what segments can we identify current factors that correspond to elements of the Nazi ideology, what prejudices and resentiments – racism, antisemitism, xenophobia, etc. – are still “hot” in today’s society;
- Holocaust education, which focuses on the persecution, expulsion and murder of the Jewish population;
- Genocide prevention, which locates the Holocaust in the History of Genocide;
- Human Rights Education, which incorporates the Holocaust into the History of the Violation of Human Rights;
- Totalitarianism theory and system comparison, on the European level (Day of Remembrance 23. August) as well as with the overlapping of concentration camp history and camp history after 1945 (e.g., Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen).

These approaches have correlating domains, but set different priorities with regards to Nazi persecution and extermination policies. Each of these perspectives generates different meanings for today and focuses on different objectives for learning from history.

It should be noted that the approaches are all based on the explicit or implicit comparison between historical events and contemporary challenges. The comparative contextualization of the past with regard to the present is a necessary basis for contemporary relevance, without which we cannot learn from history (which enables the process of learning from history). Thus the singularity of the Holocaust can be argued only against this backdrop of comparison. However, the logic of comparison runs the risk of relativization and trivialization of the historic event.

The aim of this conference is to reflect on the possibilities and limits of these different approaches, which form the horizon today for conveying history in concentration camp memorials. The goal is not to discover a “magic solution,” but to put the different approaches in relationship to one another – both in the theory and in the practice of memorial work – thereby opening up a space for collective discussion and reflection.