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Introduction: New Perspectives on Auschwitz

Auschwitz: Between History, Myth and Heritage

Today, the word ‘Auschwitz’ has become symbolic, standing metonymically for the entirety of the Holocaust and as the denouement of the human capacity for murderous cruelty. Yet this ostensibly straightforward signification masks a complex history composed of millions of individual stories, competing political and national narratives, and ongoing debates about memory, commemoration and heritage. While the sheer scope of Auschwitz might serve to legitimize the centrality of the term, its common usage also reduces the vastness of the Nazi enterprise to a singular narrative. Jonathan Huener writes:

Auschwitz, its victims, and its prisoners defy generalisations and convenient categorisations. Just as the history of the camp was multifaceted, so too have collective memories and public manifestations of those memories been diverse and at times even contradictory, to the extent that the commemoration of one prisoner or prisoner group has offended or silenced the memory of another.¹

To speak of a singular ‘Auschwitz experience’ is misleading. Scaled up to the level of Hitler’s entire ‘Final Solution,’ the use of Auschwitz as a catch-all term for ‘the Holocaust experience’ is profoundly problematic, obscuring the narratives of millions, including the many thousands who were slaughtered in the so-called ‘Holocaust by bullets,’¹¹ as well as those forced to spend the war in hiding. Even within the camp, individual experiences differed significantly, creating what Jonathan Webber has called ‘a “mosaic” of victims.’¹³ The word ‘Auschwitz’ is thus not sufficient to capture the vastness of the Nazi enterprise, or the multiplicity of individual experience. Yet the reductive ‘myth of Auschwitz’ endures. The relationship between this symbolic version of the camp and its historical point of origin is complex.¹⁴ Webber writes:
‘Contemplated from afar, Auschwitz is a convenient shorthand symbol. Encountered close-up, however, it is not a symbol, it is a real place.’

The ‘real place’ accessible today is, however, not the same as the ‘real place’ of history. From the perspective of the latter, the word ‘Auschwitz’ refers to what Maurizio Cinquegrani has called a ‘metropolis of death’ and what Debórah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt have termed ‘the epicenter of the Holocaust’: a series of camps, set up in and around the Polish town of Oświęcim in 1940. Initially conceived as a detention centre for Polish prisoners, it evolved to become a complex site of mass-extermination, incorporating three primary and more than forty satellite camps. All told, around one million Jews, 70-75,000 Poles, 21 thousand gypsies, 15 thousand Soviet POWs and 10-15,000 ‘others’ were subject to its horrors. Of the estimated 1.3 million people who were sent to Auschwitz, roughly 1.1 million were killed there.

In 1978, a year after it was first suggested as a possibility for inclusion, Auschwitz was designated a UNESCO world heritage site. Perhaps better known for its protection of sites deemed ‘irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration,’ UNESCO also works to preserve a number of ‘dark heritage’ sites, including Auschwitz-Birkenau, the slave-trading island of Gorée, off the coast of Senegal (1978), the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, Genbaku Dome (1997) and Robben Island (1999). Yet even in the context of these dark sites, Auschwitz is unique; Alyza Lewin writes:

According to the minutes of the Committee’s 1979 meeting, the Committee decided to enter Auschwitz concentration camp on the List as a “unique site” and decided to “restrict the inscription of other sites of a similar nature.” Auschwitz, therefore, is and will remain the only German concentration camp to be afforded the international recognition and protection that accompanies inscription on the World Heritage list.
Debates concerning the uniqueness of the Holocaust have long-since reached a plateau. Critics now tend to accept (more-or-less) the problematic nature of the concept, which serves both to create false hierarchies of suffering and to undermine the fundamentally unique character of all atrocities and their associated sites. Nevertheless, the status of Auschwitz as the epicenter of the Holocaust is institutionally preserved through its designation as a World Heritage site as well as through the singularity of its position on the list.

Justifying the inclusion of the Auschwitz-Birkenau site, the UNESCO website states:

Auschwitz Birkenau, monument to the deliberate genocide of the Jews by the German Nazi regime and to the deaths of countless others, bears irrefutable evidence to one of the greatest crimes ever perpetrated against humanity. It is also a monument to the strength of the human spirit which in appalling conditions of adversity resisted the efforts of the German Nazi regime to suppress freedom and free thought and to wipe out whole races. The site is a key place of memory for the whole of humankind for the Holocaust, racist policies and barbarism; it is a place of our collective memory of this dark chapter in the history of humanity, of transmission to younger generations and a sign of warning of the many threats and tragic consequences of extreme ideologies and denial of human dignity.

Alongside its historical role and significance as a heritage site, then, the camp is also understood as a lieu de mémoire, and as a place that articulates, in its very existence, the dangers of extreme prejudice.

**Visiting Auschwitz**

Since the end of the Second World War, the site has become a central part of engagements with the Nazi genocide. The Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum was established in 1947; that year, 170,000 people visited the site. Over the course of the next ten years, more than two
million people visited. As the Second World War has slipped further back in history, visitor numbers have continued to climb: in 2017 alone, 2.1 million visitors attended the site (up from 2,053,000 in 2016 and 492,500 in 2001).xvi In the critical literature of the camp, a number of prominent academics and survivors have shown that, for many, a visit to the site constitutes an important part of contemporary engagements with the genocide, especially in the field of Holocaust education.xvii

Yet the ethics of these visits are still open to debate. The rise in visitor numbers almost certainly implies a rise in the tourist industry that surrounds the camp. A quick Google search will turn up a plethora of combined Auschwitz-Salt Mine tours, running from Kraków and surrounding areas. A visitor’s center, tourist showers, and various food outlets in the area all contribute to the touristy atmosphere of the camp.xviii In one of the most striking discussions of this phenomenon, Tim Cole speaks of visits to ‘Auschwitz-land,’ where ‘we perhaps unwittingly enter a “Holocaust theme-park” rather than a “Holocaust concentration camp.”’xix The tourist industry that has grown around Auschwitz and other sites of dark heritage has the potential to turn these spaces of mass-atrocity into kitschy attractions that function as little more than fodder for the cultural imaginary.

Yet to speak of a singular visitor experience is erroneous. Familial history, levels of existing knowledge or interest, and personality are all factors that shape individual encounters with the site. ‘Symbolic Auschwitz’ also has a role to play in creating visitor expectations; certainly, many who embark on a visit do so with the aim of ‘ticking off’ the most paradigmatic aspects of the site, including the containers of hair and shoes that feature in the permanent exhibition, and the main gate bearing the famous ‘Arbeit Macht Frei’ slogan. It is worth quoting James E. Young at length, here:
By themselves, these remnants rise in a macabre dance of memorial ghosts. Armless sleeves, eyeless lenses, headless caps, footless shoes: victims are known only by their absence, by the moment of their destruction. In great loose piles, these remnants remind us not of the lives that once animated them, so much as of the brokenness of lives. For when the memory of a people and its past are reduced to the bits and rags of their belongings, memory of life itself is lost. What of the relationships and families sundered? What of the scholarship and education? The community and its traditions? Nowhere among this debris do we find traces of what bound these people together into a civilization, a nation, a culture. Heaps of scattered artefacts belie the interconnectedness of lives that made these victims a people. The sum of these dismembered fragments can never approach the whole that was lost.\xex

These artefacts are iconic but they also reduce the victims to their absence, and they contribute to the voyeurism that is so often associated with this kind of dark tourism. It is in this context that Cole cynically calls Auschwitz ‘the ultimate rubberneckers experience.’\xexi

It would be remiss to assume that all parts of the museum complex are subject to the same problems, though. As the museum has developed, attention has been mostly been paid to Auschwitz I: it is here that the primary exhibitions are housed and where the earliest guided tours took place. Auschwitz-Birkenau (Auschwitz II), on the other hand, is less built up and, historically, has offered little in the way of tourist amenities or exhibitions. Auschwitz Monowitz (Auschwitz III) does not feature as part of the Museum at all.

For van Pelt and Dwork, this focus on Auschwitz I – which primarily housed political prisoners during the war – points to a politics of memory that seeks to accentuate Polish suffering at the expense of other victim groups, especially the Jews.\xexii Jonathan Webber argues something similar:
After the death of Stalin in 1953, the Auschwitz museum moved towards a far less universalist understanding of its historical importance. Auschwitz became instead the central site of Polish commemoration of World War II, financed by central government (with special funds for conservation needs). A new permanent exhibition installed in 1955, on the tenth anniversary of the liberation, thus put the focus on Polish national martyrdom, whilst continuing to marginalize Jewish victimhood; hence Birkenau (which was deemed to symbolize the latter) was neglected, given no exhibition space, and left “to speak for itself,” although in fact it slowly became totally overgrown with vegetation.

Indeed, the difference between the main two sites, situated only a couple of miles apart, is stark. Debórah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt observe that Auschwitz-Birkenau feels more like an appendix to the main museum at Auschwitz I, while Tim Cole notes that he was surprised to experience two different Auschwitzs in the town of Oświęcim. However, in recent years, the museum has made some attempt to redress the balance: Birkenau now has its own visitor center and bookshop and it has its own exhibition space. It has also increased the amount of signage around the area; Webber writes: ‘Birkenau has been cleaned up, and the vegetation has been cut down. It is no longer un-interpreted: a fine new exhibition in the restored former “sauna” building there focuses explicitly on Jewish victimhood, and since 1995 the limited signage in Birkenau (formerly including Russian and German) has been significantly expanded, and now appears just in three languages – Polish, English, and Hebrew.

Despite these changes, and the museum’s insistence that ‘It is essential to visit both parts of the camp, Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II-Birkenau, in order to acquire a proper sense of the place that has become the symbol of the Holocaust as well as Nazi crimes against Poles, Romas and other groups’ (http://auschwitz.org/en/visiting/), Birkenau remains a secondary site: as
Griffiths notes, tours there are optional and the amount of time spent depends on how much
time is left over after the ‘main’ tour of Auschwitz I.xxvii

To some, this comparative lack of development is apt, resulting in an experience that points to
the void – what is not there – instead of drawing attention to what remains.xxviii Cole’s
distinction between the Holocaust tourist and the Holocaust pilgrim – who visits the site with
‘loftier intentions’xxix – might also be reflected in the double-ness of the museum site:
Auschwitz I caters for the tourists, while Auschwitz-Birkenau provides a space of quiet
reflection and mourning for the pilgrims.

However, discourses such as these do – problematically, in my view – suggest a hierarchy of
visitor types. Except in the obvious case of Holocaust denial, it strikes me as dubious to make
assumptions about how one ought to experience the camp. Even those who attend the site in
ostensibly problematic ways (as part of hen or stag parties, for example) surely do so with the
best of intentions, and they may well take more than it appears from their visit. Such a view is
supported by Imogen Dalziel, who, in her research of visitor photography, argues that we ought
to move away from outright condemnation of apparently frivolous engagements with the site;
she suggests that ‘investigating visitors’ motives for photographing sites such as the Auschwitz
Museum is crucial to our understanding of the ways in which the Holocaust is being
memorialized and commemorated by younger generations.xxx

Of course, the museum itself also plays a role in how the site is experienced and understood.
Primarily, its aims are didactic: ‘Education at the Memorial is meant to foster reflection about
the meaning of personal responsibility today, in Europe and beyond.’xxxii Coupled with
UNESCO’s claim (cited above) that a visit to Auschwitz will show people the dangers of
extreme prejudice, the primary goal appears to be to teach or reinforce values of inclusivity
and to promote empathy for others.
This might seem somewhat simplistic, but it is nevertheless avowed by a number of organisations. For example, trips for teenagers organized by the Holocaust Education Trust (HET) work on the assumption that a day visit to the site, coupled with pre- and post-excursion workshops, will effectively create new ‘ambassadors’ for Holocaust memory. The expectation, as Cole has noted, is that participants will communicate their experiences to others so that they, too, can ‘benefit from the experience.’xxxii This ‘benefit,’ one assumes, is that they, too, will be able to take on the lessons of the Holocaust and, one hopes, become better citizens.

In a striking move, Chelsea Football Club recently unveiled a new initiative with similar aims. Spearheaded by Roman Abramovich, who is himself Jewish, the scheme offers fans accused of racist conduct the opportunity to visit the concentration camp instead of facing a ban:

“If you just ban people, you will never change their behaviour,” the Chelsea chairman, Bruce Buck, told the Sun. “This policy gives them the chance to realise what they have done, to make them want to behave better.”xxxiii

The case of Laurent Louis is just as intriguing. Louis, a former member of the Belgian Parliament, was found guilty of Holocaust denial in 2015. On appeal, a suspended six month sentence and fine of €18,000 were replaced – at the behest of Louis and his lawyer – with a decree that he must instead embark on an annual pilgrimage to a concentration camp site and write about his experiences in his blog (the same blog that had been used to deny the Holocaust in the first place).xxxiv His lawyer called the judgement ‘une décision de grande justice.’xxxv

Yet there is little evidence that visiting Auschwitz will automatically stir empathy, create better citizens, or prove in any way transformative. Recent news reports of a group of teenagers performing a Hitler salute outside the famous Auschwitz gate is testament to this fact.xxxvi No doubt, incidents such as these are at least partially a result of the social-media climate of modern times. Since every experience can now be documented as part of a constructed online
identity, it makes sense that significant encounters – such as those of Auschwitz – are experienced with one eye facing outward, towards the intended audience of digital friends or followers. Perhaps one consequence of this is that visitors to sites such as Auschwitz may engage less – or, at least, differently – with the site itself; moral lessons may therefore be diluted or taken on only later, with the benefit of hindsight and reflection. To be sure, cases such as these challenge the notion that visitors to the site automatically engage with it in the expected (moralistic) way.

**New Perspectives on Auschwitz**

I started this introduction with an observation that the meaning of the word Auschwitz is multifaceted. Indeed, Auschwitz is a site of mass atrocity, a museum, a cemetery, a focal point of Holocaust memory, a place of education, a town in southwest Poland, a tourist “must-see,” and a place where complex negotiations of identity and morality take place. Overshadowing all of these nuances, the word itself has entered common vernacular as shorthand for the Holocaust or, even more generally, as an example of an uncomplicated ethical binary. In this way, the word masks a complex and difficult history, often functioning as a linguistic and historical reduction that relies on its symbolic currency over and above historical accuracy.

These complexities were the focus of the second conference of the European Association for Holocaust Studies, held in Kraków in November 2017. The present volume aims to continue the fruitful discussions that began at that conference, and to spark further discussion on the question(s) of Auschwitz. Since the contributions all revolve around the same theme, some overlap and repetition is inevitable. However, as will become clear, each of the articles in the volume offers something new to the extensive criticism that already exists on the topic of Auschwitz.
The collection begins with a selection of papers on Polish memory of the Holocaust. Poland provides an interesting study in the context of the current volume: Auschwitz was built on Polish territory but, as recent (and highly controversial) attempts to legislate against suggestions of Polish complicity demonstrate, the issue of ‘whose site was it’ remains vexed, even if the answer appears fairly straightforward. Coupled with the distinct ideological changes that followed the collapse of Communism in 1989, it is clear that the development of Holocaust memory in Poland has not been typical. These complexities are brought out in the first three essays of the volume.

In ‘Auschwitz as a Symbol of Martyrdom of the Polish Nation, 1947-2017,’ [name] provides a timely reflection on the changing nature of Polish memory over a seventy year period. Looking particularly at the significance of official events and the policies that shape them, the author examines the politics that shape Polish engagements with the genocide. In particular, the article shows how universalist messages have enabled narratives of Polish suffering to endure.

‘From Auschwitz to Jedwabne: Holocaust Memory in post-1989 Polish Fiction’ continues on the theme of Polish memory, albeit from a different disciplinary perspective. The author identifies three stages that roughly map the trajectory of post-war Polish-Jewish relations: the suppression of the Holocaust as a Jewish tragedy, a period of Polish confrontation with its past, and a focus on pre-war Jewish life that the author identifies as an attempt at ‘re-judaising the Polish literary landscape.’ The author concludes by suggesting that recent developments in the memorial status of Jedwabne – which are likely to force people to (re-)consider the question of Polish complicity during the Holocaust – might open up space for new reflections on Auschwitz.
Both [name] and [name] show the fraught process of the “re-judaification” of Auschwitz.xxxix [name] takes a similar line, examining the ways in which these politics of memory are reflected in history textbooks of the period. More specifically, the author shows how history was instrumentalised in and through school textbooks in the Communist and the post-Communist eras. Structured chronologically, the chapter shows how textbooks have gradually transitioned from focusing on Auschwitz as a site of Polish martyrdom to one of Jewish suffering.

Continuing on the theme of Holocaust education, [authors’ names] examine the understanding that English secondary school students have of Auschwitz, as well as the role that the camp plays in their education. Drawing on a sample of over 8,000 participants, the authors conclude that Auschwitz remains dominant in teaching practices, but that students display a worrying lack of understanding of the nuances of the camp system. Ultimately, this research shows that the simplified myth of Auschwitz is also being disseminated in England through educational practices.

[name] also examines the pedagogical usefulness of Auschwitz. Here, the author implies that a trip to the site has the potential to offer nuanced educational experiences. Reading [name’s] work in dialogue with that of [name], the reader may wonder whether such a trip has the potential to overcome some of the issues outlined in the previous study. Taking the Holocaust Education Trust’s Lessons from Auschwitz project as a case study, [name] draws on his experience as a teacher, a researcher and a HET educator to offer thoughts on what might be considered ‘good pedagogical practice.’

An important part of [name’s] work focuses on the ways in which individuals and groups interact with the site today. This is also the focus of [name’s] article, ‘Delineating Memoryscapes: Auschwitz versus Oświęcim.’ Here, the author shows how language is used by policy makers and local residents to create two distinct memoryscapes: Auschwitz and
Oświęcim. According to the author, this separation, evident in interviews and social media interactions, helps locals to distinguish between their daily life in the town and the concentration camp on its outskirts. As [name] shows, these distinctions are determined by their context and audience, suggesting the presence of intricate in-group/out-group dynamics.

The collection now takes a geographical and temporal leap, taking similar questions of memory to post-war Spain. If [name’s] contribution examines the ways in which local populations construct specific narratives of memory, [name’s] shows how such constructions work at an institutional and governmental level. [Name’s] article – ‘The Liberation of Auschwitz in the Spanish Press: From Connivance to Criticism’ – tracks reports of Auschwitz in the Spanish news in the immediate aftermath of the war; it argues that the volume and content of these reports were contingent on the shifting position of the Francoist government.

As [name] makes clear, the dissemination of information in the immediate aftermath of the war was far from straightforward. Perhaps rather surprisingly, this is also evident in the context of post-war trials. In his article – ‘Translation and the Language of Testimony: Filip Müller’s Testimony at the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial’ – [name] explores the relationship between witnessing, testimony and translation. More specifically, the author examines the testimony of Filip Müller, a native Czechoslovak who opted to speak in German at the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials. Speaking of the ‘collaborative production of witness narratives,’ [name] shows that court interpreters can play an active role in shaping testimony and that their interventions feed, in a variety of ways, into the complex network of interactions and exchanges that constitute the act of witnessing.

Also looking at representations of the Sonderkommando, albeit from a different perspective, [name] closes the collection with an examination of the works of David Olère and László Nemes. The author engages with ongoing debates about the ethics of Holocaust representation
and reflects on the specific issues associated with depictions – both testimonial and artistic – of those who were forced to work in the gas chambers.

The seemingly eclectic mix of viewpoints gathered here is deliberate. It would of course have been possible to put together a collection that was less diverse in its content, but to have taken this approach would have falsely implied that the topic of Auschwitz could be dealt with adequately by a single disciplinary or thematic perspective. Interdisciplinarity and diversity are thus defining features of this volume. Collectively, the articles collected here point to the complex, evolving, and multi-faceted nature of our present-day understanding of Auschwitz.

Notes:

2. See: Desbois, *Holocaust by Bullets*.
3. Webber, “Auschwitz as a Heritage Site,” 123.
4. This is true even at the basic level of geography since, as Webber has shown, the topographical area that makes up the current site is only part of what existed in the forties. As Webber puts it, the site has itself ‘been abbreviated as part of the commoditization process.’ See: Webber, “Auschwitz as a Heritage Site,” 122.
7. For a useful summary of the debate, see David Bruce Macdonald, ‘Instrumentalising the Holocaust: from Universalisation to Relativism’ in *Balkan Holocausts?*
8. In 2007, the name of the UNESCO entry of the camp was changed from ‘Auschwitz Concentration Camp’ to ‘Auschwitz-Birkenau. The Nazi German Concentration and Extermination Camp (1940-1945).’ The change, instigated jointly by the Polish and Israeli governments, was unanimously approved. The aim was to counter the designation of the site as a ‘Polish extermination camp.’ See: http://auschwitz.org/en/museum/news/change-to-the-auschwitz-entry-on-the-unesco-world-heritage-list,450.html
10. For further discussion on Auschwitz as a heritage site see: Young, *The Texture of Memory*.
11. The concept of *les lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) is from Nora, “Between Memory and History.” For a recent re-evaluation of Nora’s concept, see Sanyal, *Memory and Complicity*.
12. *Auschwitz Memorial Report*, 2017. Of these numbers, 81% opted for a tour given by one of the museums 300 educators and guides.
13. For recent discussions of so-called Holocaust tourism, see: Dalziel, “Romantic Auschwitz”; Reynolds, *Postcards From Auschwitz*; Griffiths, “Encountering Auschwitz”; Reynolds, “Consumers or Witnesses?”
15. Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 133.
16. Ibid., 114
Webber, 118-119.

Dwork and van Pelt, “Politics of a Strategy,” 687

Cole, Selling the Holocaust, 97

Webber, 121-122.

Griffiths, 194.

Ibid.

P.114


Cole, “(Re)Visiting Auschwitz,” 243


http://www.dhnet.be/actu/belgique/laurent-louis-condamne-a-visiter-les-camps-de-la-mort-59c234c6cd703b65926f155e


For further discussion of the impact of social media, see: Dalziel, “Romantic Auschwitz”; Commane and Potton, “Instagram and Auschwitz.”


