From Mass Murder to Exhibition: Museum Representations in Transatlantic Comparison

Veranstalter: Jürgen Matthäus, Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington D.C.; Miriam Rürup, Deutsches Historisches Institut, Washington, D.C.; Jens-Christian Wagner, Stiftung Gedenkstätten Buchenwald und Mittelbau-Dora, Weimar; Georg Wamhof, Washington, D.C.
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Bericht von: Jacob S. Eder, Department of History, University of Pennsylvania

Exhibitions about the Holocaust and other aspects of the violent history of the „Third Reich" have enjoyed tremendous public interest and success in the past several years. In Germany, the exhibitions „Hitler and the Germans" (Deutsches Historisches Museum) or „Forced Labor: The Germans, the Forced Laborers, and the War" (Jüdisches Museum Berlin) not only attracted large numbers of viewers, but also sparked academic debates. On the other side of the Atlantic, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) continues to be one of the most successful museums in the country. In connection with the opening of the traveling exhibition „Forced Labor for the 'Final Victory': Mittelbau-Dora Concentration Camp, 1943-1945" at the GHI on November 17, 2011, the conveners of this one-day conference invited scholars and museum practitioners to discuss the creation and functioning of museum representations of Nazi crimes at a time of change: the generation of survivors, instrumental in creating the first memorials and museums, is passing away, while historians and museum designers are taking over the (re-)design of such places of memory. In an increasingly interconnected world, questions of museum content and reception are also becoming issues of ever greater international and transnational significance.

In her opening remarks, MIRIAM RÜRUP (Washington, D.C.) explained that the aim of holding this conference in connection with the traveling exhibition on Mittelbau-Dora at the GHI was to provide a transatlantic forum for discussing the current state of the art for exhibiting the Nazi past. Focusing on exhibition concepts, contents, and intended messages, Rürup emphasized the challenges of tailoring an exhibition's message to its respective audience. For example, different viewing habits would clearly separate a German audience from audiences in other national and cultural contexts. She also pointed to the tension between efforts to „document the Nazi past" and to „stage" this past that sometimes distinguishes German from American exhibitions.

HAROLD MARCUSE (Santa Barbara) opened the first panel, introducing a „creation-reception-model." Based on his extensive research on the development of the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial, Marcuse explained that a certain sequence of initiators and audiences was responsible for the development of concentration camp memorials: immediately after the war, the occupying armies („bystanders") used the camps to educate German citizens („perpetrators") about Nazi crimes, followed by survivors („victims"), who wanted to make German citizens aware of their history of victimization. Thereafter, these sites were re-appropriated by the generation of the perpetrators, who, according to Marcuse, wanted to show foreign audiences and younger Germans that „it wasn't so bad." At the present—the fourth stage in this process—museum professionals have taken over the sites to convey the threefold message of genocide prevention: „intervene, desist, and resist."

Following Marcuse, K. HANNAH HOLTSCHNEIDER (Edinburgh) chose the permanent exhibition of the Jewish Museum in Berlin and the former permanent exhibition of the Jewish Museum in Vienna as case studies to demonstrate how differently museums have addressed the „Holocaust as Jewish History." Both exhibitions shared the challenge of representing the history of a minority group as well as telling the history of the Holocaust as part of Jewish history, with markedly different results: The Berlin museum integrated Jewish history into German history and chose a celebratory approach to the achievements of Jewish individuals. The former exhibition in Vienna, in turn, showed

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that Jewish life in Austria had been destroyed and could not be reconstructed in its former form. It denied its visitors „the assurance of a completed narrative."

Taking a transnational perspective, STEFFI DE JONG (Trondheim) explored the recent phenomenon of introducing video testimonies in World War II and Holocaust museums. Analyzing the relationship between video testimony, artifacts, and photographs in the Museo Diffuso della Resistenza, Deportazione, Guerra, Diritti e della Libertà in Turin and the Imperial War Museum in London, de Jong showed the increasing importance of video testimony for authenticating and individualizing objects by supplementing the experiences of a „real person." De Jong's paper spurred an intriguing discussion about „appropriate" witness testimony: were a person's experiences or rather his qualities as a „talking head" decisive in selecting testimonies? Would fictional „testimonies" ever appear in Holocaust museums? This—at times controversial—discussion clearly demonstrated the productive working atmosphere in this group of about a dozen scholars and museum professionals.

The second panel brought together representatives of two very different institutions: the director of the Mittelbau-Dora Concentration Camp Memorial, JENS-CHRISTIAN WAGNER (Weimar), and MICHAEL J. NEUFELD (Washington, D.C.), a historian and museum curator in the Division of Space History at the National Air and Space Museum. Wagner gave an engaging account of the challenges he faced in curating the traveling exhibition „Forced Labor: The Germans, the Forced Laborers and the War," which was inaugurated in Berlin and is currently on display in Moscow. Extensive research in a vast number of archives resulted in an exhibition that portrays Nazi Germany as a society constructed by „exclusion vs. inclusion." The exhibition ends with the sobering conclusion that justice has not been done to many former forced laborers.

Focusing on the „career" of the V-2 rocket as a museum artifact in the United States and Germany, Neufeld pointed to a crucial connection between the history of technological innovation and Nazi forced labor. Through the significant contribution of its inventor Wernher von Braun to the American success story of the „space race", the V-2 used to be considered a milestone in this process. Yet with the growth of Holocaust consciousness in the United States, this narrative had to integrate the history of slave labor at Mittelbau-Dora, which was exploited in producing V-2s, and of civilians killed by that rocket. The National Air and Space Museum did so in 1990. For the same reasons, attempts in Peenemünde—where rockets were developed—to create a positive narrative of technological innovation about the V-2 were doomed to fail. In the ensuing discussion, Wagner illuminated the circumstances of putting the traveling exhibition on display in Moscow: the narrative thrust of the exhibition had to be adjusted to suit the expectations of Russian authorities, who disapproved of the number of references to Jewish and Polish forced laborers. This example forcefully illustrated how much the definition—and hence representation—of Nazi crimes depends on national and cultural contexts.

The next panel focused on two sites of Nazi crimes and their subsequent history as memorials. JÖRG SKRIEBELEIT (Flossenbürg), the director of the Flossenbürg Concentration Camp Memorial, presented the history of the creation of the first permanent exhibition at this site, which only opened in 2007. The exhibition designers based the museum on thorough historical research into the history of the camp as well as a comprehensive reinvestigation of the camp's grounds. Using modern technology, they aimed to present the biographies of these almost forgotten victims of National Socialism to visitors of the memorial with „a clear moral narrative, but never a moralizing one." Shifting to a project in the making, CHRISTEL TROUVÉ (Bremen) provided a fascinating account of the challenges she and her colleagues faced in turning a massive bunker near Bremen into a „Denkort" for forced laborers. Bunker „Valentin" was built for the construction of submarines, yet not a single submarine was ever produced here. Having been used as a depot by the German army until 2010, the site is currently being redesigned by a group of scholars as a memorial and information center. Once it is com-

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pleted, visitors will be able to acquaint themselves with the site and its history on an interactive walking tour. The ensuing discussion focused on the need to integrate the history of the „total war"—armaments projects such as the V-2 and the Bremen bunker—into the topography of memorials for Nazi terror.

The next panel turned away from Europe and toward the United States, bringing together two scholars working about the USHMM, albeit with rather different approaches. ALISON LANDSBERG (Fairfax) stressed the challenge of telling the history of the Holocaust in a place „where nothing happened" in creating the USHMM. This museum was thus an attempt to „create memory." Furthermore, she argued that visitors experience what she calls „prosthetic memory," a memory that is not the result of lived experience. Having been exposed to various representations of the Holocaust in mass culture, the visitor engages „affectively" and „cognitively" with the history of the Holocaust in the USHMM, experiencing a „profound absence" thus empathizing with the victims of the Holocaust.

JACOB S. EDER (Pennsylvania) examined West German reactions to the planning process of the USHMM. Accordingly, German officials, representatives of the Kohl government in particular, perceived the USHMM as an „anti-German museum" and attempted from the early 1980s to alter its narrative by including references to postwar German history and the history of anti-Nazi resistance. Such attempts to „claim" the power of interpretation over the Holocaust and its aftermath failed, but the actual impact of the museum has not been as harmful to the Federal Republic's reputation as officials had feared. The discussion following these two papers returned to the question of telling the history of the Holocaust in a museum setting. Harold Marcuse pointed to the highly intriguing finding that the Los Angeles-based Museum of Tolerance, which scholars tend to view very critically and which contains virtually no artifacts from the Holocaust, has an impact on the visitor almost identical to that of the USHMM. This is certainly an issue that will have a major effect on the design of future museums and memorials.

The final panel focused on museums that do not explicitly aim to tell the history of the Holocaust. BILL NIVEN (Nottingham) compared the representation of Nazi crimes and the history of flight and expulsion of Germans in the Upper Silesian Regional Museum (Ratingen) and the Silesian Museum (Görlitz). Niven pointed to the significant impact of the Silesian Landsmannschaften, who failed in their efforts to prevent the representation of Nazi crimes in the museums. However, these exhibitions, in addition to illustrating German suffering, directly juxtapose anti-Semitism and anti-Nazi resistance and provide the biographies of resistance fighters, but do not call the perpetrators by their names. Thus, they create a dichotomy that simultaneously confronts the visitor with Nazi crimes while allowing for empathy with the German experience of flight and expulsion.

PAUL WILLIAMS (New York City) focused on the integration of the history of the Holocaust in the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, which is due to open in Winnipeg in 2013. After briefly illustrating the concept of the entire project with specific emphasis on the Holocaust segment, he spoke of the tensions between Canada's Jewish community and other ethnic-diasporic minorities. Canadian Ukrainians, for example, are calling for more attention to Stalinist crimes in the museum. Furthermore, Williams pointed to a major difference between this institution and the concentration camp memorials discussed earlier. Rather than teaching the history of an event, the Canadian museum will use history „to teach ethics." Williams asked in conclusion if efforts to present the Holocaust so that future generations can make sense of it will eventually outweigh historical accuracy.

The conference provided an excellent forum for a productive encounter between scholars working on memorials/museums and representatives of such institutions. Discussions of the processes of the musealization and memorialization of Nazi crimes in a transatlantic and an interdisciplinary framework proved to be highly productive as well as instructive. At times, a slight imbalance in analytical depth became obvious, which could have been avoided if the presentations of exhibition projects had been paired with a

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scholarly perspective from the outside. Then again, as most exhibition projects—the ones still in the making aside—were completed fairly recently, it may be too soon for them to be historicized. Nevertheless, the conference raised many important questions that deserve more thorough examination and debate in the future. The relevance of questions about „authenticity" versus „impact," for example, will certainly increase, especially as the generation of survivors and other witnesses continues to pass away. We can only assume what future Holocaust museums—especially in non-European locations—will look like. However, if the Holocaust continues to be reduced to a tool for „teaching ethics"—a shock therapy, as it were—and learning about the actual history of this event and of the sites of Nazi crimes becomes less and less relevant, will this result in the creation of ever more shocking, yet artificial Holocaust „theme parks"?

Conference overview:

First Panel: What and How to Present in Holocaust Museums
Chair: David Lazar (German Historical Institute, Washington, D.C.)

Harold Marcuse (University of California, Santa Barbara): Exhibitions of Nazi Crimes in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s

K. Hannah Holtschneider (University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh): The Holocaust as Jewish History: Representations of Jewish Victims of Nazi Crimes in Two Historical Exhibitions

Steffi de Jong (Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim): Exhibiting History/Exhibiting Memory: Some Reflections on the Use of Video Testimonies in Holocaust and Second World War Museums

Second Panel: Excursions I
Chair: Georg Wamhof (Washington, D.C.)

Jens-Christian Wagner (Buchenwald and Mittelbau Dora Memorials Foundation, Weimar): The Travelling Exhibition „Forced Labor: The Germans, the Forced Laborers and the War"

Michael J. Neufeld (National Air and Space Museum, Washington, D.C.): Technology Museums and Nazi Crimes: The V-2 Missile as a Special Case

Third Panel: Excursions II
Chair: Jürgen Matthäus (Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, Washington, D.C.)

Jörg Skriebeleit (Flossenbürg Concentration Camp Memorial): Flossenbürg: The Rediscovery of a European Site of Memory

Christel Trouvé (Memorial Bunker „Valentin", Bremen): Denkort Bunker Valentin: Transforming a Military Facility into a Documentation Center

Fourth Panel: The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
Chair: Martin Dean (Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, Washington, D.C.)

Alison Landsberg (George Mason University): „Remembering" the Holocaust: Prosthetic Memory and Empathy at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Jacob S. Eder (University of Pennsylvania): Confronting the „Anti-German Museum": West German Politics of Memory and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum during the 1980s

Fifth Panel: Universalizing the Holocaust
Chair: Miriam Rürup (German Historical Institute, Washington, D.C.)

William Niven (University of Nottingham): Portraying the Holocaust and the Flight and Expulsion of Germans in the Same Exhibition: Patterns, Problems, Possibilities

Paul Williams (Ralph Appelbaum Associates, New York City): Calamity and Response: Positioning the Holocaust at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights

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