

Auschwitz as World Heritage – UNESCO, Poland, and History Politics

Veranstalter: Research Group (Leibniz-Competition/ SAW) Knowledge of the World – Heritage of Mankind: The History of UNESCO World Cultural and Natural Heritage, Leibniz Institute of European History, Mainz

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The workshop „Auschwitz as World Heritage – UNESCO, Poland, and History Politics“ organized by Andrea Rehling and Julia Röttjer analyzed the historical context of the inscription of Auschwitz-Birkenau on the World Heritage List and its further development as a World Heritage site. It brought together international scholars from various historical disciplines and social sciences, practitioners of conservation, and specialists dealing with the site for a discussion on the changing role of Auschwitz remembrance in a historical perspective, the implications for history politics, heritage preservation and culture politics in Poland and in an international context. A particular focus was put on the Polish nomination of „Auschwitz Concentration Camp“ and its inscription on the World Heritage List in 1979. Which consequences arose for Auschwitz after the World Heritage nomination and how was the World Heritage Programme influenced by this event? Extending from this point of view the workshop addressed wider questions regarding the changing inner conceptions and outer functions of the Auschwitz State Museum, conflicts over Auschwitz-Birkenau as a UNESCO site and beyond, and the transformation of Holocaust memory and of international as well as Polish history politics in this perspective. This was connected to a contextualization of conservation paradigms and practices concerning the concentration camp, its buffer zone and its local context.

The first panel focused on „The Changing role of Auschwitz heritage in historical perspective“. JULIA RÖTTJER (Mainz) discussed the perception of Auschwitz-Birkenau

as „dissonant“ World Heritage since the 1970s, and analyzed different claims to this historical site and its memory over time. For this purpose she emphasized two crucial turns in the history of Auschwitz as World Heritage. Firstly, she connected the controversial nomination procedure of Auschwitz-Birkenau to the context of early Polish UNESCO proposals. To follow this argumentation she also elaborated on the role of Auschwitz for the inclusion of „negative historical values“ into the World Heritage idea. Secondly, she explored the international conflicts around the site in the 1980s with a focus on the UNESCO arena. For this she zoomed in on the Carmelite conflict, which reflected these particular claims to the common heritage and their connections to the discussions around the universal symbols embedded in this site.

JONATHAN HUENER (Burlington) discussed the politics and culture of commemoration at Auschwitz. His presentation emphasized public uses of Auschwitz and its landscapes for public events and demonstrations from the 1950s to the 1980s. He questioned in particular the political and cultural implications of the historical context of the post-war era for these processes. Thereby he highlighted the use of Auschwitz by national and international actors for different constructions of collective memory. He showed how competing narratives and practical uses entered the international public arena and changed Auschwitz commemoration over time.

In her talk HEIDEMARIE UHL (Vienna) showed how the site Auschwitz-Birkenau developed over time as a central element for the commemoration of the Holocaust in the international realm. One main argument for this hypothesis is the history of the International Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 27th, date of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and extermination camp. Furthermore, she introduced the idea of Auschwitz becoming the symbol of the „Other“ in western civilization. She analyzed the background that stood behind this development, highlighting how the meaning given to the term „memory“, as well as to practices of memory, shifted from a nation-based to a society-based focus in the 1980s.

In his presentation MAREK KUCIA (Krakow) focused on the change of meanings given to Auschwitz by people in Poland from 1945 to the present. Using a sociological approach, he identified five „major types“ of meanings, as well as five „historical periods“, within which he collocated the predominance of a specific meaning ascended to the site. He differentiated Polish national, religious Catholic Polish, International(-ist), Universalist and Jewish denotations and supported his argument through the interpretation of emblematic pictures related to practices of commemoration within the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. The results of quantitative research he presented revealed the assignment of meaning given to the site in Poland in the late 2000s.

The second panel „Polish history politics and conservation of cultural heritage in an international context“ focused on the interaction of local and global contexts in the case of the Auschwitz-Birkenau site. Two Polish specialists, who were personally involved in schemes concerning the spatial context of the World Heritage Site Auschwitz-Birkenau in an international context, presented the difficulties of combining UNESCO World Heritage, conservation paradigms and local spatial planning.

DANUTA KŁOSEK-KOZŁOWSKA (Warsaw) focused her talk on a detailed study of the areal extent of Auschwitz-Birkenau which was conducted by three Polish scholars between 1996 and 1998 in connection with the Polish branch of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). The research group, of which Mrs. Kłosek-Kozłowska was a member, assessed the site and constructed a management proposal. This proposal was mainly focused on the difficulty of integrating the intangible values embedded in the monuments into the two spatially separated parts of the UNESCO site („Auschwitz I“ and Birkenau). She presented possible solutions for the preservation of the memorial aspects of the place, as well as for the interaction of the site with the city of Oświęcim and other surrounding communities, thus bringing the local town planning perspective into the discussion.

MAREK RAWECKI (Gliwice) based his

presentation on the extended knowledge he acquired while conducting studies on defining and developing spatial management and buffer zones of the UNESCO heritage Auschwitz-Birkenau. He presented the discrepancy between the zones established for the conservation of the site from 1945 to 2014 and the space of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp during the Second World War. He also interrogated the difficulties of integrating the site in the urban context of the city of Oświęcim. He focused especially on the camp spaces situated outside of the UNESCO World Heritage Site and the particular challenges arising for local heritage conservation.

Through the course of the workshop the site of Auschwitz as World Heritage was examined via perspectives of the history of the UNESCO inscription, analyses of arising conflicts, the development of the Museum and Memorial, Holocaust commemoration, sociological research in Polish society, and architecture and spatial planning. It was discussed thoroughly, how and why meanings ascribed to Auschwitz changed in specific historical and political contexts and what the implications were for heritage policies and for the commemoration of the Holocaust. One general line was the aforementioned periodization structuring possible analyses of the Post-War Memory of Auschwitz and history politics on the one hand and the development of the Museum, the sites and monuments on the other hand. A second line of thought was the question of medial representation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, e.g. in the Museum's exhibitions, in visual media, maps, monuments, buildings and through witnesses. Concepts of authenticity, forensic proof, and projections of a legacy of the past into the future run through these representations and are worth further investigation. A third line of discussion was the analysis of historical actors and of the argumentations and motivations with which they entered the physical site as well as the international debates surrounding it in times of conflict. To research the institutional and individual actors means not only to ask for their interacting responsibilities and claims, but also to see them as vectors and carriers of memory representing at the same time the chan-

nels through which decisions are made. The UNESCO as a political agent and at the same time „expert organization“ in the UN system should be questioned in this context, leading to a reflection on the role of players within UNESCO, of heritage experts, but also of historians. The competing narratives, various claims and practical uses of this site were asserted by a variety of Polish national as well as religious or international impulses. It was discussed, how the claims to Auschwitz put forward by different groups and institutions interacted, and what function the UNESCO arena could assume. It was exemplified, how this has been connected to the construction of space, how practical heritage conservation, World Heritage paradigms and museum exhibitions mutually influenced politics of commemoration.

Conference Overview:

Johannes Paulmann (Leibniz Institute of European History, Mainz), Welcome

Andrea Rehling (Leibniz Institute of European History, Mainz), Introduction

Panel 1: The Changing Role of Auschwitz Heritage in historical perspective.

Julia Röttger (Leibniz Institute of European History, Mainz), Auschwitz-Birkenau as „dissonant“ World Heritage since the 1970s.

Jonathan Huener (University of Vermont), The Politics and Culture of Commemoration at Auschwitz.

Heidemarie Uhl (Austrian Academy of Science, Vienna), From the Margins to the Center of European and Global Memory: The Transformation of Holocaust Remembrance as Historical Context of Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial.

Marek Kucia (Jagiellonian University Krakow), The Meanings of Auschwitz in Poland, 1949 to the Present.

Panel 2: Polish history politics and conservation of cultural heritage in an international context.

Danuta Kłosek-Kozłowska (Warsaw University of Technology), The Spirit of Place and the Place of Spirits. Auschwitz-Birkenau former

Nazi Death Camps.

Marek Rawecki (Silesian University of Technology), Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum protection zones. Managing the legacy of the former death camp.

Final discussion

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