

4th Bergen-Belsen International Summer School: Memory in the Digital Age. Comparative Genocide Studies

Veranstalter: Bergen-Belsen Memorial

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From 31st July until 6th August 2017, the 4th Bergen-Belsen International Summer School took place in the Bergen-Belsen Memorial in Lohheide. Organized by Tessa Bouwman (Bergen-Belsen Memorial) and Karen Bähr (Erfurt), it gathered international Master and PhD students from different disciplines who are interested in commemorative culture in a global context.

As for this year's topic, about 20 participants from as many countries dealt with essential issues of comparative genocide studies such as competitive victimhood, comparison of mass atrocities and the strategies of transitional justice. These topics were to be connected to questions about places of remembrance: what are challenges and opportunities in educational work at memorials regarding comparative approaches, visitors' diverse backgrounds and social media?

The program started on Tuesday with words of welcome and by providing theoretical framework. KJELL ANDERSON (Leiden / Amsterdam) elaborated on the field of comparative genocide studies. Based on his interviews with perpetrators in Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Bosnia and Cambodia, he dismantled simplistic statements about perpetrators by focusing on the relationship between their motivations and the normative context. Anderson claimed that ruptures (rapid norm or individual behavior change) and continuities (perpetuation of existing institutions and self-image) entangle to empower a radicalization through escalating moral breakages. Apparently, most important factors in determining the likelihood of participation in genocide are the individual's moral disengagement from victims and their proximity to perpetrators. Anderson's research proves how once perpetration has occurred, individuals often reframe their involvement in ways that minimize their moral culpability. He outlined techniques of moral neutralization, which can

be categorized as 1) reversal of morality (justification) and 2) reduction of costs (excuses). Supported by examples, he showed how appeal to higher loyalties and denial of the victims are used to justify perpetration. Furthermore, he provided samples of excuse techniques working with denial of responsibility or injury as well as with claiming normality, inevitability, relative acceptability or inner opposition. Finally, the denial of autonomy based on de-individuation and diffusion of responsibility led him to conclude that seemingly „great evil is not always accompanied by great intention.“ His lecture demystified perpetrators of genocides and mass atrocities to indicate the *humanity of evil*. His final question lingered: „What separates us from them?“ Afterwards, a workshop led by Anderson and Bouwman provided an opportunity to discuss general concepts and definitions of genocide.

The afternoon featured a tour by DAVID REINICKE (Bergen-Belsen Memorial) on the former camp grounds of Bergen-Belsen and in the Memorial's permanent exhibition. The participants experienced digital learning opportunities as they used tablets with special trace-tracking software that provided a 3D-animation of the former concentration camp.

On Wednesday, KATJA SEYBOLD (Bergen-Belsen Memorial) showed the group around again. Her task is to (re)locate various gravesites. The challenge is to track them by using historical sources since the area is proclaimed a Jewish Cemetery, hence not allowing excavations. From 1941–1945, more than 70.000 people died in the Bergen-Belsen prisoners of war (POW) and concentration camp. Many victims of the concentration camp were buried in mass graves after liberation in April 1945. Nearly 20.000 victims of the Bergen-Belsen POW camp are buried in the Hörsten cemetery 600 meters from the former camp site. The participants also discovered the nearby military grounds of Bergen-Hohne. In 2016, the decision to name the area „Lower-Saxony barracks, former Hohne“ and thereby getting rid of the connection to Bergen-Belsen provoked a debate about the historical meaning of the place.

In the afternoon, during a group work within the Memorial's permanent exhibi-

tion about the displaced persons camp 1945–1950, David Reinecke's workshop issued the emerging memorial culture in the camp's aftermath until today as well as positions of survivors of Bergen-Belsen.

On Thursday, the first panel took place. Moderated by LEYLA ERCAN (Hannover), three speakers introduced (trans)national challenges of comparative memory studies in Europe. First, Ercan discussed how to deal with memorial politics in the context of a Turkish-German historical narrative that culminated at the Bergen-Belsen Memorial in December 2012. The Turkish embassy inaugurated a memorial plaque. Afterwards, a film called *The Turkish Passport* celebrating the myth of Turkish rescue of Jews was presented. Ercan interpreted this incident as a new challenge to German society which has just begun to understand itself as a „migration society“ by reevaluating migratory processes and cultural / ethnic heterogeneity as a social normality. Thereby, Ercan drew on Michael Rothberg's theory of „multidirectional memory“.¹ His concept may enable societies to conceptualize what happens when different histories of extreme violence and different cultures of remembrance confront each other. Consistent with Rothberg, Ercan concluded that memory should not be worked out competitively but productively through cross-referencing. Consequently, the created collective terrain of „joined“ memory could provide opportunities for a stable migration society and ultimately help to deal with e.g. the myths upheld during the Turkish ceremony in Bergen-Belsen 2012.

EVAN KOWALSKI (Baumholder) presented Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory to look into the problem of constructing a nation in post-Vichy France. He delineated how collective memories form the basis of continually evolving narratives and shared understandings of cultures. Investigating the relationship between memory and history in the context of France during the post-World War II period, Kowalski aimed to show that France's role in collaborating with the Nazis in WWII shattered France's national narrative as heir to the French Revolutionary concepts of liberty, equality and fraternity. He emphasized how

various political groups in France developed their own collective memories to reconstruct French cohesion. Kowalski displayed how certain memories became „official“ and concluded how collective memories are tools that can disregard historical accuracy with the purpose of constructing socio-cultural stability and particularly national unity. He also demonstrated the challenges to collective memory in the digital age where information channeling and manipulation is increasing.

Finally, JELENA JORGACEVIC KISIC (Belgrad) presented her research about the issue of competitive victimhood between Croatia and Serbia. She outlined how the fall of communism and the following transition (especially in the former Socialistic Federative Republic of Yugoslavia due to the civil war 1991–1995) led to a „revival of memories“ of national narratives and enormous changes in the collective identities. Referring to Serbia and Croatia, Kisić outlined national narratives and self-victimization strategy with the tendency to monopolize the own position as the morally superior and only victim. Accordingly, these strategies tend to hinder authentic reconciliation or inter-ethnic debate about history.

In the afternoon, STEPHANIE BILLIB (Bergen-Belsen Memorial) asked for the participants' individual backgrounds and perspectives of the Holocaust. She discovered that they got in touch with the Holocaust at a young age and talked about it in school early. Several answers stated that the human abysses of its history could serve as a universal lesson about the human nature.

The next day, the group visited the Ahlem Memorial in Hanover. This former Jewish horticultural school first served as an assembly point for deportations and later as „police replacement prison“. ANDREAS MISCHOK (Ahlem Memorial Hanover) showed the group around. Afterwards, the free afternoon was finished with a joined dinner.

On Saturday, THIJS BOUWKNEGT (Amsterdam) offered an insight into processes of transitional justice after mass atrocities (mostly in Sub-Saharan Africa). He outlined

¹ Rothberg, Michael: Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization, Stanford 2009.

how international lawyers mostly try to sue three crimes: 1) Genocide, which appear to be hard to prove; 2) Crimes against humanity whose legal base protects individuals and is easier to apply, because one does not have to prove the intent of perpetrators; and 3) War crimes violating the Geneva Conventions. After giving an outline of historical injustice before international law existed, Bouwknecht expounded which strategies societies may apply to deal with atrocities afterwards: they can be remembered, forgotten or denied. He sketched how the goal of any workup of a violent past is reconciliation between conflict parties. In the end, it is about being able to co-exist in peace. Bouwknecht used the example of the Truth Commission in South Africa 1996 to show how bringing together victims and perpetrators may help to find out more facts and truths while not persecute or punish anyone. Against that, he unfolded the concepts of transitional justice, a normative framework for positive change. He introduced striking historical examples of past trials from the 19th and mostly 20th century. Although international law treats Nuremberg Trials as role model, actually the Tokyo Trials 1946–1948 were more a blue pause of modern trials – since there were no documental proofs. Bouwknecht concluded that historical truth is about understanding the past to act upon it while legal truth has to be found within a certain shortage of time and is challenged by „several truths“ in the courtroom. Finding truth in court means to charge perpetrators and close the book. Afterwards, he led a workshop. The participants experienced how unreliable the human memory is when it comes down to testify a crime.

Karen Bähr moderated the second panel. Two speakers presented their research dealing with collective and individual memory after deep impact. PARANDZEM PARYAN (Yerevan) introduced a project conducted in Ashnak in 2015. This village in Armenia is inhabited (nearly only) by descendants of those who survived the genocide. Since survivors were not allowed to speak or write about their experiences until the 1960s, they became an underground remembrance community. Memories and narratives were passed orally in secret through generations. Only af-

ter the collapse of the USSR and Armenian independence, a private museum was founded to collect objects of remembrance. Paryan was able to reconstruct a redemption narrative in the village through oral-history interviews. Analyzing and comparing these, she discovered how one storyline has been circulating repeatedly: the narrative of children killed or left on the road. She deconstructed individual examples to draft the mechanism of the narrative: the fate of the sacrificed child is opposed to the fate of the community (or family). Finally, this narrative generates salvation of these deeds and emphasizes the continuation of life.

DAFINA NEDELICHEVA (New York City / Varna) gave an impression about how and why communism is remembered in East Central Europe until today. She outlined how after 1945, the communist ideology directly altered the narratives within national museum halls. Nedelcheva argued that, after 1989, public remembrance of communism in post-socialist Europe was not the product of objective and inclusive examination, but rather a profit- and politics-driven act of omission and vilification. Consequently, the past was nostalgically domesticated or turned into a „theme park“ attraction. She proved her point by introducing several striking examples in East Central Europe; like the statue park (Szoborpark) in Hungary, the Romanian Peasant Museum in Bucharest and the Retro Museum in Varna. Nedelcheva concluded that the lack of objective discussion inhibited dealing with traumatic experiences and ultimately prevents the remedial process of understanding the true dimensions of historical development as nations; creating a contested and obscure identity. Furthermore, she claimed the new political and social order of the post-1989 period undertook a similar attempt in breaking with the inconvenient communist tradition by re-establishing the state's new pro-Western identity. Lastly, Nedelcheva introduced an alternative: the park monument of Bulgarian-Soviet friendship in Varna. She is part of a team which aims at preserving architectural and cultural significance of the monument without glorifying or condemning its past while allowing the space to adapt a

new contemporary role.²

The final discussion intended to connect the topic of genocide studies with the key theme memory in the digital age. After giving examples about how social media is connected to public remembrance today (for example “#yolocaust” by Shahak Shapira³), two participants highlighted the issues of contemporary and future genocide memorials regarding commemoration, education and politics.

During the week, it became obvious how competitive victimhood plays a role in public remembrance – even more so since 1989. Comparing mass atrocities is both chance and challenge to research and educational work. Thus, the final question left to answer is: Why do we still believe there is a discrepancy between looking back and moving forward?

Conference Overview:

Kjell Anderson (Leiden / Amsterdam): „Perpetrating Genocide“ (Lecture)

Kjell Anderson (Leiden / Amsterdam); Tessa Bouwman (Bergen-Belsen Memorial): „Introduction to Genocide Studies“ (Workshop)

David Reinicke (Bergen-Belsen Memorial): „The historical camp grounds and the exhibition of Bergen-Belsen“ (Tour)

Katja Seybold (Bergen-Belsen Memorial): „The Gravesites of Bergen-Belsen and the Military Barracks“ (Tour)

David Reinicke (Bergen-Belsen Memorial): „Displaced persons in Bergen-Belsen“ (Workshop)

Leyla Ercan (Hannover) (Panel Moderation): „Bergen-Belsen as a Battle Field of Commemoration Politics? Negotiating a Multidirectional Memorial Politics in the Context of Turkish-German Historical Narratives“

Evan Kowalski (Baumholder): „Modern Deception. A look into the problem of collective memory in the construction of a nation in post-Vichy France“

Jelena Jorgačević Kisić (Belgrad): „How (not) to deal with mass atrocities: The case of competitive victimhood between Croatia and Serbia“

Stephanie Billib (Bergen-Belsen Memorial):

„What does the Holocaust stand for and how can Bergen-Belsen link to its visitors’ individual perspectives?“ (Workshop)

Andreas Mischok (Ahlem Memorial Hanover): The Ahlem Memorial, Hannover (Tour and discussion)

Thijs Bouwknecht (Amsterdam): „Transnational Justice after Genocide“ (Lecture and workshop)

Karen Bähr (Erfurt): (Panel Moderation)

Parandzem Paryan (Yerevan): „The Narrative of Child Sacrifice during Armenian Genocide. Stories from Ashnak“

Dafina Nedelcheva (New York City / Varna): „Remembering Communism“

Final discussion and conclusion

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² More information at <http://dafinanedelcheva6.wixsite.com/sovietmonument> (07.12.2017).

³ The project has been removed. The general concept and reactions at <https://www.yolocaust.de> (07.12.2017). Find some images and the whole debate at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38675835> (07.12.2017).