



**Jonathan Huener.** *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration, 1945-1979.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003. xxviii + 326 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8214-1507-8; \$44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1506-1.



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## A “Biography” of Auschwitz

While the history of the Nazi concentration and extermination camps has been the subject of intensive research since the end of the war, only recently have scholars begun to examine the afterlife of the camps: how the events that took place in the camps have been interpreted, remembered, and forgotten, and how the camp sites themselves have been preserved, neglected, transformed, and even destroyed. In his new book, Jonathan Huener examines the afterlife of one of the most important Nazi camps: Auschwitz. Focusing on the physical site itself, Huener traces how Auschwitz has been remembered and commemorated in Poland from the end of the war until the present day. Subtle in analysis and rich in detail, the book will be of interest to scholars working in a variety of fields, including Polish and German history and the history of the Holocaust.

Conceptually, Huener situates his study in the context of work on collective memory: how communities and societies remember and commemorate past events. Following Maurice Halbwachs, he identifies collective memories as social constructs subject to the exigencies of the present day; following Pierre Nora, he identifies

them as constructs in a constant state of evolution. To this construction he adds his own concern about the relationship between memory and history, the latter defined as an (ideally) objective and universally valid representation of the past. He thus situates collective representations of Auschwitz in a two-fold context. On the one hand, he examines how they emerged out of the shifting political and social context of postwar Poland; on the other, he examines how they compare to what he calls the “‘real’ Auschwitz”: the wartime history of the camp itself.

Following an introduction which outlines the conceptual framework of the study and offers an overview of the camp’s wartime history, six chronologically organized chapters and an epilogue trace commemorative themes and practices at Auschwitz over the course of almost sixty years. Across this span of time, Huener identifies three dominant characteristics of collective memory at Auschwitz. First, Poles viewed the camp primarily as a site of Polish national sacrifice and suffering. Second, the Polish authorities consistently played down and neglected the camp’s history as a site for the extermination

of Jews. Third, the Polish state instrumentalized the camp site for political gain.

Chapters 1 and 2 examine the history of the camp in the immediate postwar period. During this period, what Huener calls the “martyrological idiom” first established itself. Building on wartime ideas of national suffering and sacrifice, and on a longer history of religiously inflected nationalist thought, postwar Poles came to see Auschwitz primarily as a site of Polish national victimization. The main subjects of this martyrological idiom were Polish political prisoners, who were presented as “martyrs” for the national cause. The war itself was presented as a conflict between Germans (racist, aggressive) and Poles (virtuous, heroic). The martyrological idiom privileged the original camp, Auschwitz I, which had been used as an internment camp for Polish political detainees, and neglected Auschwitz II (Birkenau), where Jewish prisoners were concentrated and where the machinery of extermination was located. Indeed, it was during this period that the Jewish history of Auschwitz began to be neglected. As Huener notes, Poles did not publicly deny the fact that Auschwitz had been used for the mass extermination of Jews, but “Jewish genocide was seldom upheld as a unique phenomenon. Instead, the paradigm either marginalized the mass murder of Jews or, as was often the case, implied that Poles had shared in that fate, not only as the first victims of Nazi aggression and occupation, but also as certain victims of Nazi extermination policy in the future” (p. 53). Efforts to preserve the camp site and establish it as a memorial space were led largely by former political prisoners, some of them now affiliated with the Polish government. These efforts culminated in the creation of the State Museum at Auschwitz. In effect, the camp site was transformed into a novel kind of museum.

In the third chapter, Huener examines the fate of the camp during the era of Polish Stalinism. During this period, state control over the activities of the State Museum intensified, and the camp’s history was heavily exploited for domestic and foreign policy purposes. In particular, it was pressed into service for the Cold War. In this context, the narrative of Polish national sacrifice and suffering was overshadowed by the image of the camp as a site of heroic socialist struggle. More strongly than during the first postwar years, the camp’s history was presented as a moral lesson for the present day. It served to warn of the dangers that “fascist” and “imperialist” countries like the United States, Great Britain, and West Germany posed to postwar Poland.

Chapter 4 examines the post-Stalinist period. According to Huener, this period saw a turn away from the explicit political instrumentalization of the years immediately preceding and a revival of the memorial themes articulated during the early postwar period, focused on the sacrifices and sufferings of the Polish people. The majority of the chapter is devoted to a detailed examination of the new exhibition opened at the State Museum in 1955. In effect, Huener provides the reader with a guided tour of the exhibit, following the idealized itinerary established by its creators. He offers extensive analysis of the written material that confronted the visitor and of visual artifacts such as memorial tablets and the physical remains of the camp complex itself. However, this chapter also contains a good deal of repetition, as many of the themes discussed here had been covered in earlier chapters. The chapter would have worked better in a somewhat shorter, perhaps differently organized form.

Chapter 5 examines the internationalization of the camp site during the late 1960s. Although the international dimension of the camp’s history had been stressed during the early postwar period, it was progressively subsumed under the weight of the national commemorative idiom. It reemerged in the late 1960s, largely as a result of the International Auschwitz Committee, a committee of former prisoners from various European countries. The committee’s involvement in preserving the camp site provided the State Museum with greater international visibility while also opening it up to greater influence from constituencies outside of Poland. One result was the construction of a monument to international martyrdom in Birkenau. However, far from providing a satisfactory memorial to all the prisoners who died in Auschwitz, the Birkenau monument elided the distinctions between different prisoner groups and continued to privilege political prisoners. During this same period, the State Museum constructed its first exhibit on the “Martyrology and Struggle of the Jews,” part of a series of new national exhibits. Opened at the height of the Polish government’s “anti-Zionist” campaign, the exhibit focused primarily on the common suffering of Jews and Poles and failed to address the fundamentally different way in which the Nazis had treated Jews.

In the sixth chapter, Huener examines the history of the camp in the wake of internationalization, focusing primarily on the increasingly prominent role of Catholic ritual. The centerpiece of the chapter is an account of Pope John Paul II’s visit to Auschwitz in June, 1979. Unlike most of the events staged at Auschwitz since the end of the war, the pope’s visit to the camp was not orches-

trated by the state, and state authorities were anxious about the possible political consequences. In his homily at the camp, the pope drew special attention to the suffering of Jews in Auschwitz. At the same time, he placed the suffering of all the camp's prisoners within a Christian redemptive framework. Thus, while his visit has been seen as a turning point in Polish-Jewish relations, it also suggests the persistence and popularity of a Polish-Catholic memorial framework.

Finally, an epilogue to the book brings the reader up to the present day. Here Huener focuses in particular on the Carmelite convent controversy of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which erupted after Carmelite nuns were allowed to occupy a building on the grounds of the camp complex. He deftly situates the controversy within the fundamentally different views of Auschwitz that Poles and Jews had developed over the past fifty years.

Throughout the book, Huener provides subtle and illuminating analyses of the collective representations of Auschwitz forged in postwar Poland. With great skill and delicacy, he addresses a number of complex issues such as the fundamentally different perspectives on Auschwitz developed by Poles and Jews and the difficulty of adequately representing the crimes committed at Auschwitz. Although I am skeptical about the usefulness of treating representations of the past as "collective memories," I was convinced by Huener's argument about the centrality and durability of the martyrological idiom. His presentation of Polish political and social history is also very good, making the book accessible to readers not already intimately familiar with the subject.

The main shortcoming of the book is the narrowness of its real focus. Huener focuses primarily on those collective representations of the camp produced by the Polish state and its allies. He thus considerably narrows the

range of possible actors. Indeed, the book is primarily a history of the State Museum of Auschwitz and its efforts to commemorate the camp. Thus, with a few important exceptions, the reader does not learn much about popular commemorative practices, that is, practices not organized or sanctioned by the state. For example, to what extent did Poles (and non-Poles) hold their own informal commemorations at the camp and how did these differ from state-sanctioned rituals? Given official neglect of Auschwitz's Jewish history, I was especially keen to read more about popular or private efforts to commemorate Jewish experiences. For example, to what extent did the small community of Jews in postwar Poland hold its own commemorative rituals at Auschwitz? To what extent did Polish Jews (and others) draw attention to Auschwitz as a Jewish camp or protest the lack of emphasis on the part of the museum? How did they frame the Jewish experience of Auschwitz? Was this experience defined primarily by suffering and death or, as was the case among Polish Jewish displaced persons, were heroism and resistance also emphasized? Do these efforts date back to the early postwar period or are they a more recent phenomenon? This last question is especially interesting given recent debates about when the Holocaust became a prominent element of Jewish identity in Europe and the United States. To be sure, tracking popular commemorative practices poses numerous challenges, not the least of which is finding sources, and Huener's narrowing of the focus certainly makes for a tighter, more focused study. Still, I was left wanting to know more about practices that did not fit into the dominant memorial paradigms he identifies.

In all, Jonathan Huener has produced a sensitive, insightful, and very readable "biography" of the Auschwitz concentration camp (p. xiii). As we continue to grapple with the legacy of Auschwitz, his book will no doubt help us navigate the waters.

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