



Thomas Grotum. *Das digitale Archiv: Aufbau und Auswertung am Beispiel der Geschichte des Konzentrationslagers Auschwitz.* Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2004. 381 S. (gebunden), ISBN 978-3-593-37481-9.



Laurence Rees. *Auschwitz: A New History.* New York: Public Affairs, 2005. xxii + 327 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58648-303-6.



Bernhard Strebel. *Das KZ Ravensbrück: Geschichte eines Lagerkomplexes.* Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, 2003. 615 S. EUR 50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-506-70123-7.

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Revisiting the Camps: New Research, New Reflections on the Nazi Camp System

Hungarian Nobel Laureate and Holocaust survivor Imre Kertész has eloquently asserted that “modern mythology begins with a gigantic negative: God created the world but man created Auschwitz.”[1] As a man-made creation that left behind tangible evidence, the enormous negative Kertész identified continues to provide the entry point for many recent Holocaust-related studies

with particular focus on the complex Nazi camp system. As the titles of these works suggest, much information about the camps remains unknown, and additional research is still needed to uncover the exact locations, functions, and circumstances of each detention site of regulated persecution.[2] The continual opening of archives and access to previously classified documents, the pro-

cessing, conservation and reorganization of resource material, as well as the growing distance in time from the events of the Holocaust have provoked renewed—if yet unanswerable—questions and have formed the basis of analysis and reflection, with growing imperative. These three works represent some examples of the cutting-edge research conducted in light of greater access to archival resources and the posing of new questions, and are aimed at rounding out our understanding of the foundations and purpose, the inner machinations and the historical impact of the existence of the Nazi camps.

Much scholarly and popular attention focused on the Holocaust centers around the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp complex; indeed, “Auschwitz” has become synonymous with the Holocaust.[3] Grotum’s *Das digitale Archiv* and Rees’s *Auschwitz: A New History* are two recent works dealing with previously unrecognized aspects of the camp. Grotum’s book describes efforts to digitize and preserve related source material generated from the camp complex, while Rees takes a different approach, highlighting previously unknown aspects about the camp’s role and distilling that information into a readable history of Auschwitz and its role in relation to the events of the Holocaust and the more general history of World War II. Focused on one aspect of the camp’s postwar legacy, Grotum’s useful text, which stems from his dissertation at the Technische Universität Darmstadt, is a detailed chronology and examination of the attempts of several working groups to integrate “all available sources on the former inmates of Auschwitz into one homogenous database” (p. 10). The three groups, the Project Group Historische Fachinformatik of the Max Planck Institut für Geschichte (Göttingen), the technical office of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum and the Historisches Institut of the TU Darmstadt constituted the project group. By simultaneously creating a memorial to the victims of Auschwitz-Birkenau, seeking to uncover the names of every prisoner, establishing digital storage to preserve archival source material and proposing the integration of related projects at the memorial sites of other former concentration camps, the project group succeeded in its ambitious aims to create a substantial database resource for future research. Grotum’s book delineates this process in stark detail: the aims of the project groups; the search for materials; the ways in which the enormous amounts of information were processed; and the challenges the working groups faced while undergoing such an immense and worthwhile task.

Grotum begins by discussing the project’s origins, its source funding and support, its linkages with other in-

stitutions, and its major goals. He traces the historiography of Auschwitz, identifying the major works and analytical efforts by scholars over the past sixty years to research every aspect of the camp complex, situating these efforts in a brief chronology and historiography of the Holocaust more generally. He also situates this historiography within the context of changing and evolving access to archives, thus situating the efforts of the Archiv Auschwitz-Birkenau group to process and organize the scattered resources within the general attempts by various archives to make future research on Auschwitz and other camps more tenable.

Grotum provides an interesting and potentially useful outline (especially for other archives, libraries and resource centers seeking to undertake similar projects) for this kind of project in that he identifies several principles that played a role in the development of the database. The principles followed by the group include the development of data model and data entry themes; digitization and preservation of the documents; the identification of individuals and linking of dates; the development of entry points for potential research; and the verification of documentation. Yet while Grotum’s book emphasizes the creation of the digital archive for the use of future research, the bulk of the book focuses on the creation of the database itself in technical detail, with only a short portion dedicated to demonstrating how this resource can be used. Much of the book may be too technical for the non-specialist in computing. For example, Grotum elaborates in detail the uses and benefits of the “kleio” database program, the advantages of its flexibility for this kind of project, its dynamic nature and so on. On several pages he describes coded programming language (pp. 42-44). While this kind of information (frequently found elsewhere in the book) may be useful to an archivist or cataloguer, it ultimately may be superfluous for those looking for an actual study using this collated material. Still, this close attention to detail may prove useful for other database planners, conservation technicians, archivists and others. It also demonstrates just how such a wealth of resources needs to be organized in order to be useful to researchers.

With that minor criticism in mind, the most relevant sections for historians and other scholars are the chapters in which Grotum does demonstrate the potential uses of the digital archive, and which can be seen as a model for research using this database. Although limited to the latter one hundred pages of the book, Grotum aptly demonstrates here how the information gathered from the so-called camp “Death Books” (*Sterbebücher*) and

“Strength Book” (*Stärkebuch*) yields information that is of concern for those attempting to recreate a comprehensive picture of the identities of the inmates in Auschwitz: for example, detailed demographic information about the inmates, their death rates, country of origin, variegated over specific periods of the camp’s operation and within various sub-organizations of the camp structure, such as the “Gypsy” camp (see chapter 6: “Inhaltliche Perspektiven,” especially pp. 221-306). The information derived from the database and presented in this form shows how scholars can process usefully the collected material within the context of the camp’s history. It also shows that individuals can conduct research on a more personal level, tracing the trajectory of a family member’s deportation, transfer, date of death and the recorded (though not necessarily actual) reason for death, for example. Thus Grotum’s work ably demonstrates how the collecting of materials and the intricate process of organizing these materials in a format that helps ensure future access to the researchers and the general public is a step toward restoring humanity to those who were robbed of it: giving names to the “statistics,” and recapturing a sense of the circumstances of their last moments in this terrible place.

Another recent publication on the Auschwitz camp complex is provided in *Auschwitz: A New History* by Laurence Rees, the creative director of history programs for the BBC. Published in conjunction with the BBC documentary series, *Auschwitz: Inside the Nazi State* (2005) and the accompanying, highly useful interactive website, the book provides a compact, readable overview of the camp and its role within the Nazis’ murderous plans. Simultaneously scholarly and accessible, Rees’s book locates the Auschwitz complex within the context of the Nazis’ changing needs and aims as well as the circumstances of the war.

Beginning the history by tracing commandant Rudolf Höß’s circuitous career, Rees highlights the lesser-known beginnings of the camp and its original use for Polish prisoners (pp. 17-21). Drawing largely on secondary literature, Rees describes a general history of the camp and the factors that influenced its particular role at any given time during the war. He reinforces the idea that Auschwitz was not solely a death camp (as it has come to be known in popular imagination), but rather an evolving multifunctional complex: a concentration camp, a forced labor camp and a death camp. As Rees has shown, by examining the history of Auschwitz, we get a vivid picture of the history of the events of the Holocaust more generally. This generality, however, often seem-

ingly leads Rees off-topic (the main focus of the book is Auschwitz, after all); for example, in chapter 4 he dedicates a long section to Danish communal rescue efforts of Jews (although the digression does provide a thought-provoking counterpoint to the rest of the chapter focused on corruption).

One of the most useful aspects of this book—perhaps especially from a pedagogic point of view—is that Rees succinctly summarizes lengthy scholarly debates on complex issues in a matter of a few sentences, providing provocative windows of opportunity for students to further explore these debates. For example, he uses a private but influential exchange between Höß and Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler to highlight the differences between the Nazi and Stalinist regimes, pointing out the dynamism within the upper administrative echelons of the former and the pervasive fear of retribution in the latter (pp. 33-34). In similar ways, Rees covers briefly the controversy over the canonization of Maximilian Kolbe (p. 42), the timing of the decision-making process for the “Final Solution” (pp. 45-46), motivation of the perpetrators (p. 48) and the question of what “ordinary” Germans knew about the fate of the Jews (p. 61).

Although Rees provides a new perspective on and new analysis of Auschwitz (but not necessarily any major new findings), one of the most valuable aspects of his work is his considerable use of testimony: not only from victims and those who witnessed the events, but perpetrators as well. These individual portraits provide glimpses into the horrific conditions within the camp—something that cannot be gleaned from documentation alone. The painful descriptions recounted by survivors and the starkly frightening justifications offered by former camp personnel are most effectively relayed in their original words, and Rees rightly offers little mediation or mitigation.

While Auschwitz-Birkenau has certainly achieved the greatest notoriety in terms of scholarly focus and popular attention to the Holocaust, other prominent camps and sites of persecution have garnered attention as well. The women’s camp Ravensbrück, due to its size and function, has been studied from many angles, for example, with a focus on the persecution of women in the resistance.^[4] Yet before Bernhard Strelbel’s work, most studies focused on only portions of the camp’s history. Thus it is not without a certain need that Strelbel tackled an ambitious study of the Ravensbrück concentration camp. Strelbel’s tome, the elaboration and culmination of his University of Hannover doctoral thesis,

provides a detailed analysis of the Ravensbrück concentration camp. Beginning with a lucid elaboration of the historiography of the camp and the availability (and lack thereof) of sources, Strebel strives to cover nearly every aspect of the camp, including comparisons to other camps in the Nazi system and its location within the context of the Nazi program.

Strebel analyzes the origins of the camp and its initial purposes and dedicates an entire section to describing how it was originally designated under the administration of the “Frauenabteilung” in Auschwitz-Birkenau (p. 340). He traces the establishment of the camp, the decision-making process involved in searching out the location for the camp, the use of prisoner commandos from Sachsenhausen to build the camp structures (p. 44) and the firms involved in its construction—including, for example, Siemens & Halske (pp. 42-47.) Another valuable contribution is the detailed discussion of the camp personnel and their employment records, the incorporation of women into the guard staff and their training, backgrounds and deployment, even down to the use of guard dogs within the camp—which, according to Rudolf Höß, were particularly useful in women’s camps (p. 85). After briefly introducing the circumstances for women’s imprisonment in the Third Reich (pp. 31-41), he delves more deeply into those circumstances in the fourth chapter by describing the different groups of women prisoners, their nationalities, prisoner classification, particular treatment and so on. His analysis of the women’s camp constitutes the heart of the book, and the strength of the organization of the entire work is best seen here. Instead of sticking religiously to a straight chronology, he treats each sub-category of analysis with its own periodization. Although one might find some repetitiveness in this set-up, this organization makes this book an exceedingly useful reference tool, especially for those examining for particular prisoner groups and their living conditions and circumstances within the camp.

Drawing from a large base of archival sources in Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, France, the United States and Great Britain, as well as personal interviews and questionnaires, and building upon a comprehensive bibliography of secondary sources, Strebel successfully carries out an inclusive history of the Ravensbrück camp, including the perhaps more obscure aspects of the camp’s history such as the men’s camp and the “Jugend-*schutzlager Uckermark*.” He also covers the presence of Siemens, its connections to the SS and its use of prisoner labor from Ravensbrück (pp. 384-415). Of particular interest is the section devoted to the *Außenlager* or

subcamps of Ravensbrück, a subject area that generally lacks thorough analyses, and which, in the case of other subcamps, fed the German rearmament effort (pp. 419-458). In this particular study, the fact that the prisoners in question were women provides an interesting view of the role of gender in Nazi considerations for slave labor allocations. Strebel deals with the subcamps of Ravensbrück collectively but with precision.

In sum, Strebel makes a great contribution to the burgeoning literature on the camps—but he takes the rather uncommon route of trying to understand and present the camp in its totality, rather than focusing on one aspect of the camp’s history.

Notes

[1]. Imre Kertész, “Someone Else: A Chronicle of Change,” *Common Knowledge* 10 (2004), p. 316.

[2]. One ambitious effort—focused on uncovering and researching each detention site in the Nazi camp universe, including concentration camps, forced labor camps, military-run camps and those created on occupied and Axis territories—is the camp encyclopedic project led by the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The first volume (which includes the early camps and those run by the SS Economic office) of this seven-volume series is forthcoming.

[3]. Examples of the more prominent studies on Auschwitz-Birkenau, its general history and development, subcamps, prisoner populations, changing economic concerns and so on include Deborah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt, *Auschwitz: 1270 to the Present* (New York: Norton, 1996); Sybille Steinbacher, *Auschwitz. Geschichte und Nachgeschichte* (Munich: Beck, 2004); Danuta Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle* (New York: H. Holt, 1997); Franciszek Piper and Waclaw Dlugoborski, eds., *Auschwitz, 1940-1945: Central Issues in the History of the Camp* (Oswiecim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2000)—among numerous others, including journal publications, memoirs, survivor testimonies, documentaries, electronic resources and so forth, focused on the camp.

[4]. See, for example, Sigrid Jacobeit, *Kreuzweg Ravensbrück. Lebensbilder antifaschistischer Widerstandskämpferinnen* (Leipzig: Verlag für die Frau, 1987). Other studies include: Germaine Tillion, *Ravensbrück* (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1975); Claus Föllberg-Stolberg, *Frauen in Konzentrationslagern. Bergen-Belsen, Ravensbrück* (Bremen: Edition Tem-

men, 1994); Sigrid Jacobeit and Elisabeth BrÄ¼mann-GÄ¼dter, *RavensbrÄ¼ckerinnen* (Berlin: Edition Hentrich, 1995); Christian Bernadac, *Les mannequins nus* (Paris: France-Empire, 1971); and Reinhard Plewe, *Baugeschichte Frauen-Konzentrationslager RavensbrÄ¼ck* (Berlin: Edition Hentrich, 2001).

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