

2. Berliner Colloquium zur Zeitgeschichte

**World of Camps: Marginalization, Social Control and Violence
in Transnational Perspective**

International Conference

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Conference languages: German and English

14-16 April 2011

Interview

Berliner Colloquien zur Zeitgeschichte: Since the 1990s, international research into camps has greatly increased. Within a relatively short period of time there has appeared a number of important historical works that have meanwhile established themselves as standards, particularly regarding Nazi concentration and death camps and the Soviet Gulag. No less important are survey works such as La Siècle des Camps by Joël Kotek and Pierre Rigoulot. What distinguishes your approach?

In the past two decades there has indeed been much fundamental research done, mostly monographs or works with an encyclopedic approach. First and foremost is the two-volume work on Nazi camps edited by Ulrich Herbert, Karin Orth and Christoph Diekmann. Also treating this theme is the nine-volume series *Ort des Terrors* supervised by Barbara Distel and Wolfgang Benz. Others have produced important survey works on the Soviet Gulag, for instance Anne Applebaum and Oleg Khlevniuk, and all of it has enormously broadened our factual knowledge regarding the dimensions and functions of camps under National Socialism and in the Soviet Union, thus helping to inform our various talking points. And yet it is our goal to further widen the research potential, for howsoever well substantiated and knowledgeable the aforementioned studies are, they can only make a limited contribution to our understanding of the camp phenomenon. Similarly the book by Kotek and Rigoulot describes a number of camp systems in the twentieth century, and is encyclopedic in its own way, but ultimately it is not much more than an elaborate list of various systems and practices. Our interest is the *connections* between these various systems, which is why we give priority to questions regarding forerunners, knowledge transfer, and the transformations of function. We are concerned with

national and transnational lines of development, learning processes, dynamization and radicalization. In other words, we believe that the persistence and adaptability of this institution should be examined with greater precision.

BCZ: The legal philosopher Giorgio Agamben called the camps the »nomos« of modernity, a designation which has enjoyed great resonance. You refer to him in the conference materials as well. What importance does this thesis have for your framing of the issue?

It is with good reason that Agamben's thesis has permanently impacted our understanding of camps as symbols of violence in the twentieth century. And it would reward investigation as to whether the camps can in fact be seen as symptoms of modernity. That is why we discussed earlier forms of incarceration at the conference as well as focusing on the historical emergence of the camp as an institution at the end of the nineteenth century. This return to historical forerunners of the early modern era as well as a renewed examination of the context in which camps were engendered on the colonial periphery circa 1900, allows us, in contrast to Agamben, to perceive less of a break than a culmination or consolidation of various traditions. In other sections where later camp systems were discussed, ranging to the present day and Guantanamo, one could also sense a certain disquiet regarding such overarching interpretations as advanced, for example, by Michel Foucault or Erving Goffmann with their notion of the »total institution.« Make no mistake—these explanatory tools are of great importance to our understanding of the camp as an institution. And yet one cannot stave off the nagging impression that they were conceived in hyper awareness of the Nazi death camps. But it is important that we do not think about camps from the perspective of this radical endpoint—an injunction that many of the conference participants were happy to follow in attempting to arrive at a fundamental definition of terms and a historical positioning of the research subject, which comprised death camps, concentration camps, internment camps, prisoner-of-war camps, forced-labor camps and refugee camps among others. It became very clear how difficult and contradictory this undertaking still is—and must be—because the definition of »camp« is a fluid one. It seems to us no accident that particularly younger historians were repeatedly pointing out the interpretive traps when viewing the functions and intentions of camps through the historical prism of Nazi concentration camps. This is also the case in seeking out the long lines of development or historical continuities that supposedly lead inevitably to Auschwitz. For us this means that we must ask new questions so as to do justice to the camp phenomenon and its complex

and sometimes intangible developmental history. It must not be forgotten that this »history« is still a sad reality for millions of individuals to this very day, or that not only dictatorships but also democracies make use of the institution of the camp.

BCZ: So, according to your reading, the common practice of reducing camps to those criminal institutions of the Nazis cannot do justice to the camp's essence. Is this a plea for a comparative approach?

No, this is not a plea for a comparative approach. And this is not about a new edition of the totalitarian debate in another guise. Neither is it about creating a hierarchy of suffering and terror. If we have any concern it is a return to the core concerns of historiography—origin, context and change. A part of this is to place the camp systems in relationship to one another—in the ideal case, in a global-historical perspective – and to elucidate their diverse and changeable functions as well as exploring their national and transnational developments. This doesn't work if Auschwitz implicitly or explicitly serves as the end point of history. It doesn't even work for the history of concentration camps in the Third Reich itself. The extermination camps are not the final issue of a linear development that was initiated in early 1933 with establishment of the »wild camps« for political opponents—even if no one asserts that anymore. Instead there has recently been work dealing more intensively with the functionality and mutability of Nazi concentration camps and thus revealing the variable history of punishment, repression, education and—starting with the war, but primarily after 1941—mass murder and forced labor. These quartering or exclusion camps were of course not the only camps. Scholars are increasingly interested in those Nazi inclusion camps (and the conference gave a first taste of this) through which hundreds of thousands passed in the cause of social integration—Hitler boys and girls, junior lawyers, teachers, *Volksdeutsche*. Despite all the undeniable differences between the inclusion and exclusion camps, it seems to us important that we keep both in view. If one focuses exclusively on the latter camps, one »only« sees the exceptional conditions created by sites that were hermetically sealed from society. But the camps also remained genuine spheres of National Socialist power and its policy of transforming society into an ethnic community. The camps were places designed to accelerate society's transformation into an imagined perfect order.

BCZ: What's next?

The conference confirmed to us that our approach is a sensible way of expanding the perspective of research into camps. The event within the framework of the Berliner Colloquien offered a successful platform for scrutinizing the developmental lines and discussing the phases of both transnational and national dynamization and radicalization—from the early modern period to present-day Guantanamo, from the prisoner-of-war camps of the First World War to the civilian internment camps of the Second World War, from the colonial wars to the wars of decolonization, from the refugee camps of the interwar period to the displaced-persons camps after the Second World War, from totalitarian communalization and educational ideas to the planned destruction of supposedly worthless life. We want to continue these discussions.

Which is why we are pleased that there will be a special issue of *Mittelweg 36* addressing the »World of Camps« in which articles by several of our conference participants will be featured. In order to do justice to the wide spectrum encompassed by our theme and our questions, there will be two volumes of conference proceedings with a pair of focus areas and teams of editors. One volume will deal exclusively with camps from 1900 to 1945, while the other extends the view to the present and mainly focuses on those camp systems in the service of repression. We regard these volumes as worthy and complimentary supplements to the field, and hopefully they will provide further impulse for scholars.