Storytelling
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ACCESSING CAMPSCAPES:
INCLUSIVE STRATEGIES FOR USING EUROPEAN CONFLICTED HERITAGE

iC-ACCESS: Project Presentation /01
Materiality: A Short Theoretical Outline /02
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our team assesses the dynamics of competing postwar memories of Nazi, state socialist and fascist terror at work in European spaces. This can potentially offer new perspectives, beyond the tools used in other disciplines, working towards a more inclusive way of storytelling that integrates different histories and divergent memories at our key sites. To achieve this, we will explore comparatively how ‘heritage as narrative’ is articulated by national, transnational and local experiences and by tropes of resistance, collaboration, occupation, victimhood and perpetration. Our focus is on the processes of signification and appropriation in dominant and counter-historical discourses and memory narratives, and how they might and, more often than not, do overshadow complementary or conflicted perspectives.

We do so through analyses of existing narratives relating to camps (represented in testimonies, literature, historiography, juridical proceedings, public media, memorials and education), by examining of historical discourses and their specific biography in museum display, and through investigation of the sites’ historical transformations in the context of post-1989 transnational and transcultural dynamics of memory. This concerns in particular commemorations of specific victim groups at camps where conflicted histories are silenced (if not erased by monumental redesigns) or spatially appropriated by different memorial communities. We address both the competing memories and politics of identity relating to the legacy of the Second World War and the Holocaust as well as of Eastern European experiences of terror and repression. We also consider the competing use of tropes such as ‘occupation’ and ‘genocide’ after the 1990s Yugoslav Wars, as well as within the current context of the European Union’s eastward enlargements. We also highlight the growing attention placed on long-silenced postcolonial war memories of camps and massacres, which has
resulted in an intensification of a series of memory wars on the issue of ‘the
guilt of nations’. To understand how these narratives function within museum
and media contexts, our team carries out interviews with stakeholders and
curatorial and educational teams, conducts alternative historical research and
a “data mining” of previous research (raw material and mediatized research
outcomes), analyses visitors’ behavior, and, last but not least, investigates the
ontological role of researchers working with such sensitive histories.

On a theoretical level, we adopt an integrated, interdisciplinary, relational
and comparative approach to camps, in order to capture the
dynamics of their development while doing justice to their complex,
layered ontologies. Through this approach, our team treats camps as loci of conflict, competition and contestation articulated through
representations, practices and materialities. We take narratives as
inscribed into landscapes of terror (including camps designed for
hiding crimes and misleading victims) and perpetuated by their discursive,
visual, spatial and material organization as memorial sites. Our research
is focused on the nodes of conflicted histories, contested heritage and
competing memories, where mediated representations of the past relate to
(or collide with) the spatially-framed experiences of visitors.

LIVED HISTORY: TESTIMONIES AND CAMPSCAPES

In the digital age, audiovisual testimonies are not only important sources
for historical research on camps but also integral for visitor
experiences in contemporary memorials. Facilitating empathy towards
victims and deeper, personalized insight into the events, they play crucial
roles for both museum narratives and also dominant constructions of the
past validated by the ‘authority’ of experience and the ‘authenticity’ of
place. By exploring and representing individual testimonies and personal
stories, memory makers and multipliers have a major influence upon what
aspects of history are highlighted and which are, in turn, backgrounded
or foreclosed. Yet, oral history interviews, precisely because of their
idiosyncratic and personal character, also support differentiated
understanding of painful memories of conflict in the twentieth century.
Our team aims to collect, analyse and rethink interview collections
pertaining to our selected camps in order to open up paradigmatic
presentations of their histories, analyse and evaluate museum narratives
and supplement sparse contextual information relating to the sites.

We study the (past, present and future) role of audio and video
 testimonies in safeguarding, understanding and valorizing camps. While
these individual stories can provide accounts of previously
uncharted microhistories or become an additional source regarding
representations of victimhood, agency or responsibility, they also
provide a new cause for reflection and experimentation. In addition to
examination of the ways in which audio and audiovisual testimonies are
being employed in historical research, memory studies, political activism,
public and private institutions, we also examine critically the historical,
social and political contexts of their collection and archivization.

By counterpoising archival collections of personal testimonies with
historical simplifications of conflicted pasts, our team conveys the
multiple perspectives on individual experiences circumscribed to
camps.
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