

## Book Review

**'Nie wieder Auschwitz!' Die Entstehung eines Symbols und der Alltag einer Gedenkstätte 1945–1955.** By Imke Hansen. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag. 2015. 312 pp. €34.99 (paperback).

The field of memory studies already has a history of its own. In recent decades, the number of publications on the national and international remembrance of the Second World War and the Holocaust has grown to such an extent that it is practically unsurveyable. Nevertheless, the field is still open to new turns which, indeed, reveal surprising and innovative insights. One of the latest and most promising developments is the revival of micro-history in the realm of memory culture. Such a perspective highlights the complex interplay between discourses and everyday practices. It also widens the scope beyond the national level or the 'official' debates and directs it towards regional and, especially, local settings. Now this trend has at last reached the European commemorative memory symbol par excellence: Auschwitz. In the publication of her 2012 dissertation at the University of Hamburg, Imke Hansen takes a close look at the daily routine of the memorial site and museum on the former camp ground from its liberation to its establishment in 1955.

The first advantage of the book is that it is based on a large set of primary sources from the archive of the national museum Auschwitz-Birkenau and other archives. This extensive material comprises correspondence, exhibition outlines, minutes of informal and official meetings, sketches, photographs and more. It enables Hansen to present a dense reconstruction of 'Auschwitz in the making'. The archival sources are complemented by a variety of Polish press articles as well as German, English and Polish research literature.

Another important feature of Hansen's work is that she examines a variety of historical protagonists throughout the book, including not only political institutions such as the Department for Museums and Monuments of Polish Martyrdom (renamed in the late 1940s), the Council for the Protection of Struggle and Martyrdom Sites, several victims' associations and the Historical Committee of the Jewish Historical Institute, but also the many actors in the memorial site's everyday life: museum staff, and different visitor groups, local farmers, grave robbers and others. In fact, Hansen points out how the latter protagonists, first and foremost guides and visitors, exerted a strong, hitherto much underrated influence on the actual historical representation of Auschwitz-Birkenau and how several contradictory appropriation processes shaped the place on a daily basis. As a consequence, personnel changes, such as the death of the director Tadeusz Wąsowisz and the departure of his successor Stefan Wiernik, mark important breaking points in Hansen's periodization.

One essential result of the study is that Auschwitz, in its first postwar decade, was to a considerable extent a pluralistic place interweaving many narrative strands apparently rather antagonistic on the national level. This plurality was particularly present in the first phase from 1945 until 1947. The memorial practices in the first years, from the 'wild museum' until the official opening ceremony in June 1947, showed a 'harmonic coexistence' (p. 103) of Communist, nationalist, catholic and other narratives. However, Polish former political inmates clearly dominated the arrangement of the first exhibition.

Hansen's second phase begins with a controversial press debate in the summer of 1947 and proceeds with the revision of the exhibition by a temporary 'historical committee' up to

1950. This period was characterized by a growing ideological influence from the Communist party on the historical representation of Auschwitz in general and the memorial site in particular. The Communist 'fight against the cult of suffering' and the prominence of the 'fight for peace' brought about massive interventions in the design of the museum. Yet the exhibition and the commemoration practices still included various syncretistic moments.

The third phase stretches from a new revision of the museum's exhibition, which was now heavily marked by a Stalinist impetus, to a minor scandal concerning 'inappropriate' behaviour by a group of former inmates in the year 1953. Though the staff continued to tackle most controversies in a relatively non-ideological manner, the inauguration of a new director introduced a new political division within the museum itself. Nevertheless, Hansen stresses that the actual changes in the museum's overall concept still remained relatively minor.

During the years 1954 and 1955 there was a gradual 'de-Stalinization'. The museum's director was replaced and the exhibition experienced its third revision. In addition, a certain 'internationalization' of Auschwitz's historical representation set in.

In her analysis, the author pays some attention to different concepts of space implied in the usage patterns of the camp area and its facilities; this issue is certainly open to closer examination in the future. In any case, Hansen's work gives a glimpse of how promising the combination of micro-historical approaches and the analysis of (implicit) spatial concepts can be for memory studies in general.

All in all, Imke Hansen has written a very readable book that provides new insights and a concise and fair analysis of the everyday history of one of the most debated memory sites in Western culture.

doi:10.1093/gerhis/ghv064

Dirk Thomaschke  
*University of Oldenburg, Germany*