
Reviewed by Paul Moore

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The present volume adds to what already represents a monumental achievement in what has come to be known as ‘KZ-Geschichte’, namely the nine-volume series Der Ort des Terrors, itself complemented by the fourteen-volume Geschichte der Konzentrationslager 1933–1945, their combined aim nothing less than a complete history of the Nazi concentration camps. Wolfgang Benz / Barbara Distel (eds.), Der Ort des Terrors. Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager, 9 Bde., München 2005–2009. The book under review arose out of the September 2010 conference at the Topographie des Terrors in Berlin, marking the completion of the former series by exploring Nazi ‘coercion camps’ more generally (p. 9). The conference papers have been faithfully presented here, indeed their se-
quence in the book follows the running order in which they were presented on the day. The sense the reader has when reading the book, that the main impetus behind its conception had been simply to deal with topics not yet covered in the aforementioned series, is perhaps half-conceded by the editors when they write that the intent with this volume is “Desiderate [...] zu zeigen und auf den weiteren erheblichen Forschungsbedarf, aber auch auf erinnerungspolitische Lücken aufmerksam zu machen” (p. 9).

In keeping with the memorialisation imperative alluded to above, the volume presents seventeen articles plus two survivor testimonies, the latter pertaining to Belzec and the Minsk ghetto. The contributors, overwhelmingly German scholars at German institutions, vary largely in terms of their experience in the field, with authors of decades-long experience sharing space with doctoral students. Their essays are spread across five broadly-defined subsections devoted to ‘Regi
gen’, ‘Interessen und Kategorien’, ‘Täter’, ‘Forschung, Ahndung, Rezeption’ and, somewhat strangely given this is avowedly the theme of the volume as a whole, ‘NS-Zwangslager’. As with all edited collections, the standard varies, and it is unsurprising that among the best-realised essays are those covering aspects of topics which have already been the subject of book-length treatments by the same authors, such as the contributions of Marc Buggeln and Habbo Knoch.

The explicitly-stated rationale behind the use of the ‘Zwangslager’ paradigm here is that, the editors argue, for all the diversity encompassed by the term, ‘Zwangslager’ were nevertheless perceived as concentration camps, narrowly defined, by their victims, as well as often, in practice, being little different from the Konzentrationslager proper in terms of their organisation, guard force, and conditions inside (p. 9). Yet some readers may feel that rather too many differences are being collapsed here, even as the authors exhaustively enumerate the detail of shifts in institutional control, prisoner population, and so on.

While space precludes detailed discussion of all of the essays here, some examples may suffice. Thomas Irmer examines the over 200 ‘Arbeitserziehungsstätten’ (AEIs) in the Reich and the occupied territories combined, holding some half a million prisoners; a neglected area of research, within which Irmer’s specific subject, the six AELs located within pre-existing concentration camps, is still less known. The key feature of the AEL, Irmer contends, was that their prisoners were released after a brief spell; yet even this, arguably their only major unifying factor, was not consistently applied (p. 80). Such exceptions to the rule inevitably raise questions of definitions; if ultimately the only common denominator of the ‘Zwangslager’ was that they operated outside legal norms, arguably regular prisons should have been included within this rubric, not least because they, too, shared at times those ‘concentration camp-like’ conditions elsewhere cited as decisive by the editors (p. 9).

Mario Wenzel, considering forced labour camps for Jewish prisoners in occupied Poland and the Soviet Union, notes some 750–800 such camps existed in 1939–44, holding an estimated total of 265,000 Jewish men, women and children. In common with other essays included here, Wenzel’s article focuses strongly upon the institutions, chains of command, and responsible agencies involved in running these camps. Again the reader is struck by dissimilarities with the concentration camps. The make-up of guard forces in these camps corresponded to the lack of a central coordinating and decision-making authority; a shortage of personnel meant that some camps were left unguarded overnight (pp. 240–1), in Krakow ‘most’, Wenzel writes, were left unattended (p. 245) – inconceivable for concentration camps or death camps in the same period. Wenzel carefully delineates the variety of organisations contributing to the guard forces of the camps, with a glut of
figures and statistics but nothing on the back-
ground and motivation of guards, despite the title
of the article seeming to gesture in that direction.

In one of the briefer articles in the book, Bar-
bara Distel discusses criminal and ‘asocial’ prison-
ers as a category, noting the continuing lack of
knowledge regarding such victims of the Nazi
regime (p. 196). Such claims are true up to a point
– new research, perhaps published too late to be
considered by Distel, is currently expanding our
knowledge of criminals and ‘asocials’ in the
camps. See for example Julia Hörath, Terrorin-
strument der "Volksgemeinschaft"? KZ-Haft für
"Asoziale“ und "Berufsverbrecher“ 1933 bis
1937/38, in: Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft
60 (2012), pp. 513–532. The assertion is less sus-
tainable when one considers studies published
outside Germany, such as Victoria Harris’ work on
prostitutes. Victoria Harris, The Role of the Con-
centration Camps in the Nazi Repression of Prosti-
tutes, 1933–9, in: Journal of Contemporary History
45 (2010), pp. 675–698. Distel cites exclusively Ger-
man-language scholarship published – with one
exception – in Germany, and her article largely
summarises the findings of those works, offering
fewer new insights on the substantive points she
raises: why, for example, do criminal prisoners re-
main (even) less studied than their ‘asocial’ coun-
terparts? Distel usefully highlights the role played
by social historians in bringing this aspect of con-
centration camp history to light (p. 198), remarks
which serve as an important reminder also of the
continuing need to integrate the history of the
camps with the wider social history of the Nazi
regime.

Angelika Benz’s essay, on juridical ‘punish-
ment’ (Ahndung) of the Holocaust, sees the major-
ity of the text devoted to the trial of former Sob-
bor guard John Demjanjuk, also the subject of her
book, published near simultaneously with this
collection. Angelika Benz, Der Henkersknecht. Der
Prozess gegen John (Iwan) Demjanjuk in München, Berlin 2011. The trial ran from Novem-
ber 2009 to May 2011, during which the 89 year
old ‘lag 18 Monate lang in einem Spezialbett
neben der Richterbank’ (p. 310); Benz effectively
conveys the often undignified scenes in the court-
room. The author’s high degree of personal in-
vestment in this case is manifest throughout, and
her article offers extensive quotes and detailed
descriptions of proceedings; her own presence
throughout as an observer is recorded via a rare
appearance of the first person in a German aca-
demic article (p. 316). Yet such an approach also
lends a highly descriptive character to the essay,
and the strong tone of moral outrage – however
justified given the crimes discussed in court – is
not always matched by sustained analysis. Tanta-
lising references to the protests such trials can oc-
casion (slogans on placards have included ‘Lasst
die wehrlosen Nazi-Greise in Ruhe’, and, ‘Nur
Deutsche können Kriegsverbrecher sein’) are nei-
ther explained nor contextualised (p. 304). How
Demjanjuk’s nationality (Ukrainian, rather than
German) impacted upon perceptions of the trial is
not a focus here; nor is the role of the age and
health of the defendant, acknowledged in passing,
in conditioning reactions (p. 317). Not least given
Benz’s emphasis on the pedagogic role of such tri-
als, an international perspective would have
added depth to the discussion of media reaction
to the Demjanjuk case, which prompted a great
deal of coverage in Britain and the US, as well as
in Germany.

These essays, and this volume, thus encap-
sulate both the considerable strengths and impor-
tant weaknesses of ‘KZ-Geschichte’ more generally.
The essays here are encyclopaedic in the best
sense of the word, scrupulously presenting a
wealth of detail on little-known topics. But some
also tend towards the encyclopaedic in a more
problematic respect, with the facts and figures ap-
parently coming at the expense of sustained anal-
ysis and contextualisation; a resolutely narrow fo-
cus sees the camps rather isolated from their so-
cial and political context. Nevertheless, the vari-
ous contributors should be praised for the feats of
research their essays represent, and have produced a landmark work that is at once an end and a beginning: a welcome coda to the multi-volume histories already published which, as the authors themselves state, also points towards exciting new areas in the history of extra-legal terror under the Nazi regime.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/


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