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978-0-521-06448-4 - Legacies of Dachau: The Uses and Abuses of a Concentration Camp, 1933-2001

Harold Marcuse

Excerpt

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Dachau: past, present, future

Each of the three ways of dealing with the past is suited to one kind of soil and one climate only: in every other context it turns into a destructive weed. If the creators of great things need the past at all, they will take control of it by means of monumental historiography. Someone who, in contrast, likes to remain in familiar, venerable settings will care for the past as an antiquarian historian. Only someone who feels crushed by a present concern and wants to throw off the burden at any cost has a need for critical, that is judging and condemning historiography.

Friedrich Nietzsche, in *On the Uses and Abuses of History for the Present* (1874)

Historians have long known that each age creates its own history out of the raw material of the past, according to what it sees as its own present needs and future goals. As the Nazi concentration camps were liberated in the spring of 1945, they became part of that raw material of the past. Although in many of the former concentration camps some efforts were made to preserve a few remains as a record of what had happened there, most of them were first devoted to other purposes, such as emergency housing for liberated inmates and refugees, or internment camps for German suspects. Not until the 1950s did concerted efforts begin to preserve them for educational purposes, and those efforts often did not bear fruit until the 1960s, and in some cases not until the 1970s or 1980s. Depending on the political situation at the time, as well as on the influence and composition of the groups and agencies vying for control of the sites, the end results varied widely. Thus the history of each former concentration camp reflects not only the political and cultural history of its host country, but also more specifically the changing values and goals held by various groups in that society.

From the outset, the Dachau concentration camp occupied an especially prominent place in the Nazi concentration camp system. It was the first camp to be set up in 1933, and it was the first to be under the direct supervision of Heinrich Himmler, who later controlled the entire concentration and extermination camp network. In April 1934, when Dachau's commandant was appointed "Inspector of Concentration Camps," the

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Dachau system became a model for all other Nazi concentration camps. The flagship concentration camp also served as a “school of violence” for concentration camp leaders, with eighteen of the top concentration camp commandants and *Lagerführer* (head of the prisoner area of the camp) receiving their initial training there, including Adolf Eichmann, the bureaucrat who masterminded the industrially organized extermination of the Jews, and Rudolf Höss, the infamous commandant of Auschwitz.¹

Dachau was also the camp where the Nazi regime’s most prominent prisoners, including chancellors and cabinet ministers from occupied countries, as well as high-ranking religious leaders, were incarcerated. Dachau’s postwar notoriety was ensured by its liberation a week before the end of the war, before it could be destroyed or evacuated, and just after an intensive Allied media blitz to publicize the atrocities in the Nazi camps had begun. Finally, since Dachau was located on the western side of the postwar “Iron Curtain,” it was accessible to tourists from all over the world, and susceptible to the lobbying efforts of local, regional, and international groups. (In Eastern Europe, governments held a monopoly on the forms of memorialization.) For all of these reasons, Dachau is especially suited to serve as a representative case study of broader Western and particularly West German uses and abuses of the Nazi past after 1945.

In the first fifty years since the Dachau concentration camp was liberated in April 1945, more than 21 million people visited the site, 19 million of them – 90 percent – since the former Nazi camp was designated as a memorial in 1965. Visitors go to Dachau to learn more about the history of the concentration camp, and they find a museum and terrain that have been designed to convey certain lessons about it. Few of them know how the site was used in the twenty years before it was turned into a memorial, nor are they aware of the many choices that were made in the creation and modification of the present memorial site. How did the Dachau memorial site come to be? What are the lessons it teaches, and who decided how to convey them? How are the site’s messages received by visitors, and what short- and long-term effects does a visit to the site have upon them? This book was written to provide answers to those questions.

The Dachau camp, 1916–2000: A brief history

Before delving into the specifics of the Dachau memorial site’s past, an overview of the history and layout of the site reveals important aspects of its reconstruction.

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The origins of the Dachau concentration camp reach back to World War I, when the Bavarian government decided to locate a gunpowder and munitions factory on the outskirts of this town, on a railroad connection about 15 km from downtown Munich (see ill. 1). The factories, company housing, and workers' barracks were shut down under the disarmament terms of the Versailles Treaty, and they stood unused during the 1920s. When Hitler's Nazi Party was looking for facilities to locate camps to neutralize its opponents after it gained control of the national government in early 1933, the abandoned armaments works near the birthplace and headquarters of the party offered an ideal solution. Two years later Hitler and Himmler decided to make the concentration camp system a permanent feature of their new state. A number of new camps were constructed from scratch, beginning with Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald. In 1937–8 the Dachau prisoners' compound was completely rebuilt, and new barracks were added to the SS portion of the camp to house two divisions of SS military troops (ill. 3). Thus by the end of the war the Dachau concentration camp was a huge complex, more than one square kilometer in size.

The Dachau camp's postwar history can be divided into five main phases. The first was the shortest, lasting only three years, from July 1945 until the summer of 1948. During that time the US army used the concentration and SS camps to intern up to 30,000 officers from Nazi Party organizations and the German army (ill. 8). In the Dachau internment camp, the US army conducted a series of trials of the personnel of various concentration camps (ill. 11). In early 1948, as the wartime alliance between the Soviet Union and the Western powers broke down, the United States quickly brought its program of "denazification" to an end in order to increase German support for the West.

The second phase of the former concentration camp's history began when the US military government returned the compound to the Bavarian government in 1948. The Bavarian government first decided to use its portion of the former concentration camp as a "correctional institution," but soon changed its mind. Faced with a refugee crisis, as ethnic Germans were expelled and fled from the Soviet bloc, in April 1948 the Bavarian parliament decided instead to convert the prison camp into a residential settlement. Thus in the fall of 1948 the prisoners' barracks were transformed into apartments and stores for about 2,000 Germans from Czechoslovakia (ills. 3, 23–5). This settlement, officially named Dachau-East, remained in the former prison camp for fifteen years until 1964. Its infrastructure evolved gradually. The prison walls and barbed wire were replaced by storage sheds, and some of the watchtowers were torn down (ill. 26). The

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main camp street was paved and street lights installed (ill. 27). Only the crematorium compound remained accessible as a designated relic of the camp. However, Bavarian government officials removed an exhibition on display in the larger of the two crematorium buildings in 1953, and attempted – unsuccessfully – to have the building torn down in 1955 (ills. 5, 18).

Increasing public interest in the site during the late 1950s and early 1960s helped to facilitate the transition to the Dachau camp's third postwar function: a memorial site. In 1962, after the annual number of visitors had tripled from about 100,000 to over 300,000 (see ill. 73), the Bavarian government finally yielded to pressure from a lobby of surviving camp inmates and agreed to maintain the former camp as a memorial site. During the conversion, completed in 1965, the government had all of the prisoners' barracks and several other historical buildings torn down, and new monuments and buildings erected in their place. Only a few icons of the camp remained: the gatehouse and watchtowers, the service building with a tract of individual cells, two reconstructed barracks, and the crematorium–gas chamber building (ill. 4). With the dedication of Protestant and Jewish memorial buildings in 1967 and a large memorial sculpture in 1968, the memorial site and museum designed by survivors within constraints dictated by the Bavarian government reached their final form.

The decades from 1968 to 1998 build a fourth phase of Dachau's postwar history. It is characterized by stagnation in the physical appearance of the site, but by dramatic changes in the visitor demographics. During the 1970s the total number of visitors tripled again to nearly 1 million. At the same time, the average age dropped precipitously, with the age group under 25 – born long after the end of the war – comprising a majority of visitors. Except for the addition to the tiny administrative staff of nine secondary school teachers on a rotating basis in 1983, few changes were made to accommodate this group until 1996. By that time a sufficient number of members of the postwar generations had become established in local, state, and national political life. At the end of the 1990s a radical revision of the infrastructure at the site was begun. A visitors' center was planned, additional bus lines improved public access, an overnight youth center was chartered and built, and a new multimedia museum with supplementary exhibitions and classrooms was designed. This book concludes with a glimpse forward to a new, fifth phase of Dachau's postwar history: the memorial site as an experiential educational space for people increasingly distant from the events that transpired there.

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What will visitors find when they travel to the Dachau memorial site after the current construction is completed in 2001? (When this book went to press in 2001, bureaucratic and conceptual difficulties made the scheduled completion date of November 2001 increasingly unlikely. Readers should thus take “2001” to mean “when the renovations begun in 1998 are complete.”) Especially for foreigners, who make up about two-thirds of Dachau’s visitors, a trip to the memorial site begins with the discovery that the name Dachau signifies more than just a Nazi concentration camp. Dachau is also a city of about 35,000 residents that was established more than 1,000 years before it became home to one of Germany’s most notorious concentration camps. (Its pre-camp history is briefly recounted in chapter 1.) This “other Dachau,” as some of its residents call it, dominates the approach to the memorial site. Whether visitors take the S-Bahn from Munich (line 2 of the fast and efficient commuter train departs every twenty minutes for the twenty-minute trip) and arrive at Dachau station, or whether they drive from Munich on local roads or the autobahn, they find adequate signage directing their way (ill. 77).²

This was not always the case: for decades local and regional officials tried to make the former Dachau camp difficult to find (ill. 78). The local populace’s changing opinions of the memorial site is one of the important narrative threads running through this book. For instance, in 1955 Dachau county’s representative in the Bavarian parliament tried to have the crematorium torn down in order to discourage visitors. When his initiative failed, he had all directional signs to the former camp removed. Visitors in the 1950s and 1960s often reported receiving evasive answers to their requests for directions to the former Dachau camp. From the 1950s to the 1990s the single bus line traversing the three kilometers between Dachau’s train station and the camp made only nine round trips between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m., with gaps of more than an hour during the peak midday period.³

After 2001 the new entrance to the memorial site will lead past the site of the commandant’s villa, built in 1938 and torn down in 1987, to a visitors’ reception center in one of the few remaining buildings from the World War I munitions factory that was converted to create the original Dachau camp in 1933. The relocation of the entrance reflects an important feature of what West Germans learned about Nazi atrocities after 1945: except for the first short period immediately after the war, the perpetrators of those atrocities were hidden or ignored until the 1990s. The Dachau concentration camp was originally four times larger than the prison compound that

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has become the memorial site (see ill. 1). The huge SS camp adjacent to the prisoners' compound included housing and facilities not only for hundreds of camp guards, but for many thousands of SS military troops as well. For example, a major SS hospital, the payroll office for more than a million SS men, and numerous production facilities were located there. (The SS, short for *Schutzstaffel* or "protective formation," was founded as Hitler's personal bodyguard detachment in the 1920s. In the 1940s it grew to an organization of over a million men. The two most notorious of its many branches were the "death's head" division – the concentration camp guards – and the *Waffen* or weapon SS – the fighting troops.)

For decades this SS section of the original concentration camp was concealed behind a cement wall and a high earthen barrier. From 1945 to 1971 the former SS camp served as the US army's Eastman Barracks. Since 1971 it has been the home of a detachment of the Bavarian state police. The original entrance to the prisoners' compound, which came through the SS camp, was accessible only from inside the memorial site. Since 1965 visitors have had to enter the memorial site through a breach in the wall on the opposite side of the camp (see ills. 2, 4, 80). The 1998 redesign plan recommended giving a corner of the Bavarian state police compound to the memorial site, so that the original concentration camp entrance route could be restored.

Even though the Bavarian police demolished a majority of the buildings between 1978 and 1992, the SS part of the camp still contains far more original buildings than the memorial site itself. The central SS pay-processing bunker, the dispensary, and several factory halls and warehouses are all still there, as is the triangular swimming pond that is now stocked for recreational fishing (ill. 1). What astonished me most, when a retired state policeman showed me around the complex in 1991, was the *Holländerhalle*, a large hall named for the Dutch rag-cutting machines used when the complex was a munitions plant during World War I. Inside, in neat rows angled to drive out of the wide doors in a hurry, were dozens of riot police vans and imposing trucks with water cannon (ill. 67). But this adjacent historical site is off limits to the visitors of the memorial site. Its presence is only revealed in rare incidents such as in 1981, when tear gas from a house-storming exercise drifted over to the museum (ill. 68).

From the reception center at the edge of the former SS camp visitors will go on to the *Jourhaus*, the entrance building of the prisoners' compound, through the iron gate inscribed "Arbeit macht frei": "Work makes free" (see ill. 15). This is one of the last surviving relics of what I call the "clean" concentration camp, a Nazi fiction that situated the concentration camps in

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their plan to create a pure Germanic master race by using hard labor to “educate” recalcitrant Aryans.

The guiding principle of the latest renovation was to re-create as closely as possible the path taken by inmates entering the camp. Traversing that same path is indeed a powerful way to help visitors to imagine and identify with the inmates’ horrific experience, and thus be motivated to avoid the behaviors that made the atrocities of KZ Dachau possible. However, except for this entrance inscription, all traces of this Nazi fiction have been effaced, including the prison library and several didactic sayings painted on roofs and walls throughout the camp.

Entering visitors see a large expanse of barren, stony ground straight ahead, an angular black monument and the museum building on the right, and two drab gray barracks with more bare, gravelly ground on the left (ills. 2, 4). The impression of a barren, sanitized place predominates. A closer look to the left reveals two long rows of low concrete rectangles behind the two barracks. Between them two rows of poplar trees sway in the wind, and another couple of hundred meters further back rise the geometric shapes of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish memorial buildings at the northern edge of the site.

After 2001 some of the concrete rectangles may carry black poles marking the outlines of a few barracks. The memorial site redesigners of 1998 deemed the functions of those particular barracks especially noteworthy: for example, the infirmary barrack where prisoners were used as guinea pigs in medical experiments. In the early 1960s the Dachau survivors designing the first memorial site wanted to leave all of the original barracks intact, but the Bavarian government demolished them in 1964 to save renovation and upkeep costs. In order to document some of the specific features of the site, in 1985 and again after 1999 a total of about thirty-five large signs and tablets with drawings, texts and historical photographs were placed around the camp (ill. 83). They are a feeble attempt to convey a sense of the original appearance of this barren expanse.

Dachau has changed a great deal since its concentration camp days. There are no corpses, no inmates, no dogs, no guards, no living relics at this site. Antiseptic gray with a few touches of green and black predominate. There are no smells – of sweat, excrement, or death, so prominent in the narratives of the liberators – and no sounds except the feet of other tourists treading on the gravel, or perhaps an occasional guide giving explanations to a tour group. Barely a handful of camp survivors still give tours, and their voices will fall silent soon. Survivors, local volunteers, and a few public school teachers on special assignment began giving regular

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tours in the early 1980s. By the end of the millennium, many hundreds of tours were offered each year, the vast majority of them by volunteers. Before that, individuals and groups were left to themselves to explore the terrain. After 2001 visitors should be able to rent tape-recorded tours in several languages at the reception center.

The tour of the site usually begins with the main museum in the former service building at this end of the camp. The almost 200 meter long C-shaped building, with its 70 meter long east and west wings, was built when the Dachau concentration camp was remade in 1937–8. Originally, on the gatehouse side it contained workshops and rooms for registering and shaving incoming prisoners (ill. 2). In the long middle tract were the boiler room, showers, kitchen, and laundry. Clothing and belongings taken from prisoners upon entry were stored in the east wing. The post-2001 exhibition will illustrate an important feature of Dachau's postwar history: as the past recedes in time, it becomes increasingly necessary to provide explicit re-creations of that past. When the first exhibition in this building was designed in 1965, experts deemed it sufficient to present enlargements of documents and photographs illustrating important characteristics of the concentration camp system as exemplified by Dachau. According to the 1996 recommendations, the original functions of the existing buildings and rooms should be explicitly marked and coordinated with the exhibitions they contain. By reversing the usual left-to-right direction of the museum, visitors will retrace the route traversed by inmates arriving at the camp.

Another planned 2001 innovation is the inclusion of information about hitherto marginalized groups of prisoners, such as Sinti and Roma (gypsies), homosexuals, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Christian clergy. Exemplary individual biographies help visitors to empathize with their values, fates, and the choices they made. Corresponding to the great public respect accorded to camp survivors since the 1990s (their status climbed steeply in the 1980s after a very slow ascent from rock bottom in the 1950s), an exhibit of artworks by camp survivors may be mounted as well. As a final 2001 innovation, in consideration of the decades that have passed since 1945, the museum is to include a section retracing the postwar history of the site.

A memorial site exists to document a specific period of history, but it also uses the power of authenticity and location to help its visitors form an emotional connection to that history. Unfortunately, most opportunities to document the postwar uses of the Dachau camp were lost. For instance, a church built by interned SS men in November 1945 stood in front of the

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entry gate until 1963 (ills. 3, 42). It was torn down because it had not been a part of the concentration camp, and probably also because it presented a potentially confusing aspect of the perpetrators' biographies: their rapid postwar conversion into pious men. If this church had been left standing, it might have helped future generations to understand their own relationship to the concentration camp. For Germans that relationship includes having parents and grandparents who grew up in a time when dedicated Nazi henchmen metamorphosed en masse to nominal West German democrats. In spite of the realization that original relics vastly increase the educational impact of the museum, in 2000 the policymakers were divided over whether to preserve some post-1945 murals discovered in a portion of the service building used as a mess hall by the US army. These paintings depict scenes such as a Hawaiian sunset and the Manhattan skyline (ill. 88). Although the murals would provide a powerful backdrop for the exhibit on the postwar uses of the camp, some German pedagogues advocate their demolition. They may fear that this postwar relic might detract from the experience of the former concentration camp they want future generations to have.

After exiting the museum and walking past the jagged black bronze international memorial, most visitors walk down the tree-lined central camp street to the back, where the religious memorials and the crematorium compound are. These poplar trees were planted along the central street in the 1980s to replace the aged camp-era originals that were felled in 1964 (ills. 27, 29). Visitors walk between thirty-two long, narrow, rock-filled concrete rectangles, often referred to as barrack foundations, although they were poured in 1965. The original barracks, built in 1937–8, were only designed to last fifteen years and had no foundations worth mentioning. By the early 1950s, according to SS chief Himmler's calculation, Nazi Germany would have won the war and "purified" its domain of unwanted people, making concentration camps unnecessary.

Until 2001, visitors were not to be given any information about the different functions and residents of the individual barracks (see ill. 2). The first four barracks at the end nearest the museum are not numbered. On the left was the camp canteen, where "privileged" prisoners could buy food and a few necessities, the camp office, where the index of inmates was kept, and the camp library, where privileged inmates could check out books. The canteen had a porchlike entrance in the front, which has not been reconstructed. For a time Kurt Schumacher, a Social Democratic politician who narrowly missed becoming West Germany's first Chancellor in 1949, was the prisoner librarian. On the east side were the two infirmary

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barracks; the last quarter section of the second one was the morgue where each day's harvest of dead was collected for transportation to the crematorium.

There was also a clear hierarchy among the barracks, depending on the distance to the service building. Germans were housed in "blocks" (as the barracks were called in camp jargon) 2 and 4, where the walk to the kitchen with the heavy vats of soup was not so long. On the right, block 15 was known as the "punishment block." Enclosed by a separate barbed wire cage, it was for the true unfortunates in the camp, mostly Jews. One used to see flowers left at some barrack numbers by survivors who had spent time in them. As the ranks of the survivors dwindled, so too did this living tradition. At the far (north) end of the prisoners' compound, blocks 26 and 28 were the priests' barracks. Block 26, with its own chapel (ill. 41), housed a few hundred German clergymen, block 28 about three times as many Polish priests.

Visitors arrive next at the ensemble of religious memorials at the north end of the memorial site. These buildings illustrate another important feature of the memorial site's history, which is also a fundamental principle of memorialization: memorials reflect the concerns of the living, not the history of the dead. The creation of this religious ensemble began with the dedication of a tall cylindrical Catholic chapel "of Christ's Mortal Agony" in 1960 and the opening of a Carmelite convent outside the north wall in 1964 (ills. 43, 45, 47). The ring of trees and grass around the chapel is a last testimony to the plan to turn the memorial site into a park (ill. 46). The two Catholic memorials were followed in 1967 by a half-underground concrete Protestant "Church of Reconciliation" and a cavernous, semisubterranean Jewish memorial (ills. 63, 64).

The towering Catholic chapel symbolizes the transcendence of earthly suffering through Christ's sacrifice, while the Protestant church seeks to foster reconciliation through spiritual and intellectual reflection (it contains a reading room staffed by volunteers). The Jewish building is not a house of God, but merely a place to mourn the dead. The international memorial in front of the museum, too, reflects the interpretation of its makers as much as or more than it does the history of the camp (ill. 59). The memorial sculpture is composed of sticklike figures stretched between the strands of a barbed wire fence. It embodies the camp as a site of senseless mass death, the way most of Dachau's predominantly non-German inmates experienced it in the 1940s. Non-Jewish German survivors, mostly political prisoners, wished to erect a tall but fragile spire of resistance, but they were overruled by survivors from other countries (ill. 60).