

Commemorating Hell. The Public Memory of Mittelbau-Dora. Gretchen Schafft and Gerhard Zeidler. Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2011, Pp. 216. AUD \$35.95

In disciplines such as Anthropology, History, Sociology, and Geography, work on the aftermath of genocide has often focused on the politics of memory. That work is frequently place-based, exploring the role of monuments, memorials and landscapes as sites of contestation over visions of the past. 'Commemorating Hell' is a welcome addition to this body of work. It focuses on the Mittelbau-Dora camp and is co-authored by Gretchen Schafft, an Applied Anthropologist in Residence at the American University, and Gerhard Zeidler, a former archivist at Mittelbau-Dora concentration camp memorial, and details the way in which the memory of the site has changed over time as a *Gedenkstätte*: 'a place of remembrance' (2011: ix).

Mittelbau-Dora operated as a slave labour camp near the town of Nordhausen in the Harz Mountains in northern Germany from August 1943 until April 1945, when it was liberated by the US army. Originally a sub-camp of the better known Buchenwald, the camp was administered independently from 1944 and became the centre of a network of sub-camps in the region. The camp is perhaps primarily known as the site of the manufacture of V1 and V2 missiles, the German weapons of vengeance (*Vergeltungswaffe*) designed for bombing British cities and the French and Belgian coast after the D-Day landings. Allied bombing necessitated the expansion of underground tunnels where rocket-production took place. Conditions in the Mittelbau-Dora camp were brutal; there was a high mortality rate with approximately twenty thousand of the estimated sixty thousand prisoners worked to death or murdered. The majority of the camp inmates were political prisoners. It was not until towards the end of the war that Jews from Gross-Rosen and Auschwitz were brought to the camp as part of the liquidation of those camps in the face of the advancing Soviet forces.

The authors briefly outline their approach, which they situate within a 'subaltern' framework. For them, this means a social history approach 'from the bottom up' (2011: xi) which emphasises unofficial, 'outsider' views through which to gain an appreciation of the site's post-war life, but which also links to the ideological frameworks that guided its management and interpretation. The book is an attempt, in Young's terms, to restore the 'biography' of the memorial, examining the politics of memory and the relationship between the management of the site and the changing political contexts (Young 1993). It also relates to the work of Sharon Macdonald on heritage 'assemblages' which point us to the ways in which the sites themselves can become mediators of memory (Macdonald 2009). Indeed this is a useful book to read in conjunction with Macdonald's work on sites of atrocity in the former West Germany.

‘Commemorating Hell’ starts with a useful, albeit brief and necessarily partial overview of the rise of Hitler, the administration of the concentration camp system and the Holocaust in general. Further chapters chart the changing political context of the camp and how this was reflected in changes to interpretation, use and management. This is divided into three main phases: the immediate post-war era and memorial under the Socialist German Democratic Republic (GDR), the changes to the memorial brought about by the reunification of Germany, and the contemporary memorial.

One of the most successful chapters deals with the immediate post-war context, ‘Shaping the New Land and its Memories.’ It covers the initial Allied bombing of the town of Nordhausen, the liberation of the camps and the American removal of material that was considered useful to the development of their space and rocket program, before the area was transferred to Soviet forces in 1945. The authors convincingly argue that the widespread destruction of nearby Nordhausen by Allied bombing immediately prior to the liberation of the camp by the Americans had a profound impact on the immediate post war reaction to the site, blurring the lines between perpetrator and victim. Those familiar with the politics of memory at other Holocaust sites, such as Auschwitz and Auschwitz-Birkenau, will be familiar with the way that the narrative of the site was subsumed within Cold War politics and the ideology of the ‘shared fight’ of Communism against National Socialism. The camp was considered part of the capitalist military machine and interpretation at the site followed guidelines from the Socialist Unity Party who ruled the GDR from 1949 to 1990. This included, for example, showing prominent Nazis who were now working for the West German Government. Excluded from interpretation were themes that did not fit with this wider narrative, including the thousands of Jews who came to the camp in the later stages of the war from Auschwitz and Gross Rosen. During this period, the camp was officially a ‘*mahn und gedenkstätte*’ - a place of admonishment and remembrance. This name highlights the ethical understanding of the site; a meaning that is missing from the English ‘memorial’.

In ‘The Wall comes Down’ the authors tie the site into the changing European landscape, particularly the impact of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the reunification of Germany and the opening up of Eastern Europe. The chapter also charts the impact of new visitors from the West, including Jewish survivors, and the discrediting of the GDR through links with the Nazi regime. The reunification, the author’s argue, prompted a ‘reconceptualization’ of the site, with publications, displays and ephemera changed to reflect the new order, enthusiastically embraced by some museum staff, resisted by others. There were also changes to the materiality of the site, including the opening of the tunnels for the first time since they were closed by the Soviet Army. The post unification period saw further changes at the site, covered in ‘The Modern Gedenkstätte.’ During this period the name was changed: ‘mahn’ dropped from title of camp, and under a new director, Jens-Christian Wagner, who took office in 2001, the camp continued to change, with additional interpretation in the tunnels and a new exhibition space. This, as the authors suggest, necessitated the exclusion of a number of stories, and a changed

appreciation of key figures in the history of the camp. The final chapter 'Major Themes and Conclusions' provides a useful overview and highlights a number of key themes, while also hinting that the site has the potential as an agent of reconciliation. This is an intriguing idea, and one that goes to the heart of arguments for conserving such sites of atrocity. It is disappointing then that this is not explored in any particular depth, beyond the suggestion that 'kind words and a welcome instead of distancing are exactly what create hope in Nordhausen and might just tie the city to the Gedenkstätte in ever more meaningful ways' (p166).

Given the centrality of Auschwitz, particularly Auschwitz-Birkenau, in our imagination of the Holocaust, the focus on other sites is a welcome addition. Although there are a number of stylistic inconsistencies and digressions which disrupt the flow of the narrative, the key strengths of this work lie in the way the authors hold in tension the examination of both changing national narratives and the agency of those who worked at the camp. As outlined earlier, the authors' approach is to foreground the role and influences of the various people involved in the *gedenkstätte*. Given this approach, the absence of any reflection by Gerhard Zielder on his role as a former archivist is a surprising and disappointing omission. When was he the archivist? What influence did he have in the changing memorial? What was his role in the changes to the site? Without altering the focus of the book, such personal reflection would have provided a fascinating insight into the decisions being made, and would have fitted in well with the approach that the book takes. There is also little sustained engagement with the ways general visitors use and understand the site, a significant omission in appreciating the complex interplay between the production and experience of meaning. Despite these points, 'Commemorating Hell' is a fascinating book for anyone interested in the interactions between memory and place, particularly the relationship between management and interpretation.

STEVEN COOKE

Deakin University

For further information about Mittelbau Dora, including historical film footage and survivor testimony see: <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005322> <accessed 7 November 2012>

References

Sharon Macdonald, "Reassembling Nuremberg, Reassembling Heritage", *Journal of Cultural Economy*, vol. 2, no. 1-2 (2009): 117-34

James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust memorials and meanings* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993).