

Bergen Belsen Workshop

6-9 January 2017

Participants Participants in the three days workshop: University of Amsterdam (prof. dr. Rob van der Laarse, dr. Zuzanna Dziuban, dr. Andriana Bencic, Phd candidate Dana Dolghin, phd candidate), Norwegian Institute of Technology (prof. dr. Marek Jasinski, dr. Gunnar Hatlehof), Staffordshire University (Assoc. prof. Dr. Caroline Sturdy Colls, arh. Kevin Colls, Phd candidate. Will Mitchell, PhD candidate Czelsie Weston, PhD candidate Janos Kerti, Phd candidate Esme Hookway), University of West Bohemia (prof.dr. Pavel Vareka, Dr. Zdeňka Vařeková) Freie Universität Berlin (dr. Cord Pagenstecher, dr. Verena Buser) Universitat Pompeu Fabra (prof.dr. Paul Verschure, mr. Sytse Wierenga), Memorial Kamp Westerbork (Bas Korholt), Gedenkstätte Bergen Belsen (Stephanie Billib), Marie (Memory of Nations)

The meeting in Bergen Belsen represented an opportunity to tentatively decide on the directions to follow concerning the memorial dynamics of the site. The site is perhaps the most emblematic memorial attached to the history of liberation of the camps and synonymous with the horrors of the Holocaust, despite the fact that both these aspects are challenged by the actual history of the camp itself and of its inmates. From the narrative perspective therefore, the case of Bergen Belsen is an interesting case study for the way that an “anti-war” memory articulated and was instrumental for both sides at the onset of the Cold War. The three days workshop focused on the possibilities of analyzing memory dynamics around Bergen Belsen and open them up to debate, in particular as Bergen Belsen saw the demise of 20000 Russian POWs in just a few months. The visibility of this history has fluctuated since the end of the war and the significance of the memory of Soviet POWs is indicative of the dynamic of memory concerning the Russian intervention in Europe and the persecution of prisoners of war in the early stages of the Second World War. Addressing these debates and the contexts in which they were defined asks to open up the Holocaust narrative to other historical debates in Germany and abroad, for instance in the 1960s and the 1980s.

The centrality of this narrative in the remembrance of Bergen Belsen has also meant a sidelining of the debate about Russian POWs detained and perished in 1941, amounting to around 20.000 who were buried in a cemetery nearby the camp. The visibility and centrality of Russian POWs has been increasingly discussed on the premises of the memorial, but nevertheless the situation of Soviet prisoners of war, their fate and more in general their situation after the war and during repatriation is still an under-researched topic in recent memory debates. No investigative research has been conducted on pow camp, the the number of deaths is itself disputed. There is a Soviet monument on site approximating around 50.000 victims. The issue of the POW camp and the memory dynamics related to primarily because of sources and information available. Russian POWs were primarily used in slave labour by farmers and in factories, but only recently the extent to which they were working has become the focus of research.

From the materiality perspective, forensic archaeology has much in the way of unpacking the manner in which burials and the liberation aftermath unfolded on the site in April-May 1945 and equally intervene in these debates from a narratives perspective,. Investigations on the site can clarify the extent to which the debates on memory are related to how one changes the gaze of the camp beyond the images constructed from the post-war narrative of liberation.

Today, the site is primarily a Jewish memorial site, the politics of memory concerning the burials of the inmates is an important aspect of the image of Bergen Belsen as a site of mass murder. Although the memorial has included these in its representation, the site also has a number of unlocalized grave sites. The iconic role of GBB dead bodies and burials has also been central to Allied shock photography but has also created wrong impression of brutal mass killing site , although the history of the site itself is much more complex: although the camp did include a substantial group of Jewish detainees, the majority reached Bergen Belsen in the months building up to the liberation as detainees were sent here during forced marches. Deaths due to malnutrition were primarily caused by the disregard of the SS for conditions of inmates in the camps.

Primarily due to all these topics which seem to recommend a closer look at the framings of Bergen Belsen after the war, the spatial focus in Bergen Belsen has been settled to be the DP camp (the Hohne garrison 3 km away from the main camp). The DP camp was organized immediately after liberation in the former SS garrison nearby the camp to host the wounded and the sick, as Bergen belsen was dismantled. The DP camp functioned here until the beginning of the 1950s and its very activity was at the center of the post-war politics: anti-communist internees who did not intend to return Eastern Europe under Soviet influence, the British government limiting the access of Jewish survivors to Palestine, both topics being at the center of Cold War politics. The area also saw a refugee camp set for displaced people in Germany, whose visibility was equally limited in the post-war context. The POW camp, the DP theme and memorial culture and ceremonies around 1970s on the site represent three themes which are connected to each other and can reconstruct a dynamics of memory.

The garrison area, held by the British troops until 2015, had been prior to the war a training base for the Wehrmacht and the spatial history of the camp can provide insight into the dynamics of the role of Wehrmacht afterwards. As in the case of Westerbork, the emphasis and direction on perpetratorship and to what extent the actions of the regular army (in relation to Soviet POWs for instance) can be integrated and told in the memorial dynamics of the camp. The garrison area is at this point unexplored in the space or exhibition and it would be the main focus of the ICACCESS team.

The controversies around the liberation and the death toll that continued after the ratios of food were calculated by the British Army and the Red Cross. Some of the focus in the research will consider the humanitarian efforts immediately after the war and how these have contributed to the image of Bergen Belsen as the central image of the Shoah. The

death rate after liberation is still a highly contested topic as the war was still going on after liberation. The issue of memorialization and the appropriations in light of these have had a lot to do with the general dynamics of war memory. There was a distinct focus on the Jewish community, which is also noticeable in the memorials on site, for instance the Anne Frank monument on site.

Materiality is also an important strand of these explorations, primarily because it conveys the extent to which the memory of the site was conditioned by the last months before the liberation and equally made more complex by the changes in those interned here.

Around 1500 artifacts were taken from ground 1990s education project, collected in database, part in museum exhib. under glass. Only few notes where they found; no reports. But in some cases general information about found in former woman camp. For most of these cases, it is hard to decide if is from the camp or from later times; wood worker 1958 etc. For instance, one cup of Viktor Adaciev with his name engraved found in former POW camp, name found in Moscow Memorial archive, and the found out he was not POW but also in Dachau (1943) and Buchenwald where he was 1942, 1944 Nachweiler, then to Bergen Belsen. The fact that he was never in Bergen Belsen is a case of the complicated personal trajectories around the archaeological data, if this should be used to reconstruct some of these stories.

More generally, the exploration of the memorial dynamics in Bergen Belsen can be also made useful comparatively and diachronically to illustrate the dynamics of memorial culture. Polish postwar canpsapes have been more recently highlighted as nationalist martyrdom sites whereas in the post-war years there was a distinct anti-fascist dimension which did not aim for nationalist undertones, but a socialist solidarity transcending borders.