



Heritage out of Control: Don't trash my holocaust

Anne Berg
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It was an ordinary, unseasonably cool, summer day in a sleepy town just forty minutes outside of Berlin. Oranienburg once was home to Sachsenhausen concentration camp, one of the [second-generation camps](#) the Nazi regime established in 1936. In their first iteration, camps such as Dachau and Sachsenburg functioned primarily as holding pens for individuals kept in *Schutzhaft* [protective custody] and contained mainly political prisoners and suspect individuals interned during the first months and years after the Nazi



assumption of power in January 1933. Only in 1936, in the context of rearmament and in preparation for conquest, were camps built as and transformed into labor camps which in turn became central nodes in the political economy of the regime. Now, one finds *Gedenkstätten* at many former camps: places for commemoration, research and education. At the Memorial and Museum Sachsenhausen, I was sitting on a concrete bench waiting for the archives to open. I noticed an inconspicuously designed trashcan, built into the bench, tactically submerged and artfully disguised, yet visible enough to prevent the accumulation of visitor rubbish.

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The many sites of torture and murder that the Nazi regime bequeathed to the Federal Republic of Germany were preserved not to inspire heritageization, but *Aufarbeitung* and *Bewältigung* of a burdensome past. Since the first Historian's Debate ([Historikerstreit](#)) of the late 1980s, [rightwing pundits and politicians](#) have been critical of what they describe as *Schuldskult* or an obsession with collective guilt. Instead, they insist that Germans had done penance enough and often pointed to other genocides to relativize the Nazi crimes. My interest here is quite different. Rather than suggesting that Germans ought to be absolved from their responsibility to engage with the Holocaust, I suggest they might want to move beyond the rather scripted responses that characterize German *Betroffenheitskultur*. By forcing into view the trashcans of the Memorial and the waste regime that Nazism espoused, I suggest that memory has failed to account for some uncomfortable continuities that locate the Holocaust along a continuum of violence endemic to carbon capitalism, a continuum that stretches from the slow violence of everyday toxic exposure and labor exploitation to torture, physical destruction and indeed genocide.

History, much like the architecture at Sachsenhausen, is layered. The design of the [Gedenkstätte](#) is superimposed onto the structures of the camp. The



architecture of the memorial follows a [particular design](#) - the barriers to our understanding that wall off history from the present, they are made concrete here: cement walls become permeable to visitors who walk through the gaps. Carefully, meticulously, the Gedenkstätte is designed to elucidate the violence that took place, attempting to make it accessible, stacking shock against empathy. I am not an architect. I read structures as I read historical documents. Hence, I got stuck on the trashcan. Masking the mundane functionality of the infrastructure of waste removal, the designers of the memorial seem to have carefully thought about waste. The trashcans are visible enough to guarantee the conscientious disappearance of unwanted substances; they nonetheless blend nearly seamlessly into the Gesamtkunstwerk of the memorial.

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The camp, in turn, was designed to inflict violence, wall it in, surveil it from above and hide it from the outside world. Neither the bench nor the trashcan were part of the architecture of the camp. Both were built for visitors, to enhance the experience of a museum designed to frame the past and impart lessons for the future. The eagerly professed “never again” rings hollow in its germanocentrism. Historians know that history doesn’t repeat itself, yet somehow, when it comes to the Holocaust, some historians betray their training. As [Peter Novick](#) convincingly argued, to use the Holocaust as a benchmark and evaluate other atrocities as to whether they are “truly holocaustal” or merely “genocidal” undergirds the self-congratulatory complacency that marks Western democracies. This “[catechism](#)” is nonetheless eagerly professed and now viciously defended by what historian Dirk Moses refers to as the “high priests” of German memory culture.



Did the architects of the camp think about waste too? Those are not questions that historians are supposed to ask, nor is the Gedenkstätte prepared to answer. The horrendous crimes committed by the Nazi regime and a memory culture that emphasizes atonement for those crimes make it almost sacrilegious to talk about such mundane things as garbage. Asking

questions about garbage, I force into view some of the uncomfortable connections that firmly ground the Nazi regime in the history of Western-style modernity. I scoured the remaining physical structures at the Gedenkstätte Sachsenhausen for cues of the former camp's waste management infrastructure. I spotted a little brick house for garbage cans outside the main wall, but inside the camp only the structures of the memorial give indication that anybody here has been actively concerned with garbage. Taking the inconspicuously designed trashcans at the Memorial and Museum Sachsenhausen as a pivot point, I ponder the presumed unspeakability of a particularly uncomfortable juxtaposition of garbage and genocide.

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When I looked through the maps and sketches for the camp construction, I found little indication that waste disposal infrastructure had been part of the design for the camp. There was no mention of dustbins in the barracks, permanent disposal sites or incinerators as were customary in hospitals and prisons. Designed to hold tens of thousands of prisoners at a time (ultimately 200,000 people were interned in Sachsenhausen between 1936-1945), one would assume that waste and sanitation infrastructure would have figured centrally in the planning; after all the



planning was conducted by a regime obsessed with cleansing and sanitization. What few plans of the original designs I discovered made no note of it. The sketches and maps (some drawn by prisoners) merely indicated locations for latrines and washrooms. Most camps were not connected to sewer systems; *Scheisskommandos* (shit-commandos) would empty the overflowing latrines and makeshift pits that graced the camp grounds and cart the excrement beyond its walls and barbed wire. From their earliest iterations, camps were imagined as rubbished spaces, sites for disposal, containment, and, as I will explain below, recycling. It would be redundant, if not grotesque, to have waste baskets on an active landfill. Rubbish bins are an unremarkable norm in the administrative offices both at modern waste disposal facilities and the Nazi camps.

As if to make up for the absence of waste and sanitation infrastructure inside the camps, the Nazi authorities plastered the camps and ghettos with exhortations about personal hygiene and *Reinheit* (cleanliness). Warnings about lice and admonitions about hand-washing graced the walls of the washrooms in Auschwitz. Never mind the mud-coated floor and the putrid water that was to save diligently washing inmates from certain death. As [Primo Levi](#) writes

The rites to be carried out were infinite and senseless:

every morning one had to make the 'bed' perfectly flat and smooth;

smear one's muddy and repellent wooden shoes with the appropriate machine
grease,

scrape the mud stains off one's clothes (paint, grease, and rust-stains were,
however, permitted);

in the evening one had to undergo the control for lice and the control of washing
one's feet;

on Saturday, have one's beard and hair shaved; mend or have mended one's rags;

on Sunday undergo the general control for skin diseases and



the control of buttons on one's jacket, which had to be five.

Unlike the Gedenkstätten, the Nazi camps were rubbished spaces, and managed accordingly. The presence of wastes (from human excrement over ordinary rubbish to piled up corpses) was an everyday feature of camp life - the camp a place to contain and disappear what the regime designated as "offal". What is more, most camps served as crucial nodes in the recycling infrastructure of the Third Reich, as the bales of clothing, crates of dentures and gold teeth, and mounts of glasses, shoes and human hair discovered by the liberating Allies indicate. Captured on film and in countless photographs, the piled-up stuff quickly morphed into illustrations for the scale and magnitude of the Nazi crimes. Their connections to what [I have elsewhere called the Nazi waste regime](#) - an entire administrative complex designated to extract, collect, and recycle material remainders of all imaginable kinds - were quickly lost from view and subsequently forgotten.

The Nazi regime had zero tolerance for waste. In 1936, Hitler placed the economy on a war footing with the expressed goal to be ready for armed conflict by 1940. It is in this context that the regime attempted to target wastes on a systematic and comprehensive scale. Recycling became more widespread. Inside the Reich, an army of volunteers collected paper, textiles, bones, and scrap metal; later, practices of scrapping and salvaging were readily put in place in the occupied territories as well.





Camps often functioned as massive waste-relay and refurbishing stations that would return “precious” resources to the war economy. Materials collected in the occupied territories were recycled by camp inmates. Prisoners sorted woollens and textiles, metal household wares, shoes and musical instruments. They disassembled used or broken machinery, separating the different metals according to their alloy composition, washed and mended civilian clothing and military uniforms, and turned rags into yarn and paper - they unrubbished the Nazi mess.



Accordingly, camps across the Reich morphed into sweatshops for resource extension. Textile and shoe recycling, both for “in-house” use and for export, were key industries in Sachsenhausen. When it came to

shoes, the camp commander took a “scientific” approach and subjected shoes to torturous durability tests in order to determine the effectiveness of various “improvements.” As [Anne Sudrow has shown](#), prisoners were assigned to a special shoe-runner commando. The prisoners were forced to test-march the shoes fashioned in the camp for 35 kilometers a day, baking in the hot sun or enduring icy cold and schlepping heavy loads along a circular track that mimicked the challenges the shoes would have to weather in quarries and mines, swamps and marshlands. Like the Scheisskommandos, the shoe-runner commandos served as a punitive assignment, reserved for those who were accused of theft or other



violations of camp rules.

Waste labor in and beyond the camps cemented the logic of a racist system. As [Joshua Reno insightfully argues](#), waste and garbage are not *only* ontological categories. Scat or other forms of metabolic waste provide the ontological basis for a category onto which wastes, garbage, rubbish and so forth are mapped. What qualifies as reusable resource and what as waste are the result of historical processes, of ascription. Waste is pushed into rubbished spaces. Trashcans and waste workers disappear them. Across political regimes, across modes of production and forms of rule, proximity to wastes codes sub-status.

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When I walk around places like Sachsenhausen, I can't help but see traces of the history the museum does not show. The modern containers beyond the grounds of the former camp complex only heighten my sensibility for waste. Just beyond the walls of the former camp there are containers for paper waste and receptacles for old clothes and worn shoes. The continuities are uncomfortable, but they are continuities nonetheless. I am not suggesting that contemporary recycling practices are somehow tainted by the fact that the Nazis recycled, too.

Instead, I see continuities of erasure and fantasy. While we tend to champion zero waste politics as progressive, waste management and recycling are inherently conservative practices. They preserve and reproduce the existing social order by removing and reusing that which would otherwise spill into our "civilized" public and private spaces. What is more, we continue to witness the [erasure of the waste workers](#) and the [constant violence of waste labor](#) - now not in concentration camps but in the informal and formal economies of recycling that rely on the labor of predominantly poor, "expendable" populations. This violence is both slow and fast as it powers [our green fantasies](#), fantasies that enable our continued overconsumption and our convictions that we are going to recycle our way out of



the current climate pickle.



Asking questions about garbage and genocide then is not about trashing, sullyng, or diminishing history - any history - but to help us navigate the multi-faceted continuities and ruptures that render the past both a foreign country and part of our everyday present. Asking questions about garbage draws attention to the processes through which systems reinvent and reproduce themselves. Asking questions about garbage and genocide underscores the historical *Verwandtschaft* between systems that rubbish on an industrial scale - whether they do so in a holocaustal, genocidal or putatively democratic fashion.

IMAGES:

1. Submerged trashcan (photograph by author)
2. Garbage houses (photograph by author)
3. Marker for shoe-runners-track (photograph by author)
4. Recycling container (photograph by author)
5. Containers for clothing and shoes (photograph by author)