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The Violent Order of Space: Spatial Developments and Dynamics of Violence in the example of Gusen Concentration Camp

In this short paper, which is based on a presentation I held on January 6 at the 2022 research seminar organized by the *Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah*, I will outline my research project and discuss a segment of my research.¹ First, I will provide a short overview of the history of the camp and in the second part, I will discuss a situated study of violence. Overall, the project is guided by the following questions: How did the camp-SS, as the constituent organizational power, violently order space(s) in the camp(s) over time and how did this development interrelate to power dynamics and violent practices on the side of the perpetrators? Further, I am also interested in the question of how the prisoners represented, appropriated, and negotiated these “Spaces of Violence” (Sofsky) in their everyday life in the camp.

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¹ Because this paper is based on a presentation, I will only use very few footnotes. However, please contact me if you should need additional information concerning the project.

A Short History of Gusen

From August 1938 onwards, a few months after the so-called “Anschluss”, Mauthausen Concentration Camp was built around granite deposits in the Bohemian Massif and together with Gusen developed into a closely linked and unique camp complex within the National Socialist Concentration Camp system.



This map is a graphic realization of the camp complex Mauthausen-Gusen based on its architectural features in May 1945. In May 1945 there were three camps administered under “Gusen”: Gusen I, Gusen II, and Gusen III. Map: Ralf Lechner, Archive of the Mauthausen Memorial, Vienna.

Officially opened on May 25, 1940, only five kilometers from the main camp, Gusen’s main purpose was to house thousands of “Polish political prisoners” from occupied Poland, as the first large group of prisoners was categorized within the racist framework of the SS. Another main factor for the establishment of Gusen was the economic aspirations of the SS and its building company *DEST* (Deutsche Erd- und Steinwerke GmbH). Under horrendous conditions Polish prisoners, and later in 1940 also republican Spaniards, were supposed to forcefully supply Hitler’s gigantic building projects with granite. The prisoner groups deported to Gusen during the first months of its existence were systematically murdered by building the camp or by developing the infrastructure needed to mine large quantities of granite. Especially Polish intellectuals and Jews were specifically targeted. The next years, particularly 1941 and 1942,

were characterized by increasing deportations of prisoners from across Europe to Gusen which continuously impacted and changed the composition of the prisoner society. Simultaneously, the SS reacted with a growing radicalization of violence against certain groups, for example, Soviet prisoners of war, of whom around 2000 were deported to Gusen in October 1941. The Soviet POWs were fenced off from the rest of the prisoners in a “camp within the camp” that, according to the daily and monthly death statistics, was dominated by an extreme logic of extermination. Another group that was targeted were the so-called “invalids” - prisoners who, due to the horrendous conditions in the camp, had become sick and were therefore deemed “unfit to work”. However, the methods and places of killing differed with some hundred “invalids” being showered to death within the space of the so-called *Schutzhaftlager* (Protective Custody Camp) or killed in the so-called *Revier* (Prisoner’s Hospital) by lethal injections while others were deported to Castle Hartheim to be gassed. This violent dynamic decreased for most of the prisoners only in 1943 and early 1944, when, due to the war effort, the SS leadership decided to switch from engagements in the building and construction sector to armament production. Most prisoners at Gusen were then forced to perform work for *Steyr-Daimler-Puch AG* (SDP) and other companies on the grounds of the camp. This changed once again in the final stages of the Shoah when from 1944 onwards, thousands of Jews, mainly from Hungary and Poland, were deported from Auschwitz and other camps for the deadly task of the underground relocation of parts of the armament industry. This decision by Himmler and his top SS leaders, to deport tens of thousands of Jewish prisoners as slave laborers to the “*Reich*”, was the reason for the establishment of the makeshift camp Gusen II in the spring of 1944. Around two kilometers from Gusen II, the prisoners had to dig tunnels in manual labor for the secret *Messerschmitt* production facility “*Bergkristall*”, with the majority of the forced laborers being cruelly murdered by the end of the war. Also, in 1944 many French “*Nacht und Nebel*”-prisoners were deported to Gusen from Compiègne. This phase, from spring 1944 to spring 1945, proved to be the deadliest period in the existence of Gusen I and II. Overall, 71 000 prisoners of at least 27 nationalities were registered at Gusen during the time of its existence of which a minimum of 35 800 were killed.



Bundesarchiv, Bild 192-182
Foto: o. Ang. | 1940/1943

Bundesarchiv, Bild 192-182 / CC-BY-SA 3.0.DE (Wikipedia; no changes were made)

The picture above was probably taken by SS-men Paul Ricken or Fritz Kornatz in spring/summer 1940. Both worked at the so-called *Erkennungsdienst* (Recognition Service) at Mauthausen at the time. This picture was taken from a wooden watchtower (two of which can be seen on the right half of the image) and is part of a series of pictures documenting the construction of Gusen from the perspective of the SS. In the picture, several dozens of prisoners can be seen performing forced labor constructing the *Appellplatz* (Roll Call Square). The prisoners are applying granite stones and leveling the square. Running to bring the granite from the quarry to the camp was a favorite way of the SS of inflicting violence on the prisoners and killing them. In the picture, one can see the basis for the socio-spatial ordering of the camp was prefabricated standard barracks. However, the camp proper was continuously changed and restructured internally for the needs of the SS.

Research and Theory

For deportees, concentration camps were “coercive spaces” (“Zwangsräume”). This thesis, therefore, theorizes concentration camps according to Erving Goffman as *Total Institutions*. He clarifies: „Their encompassing or total character is symbolized by the barrier to social intercourse with the outside and to departure that is often built right into the physical plant, such as locked doors, high walls, barbed wire, cliffs, water, forests, or moors.”² Essential to Goffman is a boundary deployed and used by the institution, which existed socially and could also, as in the case of concentration camps, take physical forms - usually barbed wire and in the case of Gusen also walls. Another distinction Goffman makes, which is also essential for concentration camps, is a fundamental (and spatially enforced) separation of inmates and staff.³ Even if, for example, a so-called functionary prisoner could exercise as much power as he wanted over his fellow prisoners, there was no closing time for him, no home leave, and he was not integrated into the world outside the barbed wire, as it was the case for the staff (the SS members). Goffman deliberately applies his concept of a *Total Institution* broadly, but since concentration camps were fundamentally different from monasteries, schools, psychiatric hospitals, etc., it is necessary to introduce a further specification here: Gusen Concentration Camp was a “coercive space” (“Zwangraum”) run by a state or para-statal violent organization - the SS, and the deportees were prisoners of this same organization. This difference is essential because the guards as well as the members of the command in the concentration camps were part of a barracks-based armed organization. Here, in my opinion, Wolfgang Sofsky's pioneering study *The Order of Terror* is helpful for this work. In it, he deals with the power system of a *Total Organization* - a concentration camp - and he for the first time systematically analyzed, among other things, dynamics of violence and spatial organization.⁴ He states:

The ordering of coercive space is not merely a material fact; at the same time, it generates social and symbolic significations. Consequently, an analysis of space must provide more than mere topography: it must explore social functions, trace human

² Erving Goffman, *Asylums. Essays on the Situations of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. 1961. 13-117. 15.

³ See *Ibid.* 18.

⁴ Wolfgang Sofsky, *Die Ordnung des Terrors: Das Konzentrationslager* (Frankfurt: 1993).

movements, and endeavor to render the symbolic meaning of the sites in space intelligible.⁵

Further, he sees space as an instrument of social discrimination and death, or in other terms: violence. "Violence" and "space" thus always have a social component for Sofsky, even if this sociality he often mentions is always ultimately dissolved by an absolute power (the SS) in the concentration camp.⁶ However, he analyzed much more specifically than Goffman the significance of space and violence for action in the "coerced space" of concentration camps. For this thesis, which deals with a historically existing concentration camp – Gusen – I argue for reading Sofsky's structured and spatially oriented approach of *Absolute Power* with the somewhat more open concept of Goffman's *Total Institution*. Otherwise, there would be a danger of subordinating any empiricism from the outset to a theory of *Absolute Power*. Teresa Koloma-Beck also makes the connection between Sofsky and Goffman based on the following paradigm of spatial theory:

"Space is not thematized here as a container in which things are arranged and occur but gains its relevance as an object of experience. Sofsky - like Goffman before him - reconstructs the space of the camp from the perspective of the experience of prisoners and staff. He traces how space is structured by organizational action, how inmates' bodies are disposed of and acted upon in this space, and how this alters the structure of the self."⁷

As already mentioned in previous chapters, this thesis will answer the following questions: Firstly, it deals with the question of how the camp-SS, as the constituent organizational power, violently ordered space(s) in the camp over time and how this development interrelated to power dynamics and violent practices on the side of the perpetrators? More precisely this dissertation also asks what the social intentions and functions behind the ordering of space were from the perspective of the SS? Was space an instrument of violence as Sofsky suggests,

⁵ Wolfgang Sofsky, *The Order of Terror. The Concentration Camp* (Princeton: 1999), 48-49.

⁶ Sofsky was very much criticized for his portrayal of an ideal-typical camp that never existed in reality and his neglect of the temporal developments of the camps. By his emphasis on the SS as an absolute power he certainly overlooks the agency of inmates.

⁷ Teresa Koloma Beck, „Gewalt | Raum“, in: *SozW Soziale Welt* 67/4 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.5771/0038-6073-2016-4-431>. 431–450. 440

and if so, where does it show, and to what end was it used? Particular attention will be paid to the discourse concerning so-called “invalids” in the camp because what my research so far has shown is that over time certain spaces (mostly barracks) in the camp were dedicated to the social exclusion and murder of large numbers of sick prisoners. An example for Gusen would be barrack 31 which according to survivors was called “Bahnhof”.

Secondly, since it has now been agreed upon amongst historians and sociologists that camps were social spaces, it, therefore, is also vital to look at how prisoners imagined, used, and appropriated the given spaces and what kind of options of action they could create. How did various prisoners negotiate these “Spaces of Violence” in their everyday life in the camp and how are “Spaces of Violence” represented in various sources? Particular attention in this respect will be paid to a specific facet of the Shoah – namely the lives of thousands of Jewish prisoners, who were deported to Gusen II mainly from Auschwitz and Plaszow in 1944, to work in the underground relocation of the German aircraft production and of whom relatively little is known.

[Research Excerpt: The Biopolitical \(Mis-\)Management of Gusen Concentration Camp](#)

In this part, I want to focus on the period between September 1941 and January 1942. Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, struck a deal with Hitler in September of 1941 to have tens of thousands of Soviet Prisoners of War transferred from the *Wehrmacht* to the SS.

Almost every concentration camp in September 1941 was faced with the task of creating “camps within the camps” for “creating space” for Soviet POWs since the orders did not allow for them to have contact with other prisoners. For the camp leader of Gusen, Karl Chmielewski, this caused a problem because several thousand prisoners coming to a camp with approximately an average of 6000 thousand prisoners during 1941 was, from an SS point of view, impossible. The camp was already overcrowded. The SS decided to have barracks 15, 16, 23, and 24 fenced off from the rest of the camp for a separately administered Soviet POW camp. However, the barracks at this point were full of prisoners. Another problem, from the perspective of the SS, was, that the leadership did not know how many people would come. In the end for Gusen, around 2000 arrived between Oct. 24 and 26 but it is known from SS records that at Mauthausen and Gusen at this time, they expected an additional 21 000 POWs.

Together with his subordinates (and possibly in consultation with Franz Ziereis, the camp commander of Mauthausen), Chmielewski developed the idea of bathing prisoners to death. This idea was likely adapted from practical experiences. The camp had a large shower for entire blocks of prisoners at this time because of a previous typhus epidemic and prisoners occasionally died when being showered with cold water. One such bath took place in the second half of September 1941. Prisoners sick with tuberculosis, who had already been isolated in one part of barrack 29 at the time, were the victims. Around 130 people, barely able to move - some had to be carried - were forced to walk naked to the showers. In the shower, they were surrounded by *SS* and *Capos* or other so-called functionaries, who beat them with sticks and other objects and forced them to stay under the ice-cold showers. Another group of “functionary prisoners” were positioned between the barracks next to the shower to create what can be described as a temporary space of extermination. The baths lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. Most people did not die from hypothermia or drowned - they died hours or days later because of pneumonia or other sicknesses related to the ice baths. The showers are well-documented because several prisoners survived and witnessed the showers. One former prisoner mentions that he survived several showers because he was, in his own words, strong enough to stay in the middle of the shower where he could escape the beatings of the *SS*-men and *capos* and the water pressure was not as strong as in other places.

This excerpt should serve as an example of a specific form of violence as a means of biopolitical management on a local level, obviously influenced by the racist, antisemitic, and social Darwinist views of the *SS*. The example of “Gusen as a space to be managed” also shows that a situated study of violence is necessary to analyze the camp’s socio-spatial infrastructure of extermination and its topological features.