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THE HISTORY AND PRESENT OF A SITE OF TERROR: GURS INTERNMENT CAMP FROM 1939 TILL TODAY

Gurs internment camp's history illustrates the complexity of the „modern camp“. Its outward appearance showed many patterns commonly associated with „a camp“: a rectangular outline, barbed wire-fence, barracks. My focus, however, will be on other aspects:

1) The camp fulfilled radically different functions during its existence. Within less than three years it metamorphosed from a site of shelter to a cog in the wheel of genocide. It was set up in April 1939 to host refugees from Spain after Franco's victory. As World War II commenced 4,000 German Jews were interned here stigmatized as „enemy aliens“, along with real or alleged political opponents. After France's defeat in 1940 the Vichy government interned even more „undesirable elements“. On Sukkot (22. October 1940) Gurs became the destination for 6500 Jews deported from Baden and the Palatinate. Less than two years later deportations to the extermination camps in „the East“ started. After France's liberation, Gurs was re-used to house German prisoners of war and French collaborators but also former Spanish Republican fighters who where, under the auspices of the Cold War, regarded as Moscow's Fifth Column. The camp was finally closed in 1946.

2) Gurs was first and foremost a site of terror. But despite its horrible living conditions it had a rich intellectual and cultural life. Hannah Arendt, Jean Améry, Ernst Busch and Marta Feuchtwanger, to name but the most prominent internees, transited through Gurs. Camp schools were established alongside a library, a theatre group and an orchestra. The internees celebrated Passover, they kept diaries and they drew what they saw and felt. Gurs also witnessed the activity of humanitarian aid organizations among them the Swiss Humanitarian Aid Unit, but also Jewish French or Protestant organizations such as the Quakers or the YMCA. The Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants succeeded in saving 409 of the 560 children and juveniles deported to Gurs.

3) The commemoration of Gurs was initiated in Germany in 1957 by a newspaper article with the telling headline „Are the Jews of Baden forgotten?“. Six years later the camp cemetery was inaugurated. In 1979 a local initiative emerged resulting in the foundation of the L'Amicale de Gurs the following year. Today Gurs is the focus of commemoration for communities all over Baden and the Palatinate. The camp now contains a memorial and a reconstruction of a cabin as a testimony to the effort to transfer the Camp-history from the communicative to the cultural memory.

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Wichtige Publikationen:

Gewöhnliche Soldaten. Desertion und Deserteure im deutschen und britischen Heer 1914-1918, Göttingen 1998; Antisemitismus vor Gericht. Debatten über die juristische Ahndung judenfeindlicher Agitation in Deutschland (1879-1960), Frankfurt a. M. 2011; (Hg.), Lager vor Auschwitz. Gewalt und Integration im 20. Jahrhundert, Berlin 2013 (zusammen mit Jens Thiel); Paul Nathan. Publizist, Politiker und Philanthrop, 1857-1927, Göttingen 2018; „Das Lager“. Überlegungen zur Geschichte einer Institution zwischen Herrschaft, Recht und Gewalt, in: Juridikum – Zeitschrift für Recht und Gesellschaft 31, 1/2020, S. 79-88 (zusammen mit Jens Thiel)