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Harold Marcuse, Featured Review for *American Historical Review*, of:

*KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps*, by Nikolaus Wachsmann, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 865 pp., cloth \$40.

review: 2574 words with 130 struck through = 2444 (2500 max)

The title of this prodigious but eminently readable work, *KL*, is programmatic. Instead of the more commonly known and used abbreviation for the German *Konzentrationslager*, KZ, Nikolaus Wachsmann has chosen the official Nazi abbreviation, which was guarded like a trademark by the system's potentate, Heinrich Himmler, who did not want competing camps outside of his system. "KL" reflects Wachsmann's attempt to roll back the veils of historiography and memory to reveal the system as seen by its contemporaries as it unfolded over time. This undertaking synthesizes numerous works of German scholarship, which since the 1990s have drawn upon a wealth of newly available sources to shed light on many aspects of the Nazi camp system.

While a meticulous and innovative overview of the Nazi concentration camp system based on the latest scholarly research would already be a significant achievement, Wachsmann combines this scholarship with an encyclopedic knowledge of published and unpublished survivor accounts. The many corrective and illustrative anecdotes that lace this dense account also keep it engaging. Additionally, Wachsmann is attentive to the broader social, political and economic contexts within which the camp system evolved and operated. This enables him to revise longstanding preconceptions about the camp system, which have persisted because of its unique historiography. A look back at previous attempts to portray the entire system highlights the achievement embodied by *KL*.

The first such attempt was made by Eugen Kogon, a non-party-affiliated anti-Nazi who was liberated from Buchenwald, where he had been imprisoned since 1939. Immediately after liberation the US Army commissioned the scholar-journalist to write a report about the camp system. Over the following months Kogon augmented and reworked his original *Buchenwald Report*, publishing it under the title *Der SS-Staat* in 1946. It was translated into English in 1950 as *The Theory and Practice of Hell: The German Concentration Camps and the System Behind Them*. Still in print today, the nearly 50 German editions and dozen translations of this book remained the only attempt at a comprehensive portrayal of Himmler's KL system until the 1990s.

This is not to say that no scholars had written about the camps until then. Historians at the Munich Institute for Contemporary History (IfZ) compiled historical reports for the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial in 1963, soon published under the title *Anatomy of the SS-State* (1965, English 1968). Typical of works during this period, they were based almost exclusively on perpetrator-

produced "official" documents. The IfZ also published some research outlining the histories of individual camps, most notably the six-camp anthology *Studien zur Geschichte der Konzentrationslager* in 1970. A few monographs in the 1970s signal a return of scholarly interest in the human experience of the Nazi camp system, such as Terence Des Pres' *The Survivor* (1976) and Falk Pingel's comprehensive 1978 study of prisoner behavior.

In the 1980s this dearth of publications began to change with the inauguration of a new annual dedicated to publishing primary sources and new scholarship about the camps, the *Dachauer Hefte* (1985-2009), edited by Barbara Distel and Wolfgang Benz. Finally in the 1990s there was a burgeoning of scholarly works on the camps. They tended to be based either on archival materials, or on survivor reports. Johannes Tuchel's dissertation on the organizational history of the camps from 1933 to 1937, published in 1991, is an example of the former, while Wolfgang Sofsky's 1993 sociological examination of camp life, translated as *The Order of Terror* in 1997, is an example of the latter. In the Anglophone world groundbreaking research yielding new insights about the Nazi camps remained rare, with the masterful *Auschwitz, 1270-present* by Deborah Dwork and Robert-Jan van Pelt (1996) as a noteworthy exception.

Until about 2005 these two approaches existed literally side-by-side in a number of anthologies, such as those edited by Ulrich Herbert, Karin Orth and Christoph Dieckmann (50 essays and commentaries in *Die nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager*, 1998), and by Benz and Distel, especially their ongoing series 'History of the Concentration Camps,' with 15 volumes from 2001 to 2014, and their nine-volume collection *Ort des Terrors* (2005-2009), which includes both thematic anthologies and quasi-monographic histories of individual camps. With this huge quantity of detailed new scholarship, the need for a multidimensional synthesis—of different source types, of studies of the various camps, and of the various functions as they came and went over time—was obvious. Wachsmann stepped up to this task.

Wachsmann worked for over a decade to write this synthesis. His Frankel-Prize-winning dissertation, published in 2004 as *Hitler's Prisons: Legal Terror in Nazi Germany*, covers much of the same ground as *KL*, but within the context of the German judicial and penal system. After editing a revised edition of Kogon's standard-setting work in 2006, he spearheaded a multi-year research project, "Before the Holocaust: Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany, 1933-1939," which yielded a published anthology of 300 translated documents, and support for four doctoral dissertations co-supervised by Wachsmann, which enrich the first chapters of *KL*.

In 2011, with Jane Caplan, Wachsmann edited *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany: The New Histories*, which introduced the post-1990 spate of German research on the Nazi camps to an English-speaking audience. For *KL* Wachsmann not only drew on the new scholarly literature, but mined hitherto essentially untapped sources, such as the 49 volume collection of trial judgements (*Justiz und NS-Verbrechen*, 1968-1981, 1998-2012), the International Tracing Service's enormous archive of victim and survivor data, and the perpetrator records of the Berlin

Document Center, all now with digital search interfaces. Memoirs in the Wiener Library and depositions in the recently opened Ludwigsburg trial prosecution center are also noteworthy "new" sources utilized in *KL*, as are recently accessible denazification and restitution files. They enabled Wachsmann to piece together many of the revealing biographical vignettes that enliven this book and illustrate his interpretations.

*KL* divides the history of the camps into eleven chapters bracketed by a prologue and an epilogue. The chapters proceed roughly chronologically, with 1-3 covering the prewar period, and 4-6 the functional impulses towards mass murder prior to the 1942 construction of the extermination centers Treblinka, Belzec and Sobibor. Chapters six and seven focus on Auschwitz, first on the systemic scale of the Holocaust, recounting the camp's evolution from a "standard" concentration camp to a pivotal hub of the factory-scale mass murder of Jews; then from the interior view of camp routines. Chapters eight and nine deal with Himmler's camps' economic role, first structurally in the *Reich* economy, then from the interior perspective of life and death in the metastasizing subcamp system branching out from the main camps in 1943-44.

After so much recounting of the callous disregard for human life, chapter ten, "Impossible Choices," examines the prisoners' struggles to survive over the entire period 1933-1945. Wachsmann sidesteps the contentious debate about whether mere survival can be considered resistance by using the behavioral triad perseverance, solidarity and defiance, which he applies to interactions between and among the various color-coded prisoner groups, but also to the camp staff. The eleventh chapter covers the "final paroxysm of violence" (22) during the evacuation "death marches," as the Allies bombed Hitler's *Reich* infrastructure into rubble. The epilogue, finally, whisks readers through the problems survivors faced in trying to rebuild their lives, including West Germany's grudging efforts at compensation, the trials of camp perpetrators, public memories of the camps, and the re-uses of the camp facilities.

Each chapter contains some new and perhaps surprising results. Drawing on Wachsmann's own dissertation research, the prologue addresses the issue of British, Spanish and colonial German camp precedents, which he finds "unconvincing," even as "'rough template[s]" (8). In contrast, he shows how the Nazi camps served as models for those under Franco, while as a system they had the most parallels to Stalin's gulag, albeit with profound differences, such as the exterminatory function embodied by Auschwitz-Birkenau, and the fact that NKVD prisoners were more likely to be released than to die, with a survival rate of 90% (8f).

In chapter one, Wachsmann emphasizes the contingency of the early camps. He recounts the competition between Himmler, and Prussian and *Reich* Interior Ministers Göring and Frick in 1934, from which Himmler emerged triumphant. Whereas the latter saw the camps as expendable after the Nazis consolidated their hold on power, Himmler envisaged the camp system as a tool to cleanse the German empire of people he ~~and his ilk~~ deemed inimical to the Nazi enterprise (52, 91f).

Wachsmann's emphasis on the role of individual agency at all levels in the evolution of the camp system integrates the intentionalist, functionalist and structuralist interpretations invoked to explain the Holocaust. He offers numerous examples of both structural rivalries between bureaucracies, and the functionalist dynamic of individuals at various levels "working towards the Führer" (and towards Himmler, Theodor Eicke, and Oswald Pohl, whom Himmler placed in charge of the camp system), whose intended goals they intuited. In the words of a Sachsenhausen guard in a 1957 deposition, " Personally, I now believe that orders to act, in so far as they were given, were only meant to point lower-ranking officials in a certain direction, so that they would then try to act, of their own accord, as the top leadership wished" (224f).

Other prime examples of this dynamic are the rivalries between Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss and "Operation Reinhard" extermination center chief Odilo Globocnik (324), who vied to see who could murder and plunder more efficiently, and the jockeying for power in the war economy between armaments minister Albert Speer, and Himmler ~~and his minion Pohl~~ (405). Further examples show "euthanasia" doctors being shut out of the camp inmate selection process (256f), and individual camp leaders in a meeting with the founding head of Himmler's camps "trying to surpass one another with ever more ingenious proposals" for mass murder (262).

Wachsmann also corrects common misconceptions both about the lethality of the prewar camps, and the extent to which they were "racially" employed, that is aimed at terrorizing or murdering Jews. For instance, except for a period of weeks after the November 1938 "Kristallnacht" roundups, Jews never comprised a majority of KL inmates, and even in the period of highest prewar mortality, more non-Jewish "asocials" were murdered systemwide than Jews of every classification (188, 680 n. 319). ~~Mortality statistics also provide evidence for the start of the war as a watershed in the camp system's history: in Dachau, for instance, in a mere four months in 1940, double the number of men died than in the entire seven prewar years~~ (244).

Wachsmann argues that the "Operation Reinhard" extermination centers, for which he introduces the term "Globocnik death camps" (293f) were not a true part of the KL system. ~~In a tightly argued section (322-325)~~ he notes that in contrast to the sprawling, multi-functional camps throughout the *Reich*, they were narrowly circumscribed in time, space and function: operational only in 1942-43 in remote areas of Nazi-occupied Poland, they served solely to murder Jews. Their leading perpetrators were drawn from the "euthanasia" murder program, not from the pool of camp SS, and they were supervised by Globocnik's office in Lublin, not by the KL administration in Berlin.

Wachsmann also addresses the question whether the Holocaust began with a single order. He makes clear that the contingencies and rivalries indicate that it did not (292). The second Auschwitz chapter, drawing on Dwork and van Pelt's work as well as Sybille Steinbacher's dissertation ("*Musterstadt*" *Auschwitz*, 2000), offers an overview that provides the historical

context within which widely read accounts of the camps, such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986, 1991) and Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* (Italian 1947; 1959) unfolded. It would serve as an excellent follow-up reading for students in courses that use these memoirs.

Chapter eight on the camp system's economic functions shows in case after case how unproductive the mobilization of prisoner labor remained, even as the number of slaving inmates skyrocketed into the hundreds of thousands in 1943-44. Wachsmann's well documented recounting of Himmler's ambivalence between economic and exterminatory ambitions should become central to histories of Nazi Germany.

Chapter nine on the post-1943 explosion of satellite camps synthesizes the findings of studies by Marc Buggeln and Sabine Schalm. Wachsmann debunks the claim that women's experience as homemakers or their sisterly solidarity gave them better odds of survival than men (477). Instead, it was the concentration of women in production, whereas many men were deployed in the far more deadly construction, that gave them better odds. Additionally, he notes that gender trumped "race," with "Jewish women ... more likely to survive than non-Jewish men" (478). In the Gross Rosen system, for example, female mortality was one percent, while the male death rate was over twenty-seven percent.

In chapter ten Wachsmann again uses his signature combination of new research (~~a 2012 dissertation by Julia Hörath~~) and telling anecdote to rehabilitate prisoners categorized as 'asocial' and 'criminal,' who since Kogon have been seen as pariahs within inmate society (522-525). Camp officials often assigned black or green triangles to people whose non-conforming lifestyles were anti-Nazi, even if they were not politically motivated, and previously disregarded examples show that they often contributed to ameliorating activities among the prisoners. As a corollary, red-badged "politicals" were not always as selfless as their memoirs would have us believe.

Chapter eleven reveals that camp evacuations in eastern Europe began much earlier than previously thought, but were no less chaotic than the ones at the very end of the war (550). The level of self-delusion among top camp system administrators is illustrated by the plan to dismantle the Birkenau gas chamber-crematoria and rebuild them near Mauthausen in Austria in early 1945 (553).

Last but not least, buried among the work's 3423 endnotes, ~~each averaging perhaps five references,~~ are several important scholarly discussions, such as dating the beginning of mass gassings in Auschwitz to May 1942, not October 1941 (300, with 707f n. 44). Other notes offer mini-bibliographies on specific topics, such as camp libraries (663 n. 273), tattooing (704 n. 262), and sexual violence against women and men (721 n. 155 and 753f n. 122).

After such masterful synthesis, one might wonder whether we can expect new insights about the Nazi camp system. I think we can. The huge databases of prisoner information accumulated after the war by the International Tracing Service, as well as the newly available

death registers of most of the main camps (671 n. 111), can add a quantitative perspective on mortality rates of various prisoner groups, over time and across the camp system. "Big data" visualization techniques, such as those piloted by Ann Knowles, Tim Cole and Alberto Giordano in their *Geographies of the Holocaust* (2014), will help us to grasp the scale, evolution and interconnections within the system. If I had to find one thing to criticize about Wachsmann's work, it would be the thinness of the seven maps and two tables he includes—they could have been augmented to show graphically the relative size, composition and mortality of the camps (e.g. as pie charts instead of squares on the maps), and perhaps arranged together to make clear the spatial expansions and consolidations over time. The statistics on "camp strength" and mortality rates he offers for various periods could have been summarized in synoptic graphical form as well, much as he did in his *Hitler's Prisons*.

However such a small flaw cannot detract from this multiple prize-winning monograph, which has already been published in four languages and as an audiobook.

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