

Nazi Camps and their Neighbouring Communities Nazi Camps and their Neighbouring Communities.  
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Clare Copley (2021)

Whatmore-Thomson's rigorously researched book provides a richly detailed analysis of the complex relationship between three Nazi concentration camps and their local communities during and after the war. Increased scholarly attention has been paid to the interactions between such camps and their civilian neighbours in recent years and this comparative micro-history of KZ Neuengamme (Germany), KZ Natzweiler-Struthof (Alsace) and Kamp Vught (Netherlands) makes a strong contribution to this growing field. The differing relationships between the three locations and the Nazi regime and, consequently, the different status of the camps within their local settings adds a fascinating dimension to the study. In Germany, Neuengamme is part of the disciplinary apparatus which people had seen evolve since 1933 and which played a key role in enacting the inclusion / exclusion which defined the *Volksgemeinschaft*. In contrast, in the annexed Alsace and occupied Netherlands, the camps were enemy installations imposed from outside to enforce an alien and brutal system of punishment.

The first chapter focuses on the origins of the camps, revealing how their physical proximity to the neighbouring communities meant that interactions were unavoidable at all three locations. From their very inception, each camp became incorporated into local structures both through the construction of their physical fabric (sewerage, water, electricity) and through administrative procedures (negotiation of land use and ownership, civil registration of deaths). As the camps developed, these interactions became increasingly individualised and complex. As well as encountering prisoners outside of the camps, at places such as forced labour sites or Vught's train station, members of the surrounding communities took jobs within the camps themselves or developed trade relationships with them. Whatmore-Thomson goes to great lengths to highlight both the myriad motivations behind local people taking up these positions and the range of behaviours they exhibited towards the prisoners in their localities. At all three locations she finds examples of support for the prisoners as well as passivity, looking the other way and contributing to their misery and ill-treatment through acts such as throwing stones or reporting escapees. She notes that there were fewer incidences of help in the German example than the other two. In Alsace, acts of support tended to be more widespread than in Germany but were still limited to spontaneous, clandestine actions carried out by individuals whereas at Kamp Vught, activities such as the smuggling in of food and cigarettes were supplemented by collective and open actions such as organising the delivery of parcels to prisoners and providing support for released detainees at the local train station.

The remaining five chapters then go on to explore the post-war histories of the camps up until the early years of the new millennium. Key themes are the tensions between pragmatic reuse and commemoration at each site and the extent to which each camp was incorporated into local, regional and national memory narratives and how these interacted with one another. At all three locations, the neighbouring communities were considered 'tainted' through their associations with the camps yet the ways in which they responded to this varied considerably and were heavily shaped by changes in the sites' functions after 1945. All three were used as internment camps in the

early post-war period, complicating memory of the concentration camps through the imprisonment of people with a different relationship to the neighbouring communities: locals and compatriots accused of collaboration or war crimes. Vught then went on to house a military compound, a prison and temporary accommodation for Moluccans who were unable to return to Indonesia due to their support for the Dutch colonial regime. This latter use in particular detracted from memory of the site's use as a concentration camp as it tied it into on-going debates around salient issues such as decolonisation and the living conditions and integration of the Moluccan community. Neuengamme became the site of a 'model prison', the Neuengamme Prison for Men. Its designation as a humane, progressive penal institution came to feature prominently in local identity narratives and, through the stark contrast it provided to its Nazi counterpart, it was considered to constitute a 'silent memorial' to the concentration camp that preceded it. Whereas no specific institutional use was found for Natzweiler-Struthof, debates over the site's future were dominated by questions of rights to the land which had been requisitioned for the building of the camp and recompense for the local community.

Today, all three sites are heritage-protected memorial complexes encompassing museums, archives and education centres. Whatmore-Thomson reveals the contested and heavily contingent processes by which they arrived this point and the differing roles of the local communities in shaping them. Initially, commemoration largely corresponded with dominant national narratives and styles which in both the Netherlands and Alsace meant a strong emphasis on heroism and resistance. At Vught, however, the local community played a significant role in shaping how this was realised. Locals were heavily involved in developing a memorial, raising funds and organising ceremonies and ensured that the former concentration camp became a prominent feature in both the local and national memorial landscape and that the acts of support for the prisoners from the local community were highlighted. In Alsace, Natzweiler-Struthof was taken over by the French state and incorporated into centralised memory narratives as a *haut lieu de memoire* for all French resisters and martyrs. Local involvement in the shaping of this was initially largely restricted to efforts to protect the community against what was perceived as a challenge to local interests by the state memorialisation of the former camp. Once a national memorial had actually been installed, however, local people became increasingly involved in commemoration although they were less able than the residents near Vught to shape the forms that this took. In Germany, a memorial installed at Neuengamme by survivors did not gain much public engagement until the 1980s when wider debates about 'coming to terms with the past' combined with an increased awareness of the importance of place and of physical traces led to public pressure on the Hamburg Senate for enhanced memorialisation at the site and for increased interrogation of the relationship between the camp and its neighbouring community. Through this process, stories of local support for prisoners emerged along with acknowledgement that the community had been more aware of what was happening at the camp than had previously been admitted.

Whatmore-Thomson's emphasis on the local level of these debates brings refreshing nuance to our understanding of the development of post-war memory narratives. In chapter five, for example, she is able to demonstrate convincingly that the significant shifts in memory discourses that occurred in the 1960s did not actually have any real impact on the sites of the concentration camps themselves at the time. Rather, it was the debates of the 1980s and 1990s that brought real changes to their memorials and ceremonies. Furthermore, the micro-history approach enables Whatmore-Thomson to reveal the highly contingent nature of the memory processes and their evolution. We see, for example, how the 1965 retirement of the ageing Kamp Vught Monument Committee and the

transfer of its responsibilities to the local council saw the frequency of large-scale, formally-organised ceremonies reduced to every five years; how a local Evangelical church in Neuengamme played a pivotal role in opening up discussions about the camp and facilitating critical reflection on community interactions with it; and how graffiti and arson attacks on the museum at Natzweiler-Struthof in the late 1970s were connected to increasingly anti-French undertones to Alsatian interpretations of the war and to anger at the mistreatment of Alsatian internees in the early post-war period. However, in places the balance between the focus on very local memory politics and larger shifts in memory discourses could usefully have been adjusted; complex and extremely pertinent issues such as the *malgré-nous* and the impact of the Cold War on memory are mentioned but with such a light touch that their significance is not always particularly clear.

A corollary of the micro-history approach is that one is often left wondering how representative the selected case-studies are and I am left curious about the extent to which the claims made about these particular sites can be applied elsewhere. I hope that more studies of this nature are carried out in order to allow us to explore this and that they are all as thoughtful and as meticulously researched as this one.