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“Going east”: colonial experiences and practices of violence among female and male Majdanek camp guards (1941–44)

ELISSA MAILÄNDER KOSLOV

This article examines the specific experience of the transfer of the camp female and male camp guards to Majdanek and its impact on the guards' violent behavior. The concentration and extermination camp Majdanek, set up in the summer 1941 on the outskirts of Lublin in Nazi-occupied eastern Poland, was a quite particular camp because of its multiple functions and its eastern location. First the article analyzes how the Austrian and German camp guards perceived their transfer to the “East” and what conditions the employees expected upon their arrival in this new location. In the second section, it scrutinizes the specifically “Eastern” experience of the Majdanek camp staff. Finally it asserts that the conjunction of a specific set of beliefs, cultural prejudices, and racial images of the “Nazi East” along with the concrete “work” experiences on the ground had an impact on the practices of extreme violence in this camp.

“Nobody was ever born whose language could describe Majdanek. It was—it is—impossible.” Those were the words of a Jewish survivor in Eberhard Fechner's documentary, as the Majdanek trial proceeded in Düsseldorf during 1975–81. “Imagine, when we heard one day that the SS was looking for people—women—to go to Auschwitz, we volunteered,” she continued. “And we knew of course that Auschwitz was not a finishing school. But we didn't care. We just wanted to get out of this place.”¹

Majdanek, set up in the summer 1941 on the outskirts of Lublin in Nazi-occupied eastern Poland, was an unusual camp because of its multiple functions. Originally conceived as a POW² camp for Soviet soldiers and as a work camp for Jews from the Lublin region, it was also a camp for Polish and Soviet civilians, a rural population which served as hostages, and a concentration camp for Polish political prisoners. Between October 1942 and April 1944, Majdanek had a female concentration camp section; then, in the spring/summer of 1943, it served as a camp for Jewish children and between the summer of 1942 and the autumn of 1943, it was an extermination camp for European Jews. Between the

autumn of 1941 and the summer of 1944, close to 500,000 people from 28 countries and belonging to 54 different nationalities passed through Majdanek.³ Tomasz Kranz has therefore coined the term “multifunctional makeshift”⁴ (*multifunktionales Provisorium*), which refers not only to the multifunctionality of the camp, but also to its unfinished and improvisational character.

The level of violence also sets it apart: Majdanek was a place where violence was both quantitatively and qualitatively amplified. The female and male guards transferred to this camp had all been trained first at concentration camps in the *Reich*, spending up to two years in Ravensbrück, Buchenwald, Dachau, and Sachsenhausen. Yet prisoners had hitherto regarded very few of them as particularly violent. Most of the guards could be described rather as “gray mice.”⁵ So, one might ask, what happened in Majdanek? How can we explain the relative crescendo of violence there?

In this article I would like to examine how the specific experience of the transfer of female and male camp guards to the Nazi East caused them to amplify their violent behaviour. To be sure, the change of venue represents just one among multiple factors. Other factors, to be considered elsewhere, include the social make-up of the SS personnel, their initial training and socialization in the camp environment, group dynamics on the ground, as well as gender relations (understood not only as women-to-men relations but also as men-to-men/women-to-women relations). However, the eastern location of Majdanek stands out. Hence I maintain that the conjunction of a specific set of beliefs, cultural prejudices, and racial images of “the East” along with the concrete “work” experiences on the ground had an impact on the practices of extreme violence in this camp.

Location may not be “everything,” but it surely is, and was, something. Rudolf Höß, for instance, opened his autobiographical notes on his experience as the commander of the Auschwitz–Birkenau camp (1940–43) with the statement that Auschwitz “was far away, back there in Poland.”⁶ Although that concentration and extermination camp was situated within the Polish territory of Silesia which had been re-annexed to the German *Reich*,⁷ the allusion to “far away Poland” nevertheless indicates distinctly how remote Poland was perceived to be. It is moreover an expression of a specific European West–East perception, which deprecated the “East” as inferior and foreign. Such discursive constructions reflect a set of beliefs surrounding a subordinated alien and convey a claim to domination and legitimize an aggressive and radical appropriation of the “Other.”⁸ Likewise, prejudices and negative images comprised the “semantic” work “matrix”⁹ of the camp personnel. They had strong emotional components which inevitably influenced their actions and behaviour. As the sociologist and political scientist Paula Diehl states, images are more than external and pictorial representations.¹⁰ They are internal perceptions, descriptions and metaphors that constitute our individual as well as social imagery and serve as a foil for our everyday experiences and behaviour.

Majdanek was situated in the southeastern part of occupied Poland, in the so-called “*Generalgouvernement*,” often abbreviated as GG. The GG can be called the “far East” of the German empire. It was considered as a foreign land;

according to the Baedeker travel guide, Adolf Hitler himself designated it as the “forecourt” (*Vorplatz*) of the *Reich* and the appointed Governor General Hans Frank referred to it as the “neighboring country” (*Nebenland*) of the *Reich*.¹¹ This territory had not been incorporated into the *Reich per se*, but was separated by a currency, customs and administrative frontier. On September 25, 1939 after



Figure 1. Definitive borders of General-Gouvernement, August 1941.

the German invasion of Poland, the former Polish Voivodships (districts) of Krakow, Lublin, Kielce, and Warsaw had been placed under a German military administration. A month later, on October 26, the zone was officially declared to be the General Government (GG). The GG was subdivided into four administrative districts—Krakow, Warsaw, Radom and Lublin—with the administrative centre established in Krakow. The administration was in German hands. Researchers refer to this setup as a civil administration (*Zivilverwaltung*), although strictly speaking, it was a civil occupation administration. The *Wehrmacht*, the SS and police apparatus were part of the occupation authorities. The area of the GG was 95,000 square kilometres with a population of about ten million, mostly Poles, Jews and Ukrainians. With the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, East Galicia became the fifth district of the GG, so that the total territory expanded to 145,000 square kilometres and counted approximately 17.7 million inhabitants in 1942 (see Figure 1).¹²

This article consists of three sections. First, I would like to elaborate how Majdanek SS personnel perceived their transfer to the “East.” What did it mean for them to be assigned to this camp? What sort of conditions did the Austrian and German camp employees expect upon their arrival in this new location? In the second section, I would like to scrutinize the specifically “Eastern” experience of the Majdanek camp staff. Finally, I will show how the specific cultural and ideological background of the Nazi East as well as the “working” conditions on the ground amounted to a stimulus for destructive behaviour.

The transfer to Majdanek

Majdanek was planned as a POW camp for captured Soviet soldiers in summer 1941 and set up on the outskirts of Lublin, the capital of the district. The location and the timing of this operation were carefully chosen in relation to operation “Barbarossa”: the district of Lublin constituted the borderland to the Soviet Union from 1939 to 1941. In the immediate aftermath of the successful German invasion, the *Reichsführer-SS* Heinrich Himmler had great plans for this region, which was meant to become Germanized, with the city as a headquarters. The so-called “General Plan East” (*Generalplan Ost*) envisioned an ethnic remodelling of the East with Poland, the Baltic states, the Crimea, as well as parts of the occupied Soviet territories all being populated by Germans.¹³ The implementation of this project was entrusted to Odilo Globocnik, SS and Police Leader (*SS- und Polizeiführer*) in the Lublin district of the General Government.¹⁴ On July 21, 1941, Himmler personally visited Lublin and charged Globocnik with the construction of a camp for 25,000 to 50,000 prisoners to be used as construction workers for the police and SS bases in Lublin.¹⁵ During the summer of 1941, a new “Program Heinrich” was devised to build an SS city in Lublin with barracks for three *Waffen-SS* regiments, apartments for their families, supply facilities, etc.

As a result of the strategic and political importance of this operation, the SS construction engineers in Berlin increased the camp’s capacity in October 1941 to up to 100,000 prisoners. On October 24, a construction order went to Auschwitz

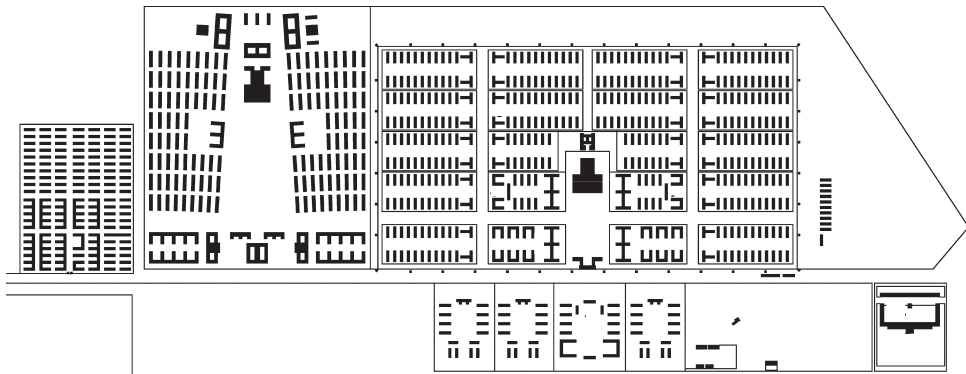


Figure 2. Majdanek, construction plan from March 1942.

and Majdanek, according to which the Lublin camp was meant to accommodate 125,000 Soviet POWs.¹⁶ A month later, the head of the SS construction department in Berlin, engineer Hans Kammler, increased the envisioned capacity still further, to 150,000 prisoners. According to the general construction plan of March 23, 1942, Majdanek was meant to include three camp complexes over an area of 516 hectares and with the capacity to house 250,000 inmates¹⁷ (see Figure 2). It would have been the biggest camp of the Nazi camp system, since at that time a camp for 10,000 prisoners was already considered exceptionally large.¹⁸ But when the Nazis' war effort foundered, these ambitious plans for Lublin as well as for the Majdanek camp quickly became unattainable. Already in April 1942 Himmler gave orders to cut down the total volume of the camp to 50,000 prisoners. In the end, only a scaled-down version of the original plan was realized: In summer 1943, the camp measured approximately 270 hectares and consisted of a prisoner camp with six fields, an SS wing with accommodation and supply facilities, and a manufacturing area (see Figure 3). The number of inmates never exceeded 25,000. On average about 10,000 to 15,000 people were detained in the camp at any given time.¹⁹

In September 1941, the first SS men were transferred from Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen to Majdanek. The former camp guard SS Unterscharführer Heinz Villain remembered his arrival in an interview in Eberhard Fechners' documentary registered between 1975 and 1981 as follows: "The conditions were beastly [*saumäßig*]."²⁰ When the first group of ten female guards joined Majdanek in October 1942,²¹ the construction of the camp was not yet finished. Charlotte W. remembered in an interrogation in 1976 during the Majdanek trial in Düsseldorf that upon their arrival, there was no accommodation available: "We were very pissed [*sauer*] about the whole thing, those of us who did not agree [to being transferred to Majdanek, EMK]."²² The women spent the first night in a private house in the city of Lublin before being lodged temporarily in an annex camp of Majdanek. There they had to share rooms, a circumstance they did not appreciate. Charlotte W. called the accommodation "primitive."²³ In March

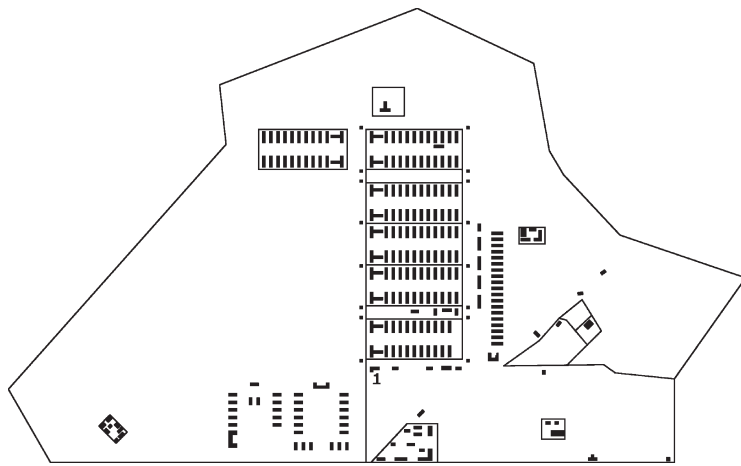


Figure 3. Majdanek, realization, 1943.

1943, the *Aufseherinnen*, who in Ravensbrück had been used to a certain level of comfort and a modern living environment, were finally relocated to a wooden barracks in the SS section of the main camp (see #1, Figure 3) where they lived until the evacuation of the women's camp in May 1944.

In order to understand the destruction wrought in Majdanek, it is useful to think of the concentration camp as a working place and a living environment in an everyday historical sense. It may appear inappropriate to speak of the “everyday” of Fascism and especially of a concentration and extermination camp like Majdanek. However, to scrutinize the everyday does not mean to banalize the camps, but instead to historicize them in order to understand how the female and male camp guards could live in the camps, carry out their “work,” and kill for a living over the course of several years. Not only the work experiences but also the private lives of the SS men are of interest: an analysis of the everyday includes such domains as work, leisure, habitation, nutrition, and sexuality, etc. By “everydayness” I do not only mean formal routines. Instead, the term encompasses the living and working environment (*Lebenswelt*) in which people deal with a given reality and with each other on a daily or regular basis.²⁴ By putting the behaviour, experience, and perceptions of female and male camp personnel in the centre, we can gain a specific view of how the camp guards dealt with the given conditions and arrayed themselves within the wider socio-political landscape of the camp.

“I recall that it was very, very cold,”²⁵ remembered Hertha E. in a postwar interrogation about her arrival in Majdanek in January 1943. The only thing the former *Aufseherin* Erika W. recalled in 1976 about her two months in the camp at the Maidanek trial was the wet ground and the “mud alleys.”²⁶ A look at the weather reports of the *Wehrmacht* show that the climate conditions were indeed harsher than those to which the Austrian and German SS staff were accustomed.²⁷ The region of Lublin had very long, cold, and snowy winters and very hot

summers with plagues of mosquitoes.²⁸ Between these seasons, the frequent heavy rainfalls brought flooding and, in freezing temperatures, ice. Although the SS personnel, unlike the camp prisoners, were very well outfitted with winter and summer uniforms, the guards often complained about the “inhospitable” weather conditions during the postwar interrogations.

Not only was the climate unfamiliar to the SS personnel; other factors also served to underscore the foreignness of the place. The composition of the inmates and the scale of the camp were quite new. While the female and male guards had been employed in camps within the *Reich* to supervise prisoners who mainly originated from Austria and Germany and with whom they shared a common language and culture, in the GG they were confronted with people who came predominantly from Eastern Europe. An average prisoner in Majdanek had only occasionally spoken German. The former guards described the facility in a pejorative manner as a markedly Jewish, Polish and Russian camp. In addition, the guard to inmate ratio at Majdanek was also different: according to a correspondence between the camp administration and the central administration in Berlin (*Wirtschaftsverwaltungshauptamt*), Majdanek disposed only of 19 *Aufseherinnen* to supervise over 7,000 female inmates.²⁹ By comparison, in Ravensbrück the female guards in the early years supervised an average of 20–25 inmates, and even supervising a group of a hundred was considered an extraordinarily large workload.³⁰

Unsurprisingly, Majdanek was a quite chaotic place when contrasted with the better-organized camps in the *Reich*. During its existence there were constant problems with the water supply and drainage that regularly caused large-scale typhoid fever epidemics.³¹ And since the SS did not try to improve the sanitary situation for the inmates, living conditions got worse to the point that the epidemics also affected the SS guards. Almost all of them recalled in their interrogations that they had fallen sick at some point, struggling with typhus.³² These illnesses of the staff members are documented by the camp correspondence with the military hospitals. Even though the camp guards benefited from good medical care and convalescent leave, they experienced their stay in Majdanek as an “imposition.”

In postwar interrogations, all of them emphasized that they had been transferred there for disciplinary reasons. That discourse certainly reflected a defensive strategy. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether the transfer to the Eastern camps was a promotion as some Ravensbrück survivors have claimed. Nanda Herbermann, for example, stated that only the most brutal and proven *Aufseherinnen* were sent to Auschwitz and Majdanek.³³ However, recent research findings on the personnel policy of the civil administration of the GG show that assignment to “the East” was a frequently used strategy for getting rid of unpopular or undisciplined colleagues.³⁴ Similar techniques can be observed for the camp commanders: the first commander of Majdanek, Karl-Otto Koch, had been transferred there in January 1942 while concurrently being investigated and charged by the SS tribunal with fraud in Buchenwald.³⁵ Majdanek was intended by Himmler as a last chance test, which Koch, incidentally, did not pass. Another commander,

Arthur Liebhenschel, had been transferred by Himmler to Majdanek as a punishment for a private love affair.³⁶

A lack of documentation means that it is impossible to determine the exact reasons for the transfers of ordinary female and male guards, but it is important to note that they experienced and perceived their transfer to Majdanek as a form of punishment and a hardship. At the same time, however, it would be misleading to focus solely on the disadvantages. Despite the fact that the Austrian and German SS personnel experienced the working and living conditions in Majdanek as a form of degradation, their stay in the GG cannot be categorized as a totally negative experience.

Colonial experiences in the Nazi East

In fact, the GG offered numerous advantages. Whereas the job as a camp guard already meant a social advancement for the majority of the women and men due to the stable income and the status as a functionary of the *Reich*, assignment to the “East” involved yet another step up on the social ladder. This is because the GG can be categorized as an “apartheid” society in which the imperial Germans (*Reichsdeutsche*) were able to take up a leading position *vis-à-vis* the Jews, the Poles and also the indigenous ethnic Germans (*Volksdeutsche*).³⁷ Poles, for instance, had to carry with them a special identification card, which certified them as ethnic Poles or Poles of German origin (*deutschstämmig*). In everyday life, the space of the Poles was strictly separated from that of the German occupiers. This applied to rail travel as well as to hotel stays. In the Baedeker travel guide from 1943 one can read: “The headmen of large and medium-sized train stations are German officers, whereas for the rest, mainly Polish and Ukrainian personnel are used, though they mostly speak a little German. For German passengers special ticket offices, waiting rooms, gates and railway cars are available.”³⁸

The Polish historian Bogdan Musial identifies the type of government in the GG as a mixture between a governance administration (*Regierungsverwaltung*) and a colonial administration (*Kolonialverwaltung*).³⁹ The social dynamics, however, were different from those in the *Reich*: In the GG, imperial Germans from socially modest backgrounds advanced to the highest level of the social hierarchy due to their “racial” and cultural distinctions.⁴⁰ This racial and cultural superiority stipulated by the Nazi ideology was part of the everyday experience of the occupying Germans. In the capitals of the Districts and in the bathing and health resorts, there were special hotels for Germans. In smaller towns, hotels kept separate rooms with higher standards for the German clients.⁴¹ This superior status increased the self-confidence of the Austrian and German occupiers.

The colonial political context also shaped gender relations in wartime Poland, where German women were authorized to give orders and issue instructions to Polish men.⁴² The British historian Elizabeth Harvey speaks about “instilling *Herrenbewußtsein*”⁴³ into those women who served as settlement instructors and teachers in the annexed and occupied portions of Poland. One can observe a similarly increasing self-assurance among the female guards in Majdanek. Whereas

their male colleagues described the newly arrived *Aufseherinnen* in Majdanek as alienated and shocked, within a few months, they had acquired a different posture and moved with ease in the camp and the city of Lublin.

The city centre of Lublin offered numerous facilities where Germans could spend their free time: public baths, an outdoor swimming pool, two libraries, a bookshop and a variety of coffeehouses and restaurants. A theatre and a cinema, the “*Deutsche Lichtspiele*” offered entertainment for the evenings (see Figure 4).⁴⁴ The café *Deutsches Haus* included a concert and dance hall which the former *Aufseherinnen* remembered fondly during their interrogations. In Fechner’s documentary, Luzie H. recalled the café with its dancing as her favourite spot (*Stammlokal*): “And when we entered the café where we used to hang out, and the band saw me, they immediately started to play *Alte Kameraden*. Because they knew that this was my favorite song. And then I paid for a round, of course. Once, the husband of my cousin was visiting and he was astonished that they played my song and that the band raised their glasses to us. And I said, yes, that that is my favorite song and my favorite place.”⁴⁵ The self-confident appearance and patronizing, mainly male-connoted, gestures of the 33-year-old single woman were acknowledged by her cousin with amazement and appreciation, at least in retrospect. This self-representation of the *Aufseherin* corresponds to her role as a German colonial in a master position.

Another “attraction” of the GG was the bonus pay the SS staff received for their assignment abroad. In addition, the female and male guards in occupied Poland received special rations of liquor and cigarettes that they could exchange for fresh food or money on the black market.⁴⁶ Besides this crucial barter business, Majdanek offered the SS staff the possibility of enriching themselves with the belongings of the robbed and killed inmates, first of all Jews, since Majdanek was part of the so-called “*Aktion Reinhardt*.”⁴⁷ As the former SS man Otto Z. stated in the Majdanek trial in 1977, the SS staff took money from the prisoners in the camp on a regular basis, but also before their entry into the gas chambers.⁴⁸ Even though it was strictly forbidden and severely punished, “in the camp, the SS dealt with and against anything.”⁴⁹ Apart from the possibility of seizing objects of value and money directly from the prisoners, the guards could also secretly supply themselves with clothes and commodities from the well-supplied camp stocks.

Although the SS staff experienced their stay in Majdanek as a disadvantage, they were at the same time aware of the benefits of their assignment in the East. A cross-examination by the British prosecutor of a former female guard is therefore very revealing. In the Belsen trial held in immediate aftermath of the war, Hertha E. testified as follows:

The Judge Advocate: Did you always get the same pay while you were serving in the S.S.?

Hertha E.: No, I got more.

The Judge Advocate: How much pay were you receiving when you were sent as a punishment to Lublin?

Hertha E.: I think it was about 170 or 180 marks a month.

The Judge Advocate: And how much did you get in Lublin?

Hertha E.: The same. Some extra pay for being in a foreign country.

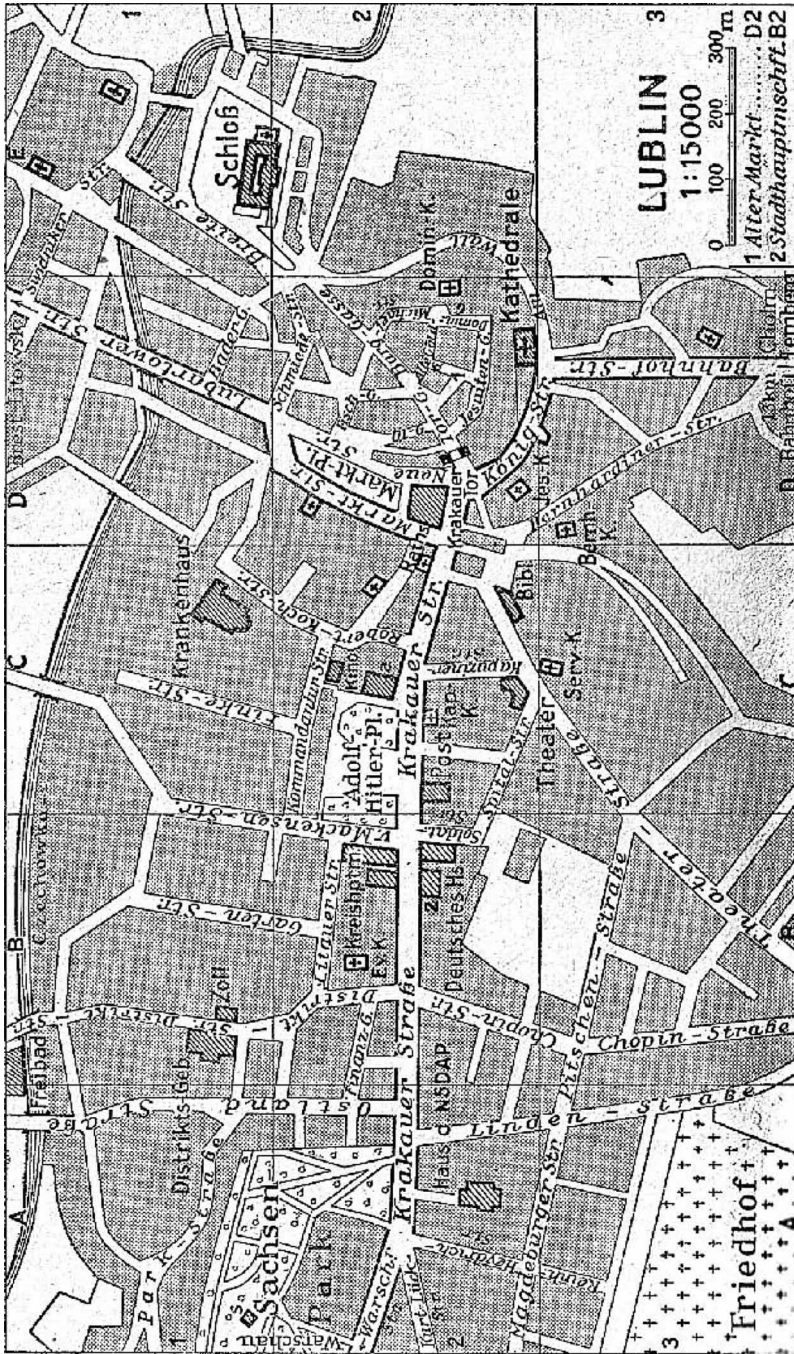


Figure 4. Lublin city centre in 1943/44, in *Das Generalgouvernement. Reisehandbuch* von Karl Baedeker (Leipzig: Baedeker 1943), p 128.

The Judge Advocate: Where did the punishment come in? I do not follow how you were punished by being sent to Lublin if you got more money?

Hertha E.: Because the camps in Poland were not quite as cultivated as the camps in the German *Reich*.

Colonel Backhouse: I think the translation is wrong.

The President: I think she meant “civilized.”

Colonel Backhouse: Yes.

The Judge Advocate: Do you mean the living conditions for the S.S. were better in Ravensbrück than they were in Lublin?

Hertha E.: No, they were better in the East, in Lublin.

The Judge Advocate: I do not want to waste time, so I will just put it to you once again, and then I will leave it. I gather you performed the same sort of duties as an *Aufseherin*, you got the same pay and a bonus, and the conditions were no worse for you. Why do you say it was a punishment?

Hertha E.: It is a punishment because you do not feel very well in such a camp.⁵⁰

Thus the remote assignment offered the SS staff in their everyday work and living numerous advantages due to its location. The working routine was followed more casually than in camps within the *Reich*; Majdanek also gave the SS staff opportunities to enrich themselves. Within this colonial society the Austrian and German SS personnel held a dominant position *vis-à-vis* Poles and ethnic Germans; they were the direct profiteers of the Nazi occupation and extermination policies.

Despite these “advantages,” it was, as Hertha E. stated in court in 1945, rather a matter of emotional experience and “feelings.” For Germans and Austrians, Majdanek was literally at the far end of the “civilized” world, close to the Eastern front. The female SS guards trained in Ravensbrück could no longer spend free weekends at home with their families and friends or simply go for a trip to the nearby capital. Travelling home from Majdanek could take several days, depending on wartime conditions. There were no German cities in the Lublin area. A transfer to this camp was therefore not seen by the SS personnel as a promotion; the female and male guards perceived the working conditions and living environment in Majdanek as particularly nasty. Such prejudices and fears of “the East” were also evoked by Elisabeth H. in Fechner’s documentary, when she cited her mother’s concerns and objections to her transfer to occupied Poland. “Yes—er—and I should not go there. Why not, I said, so I come out a little bit.”⁵¹ Here an adventurous spirit shines through the fear of the unknown. This discourse shows that the “foreign” and “dangerous” posting could at the same time be feared and yet considered “attractive.” Looking back at this time during their interrogations, the former Majdanek camp guards at times expressed a sense of attraction and positive experiences despite the generally negative, complaining tenor of their reports.

Dynamics of destruction: emotions, enemy figures and practices of violence

In the following pages I would like to focus on how specific Nazi representations of “the East” and its inhabitants combined with the experiences of the SS staff on

the ground to shape the violence and extermination practices in Majdanek. I follow the French sociologist Jacques Sémelin in using the term “destruction.”⁵² This concept encompasses the processes by which the victims were dehumanized before their elimination and leaves open the killing methods (fire, water, hunger, cold as well as other methods of direct, indirect, quick and slow killing). Collective violence and killing against noncombatant civilians or disabled combatants always involves a total asymmetry between the aggressors and the victims. Sémelin therefore calls it “one-sided destruction.” As he points out, massive destruction always requires a certain degree of organization, although this does not exclude improvisation, acceleration, pauses and radicalization by the implementors on the ground.

Sémelin’s concept is useful for analysing the mass killing at the concentration and extermination camp Majdanek, because it allows for the inclusion of—without necessarily equating—the extermination of the European Jews and the mass killing of prisoners of other nationalities. It also allows me to consider not only the extermination of inmates in massacres and gas chambers, but also other, “lesser” violence. The Polish survivor Jan Novak remembered the SS officer Hermann Hackmann, *Schutzhaftlagerführer* and second in command after the camp commander Karl-Otto Koch, in the following way:

Hackmann represented for me a miserable figure. He was at the time a young man in his thirties, elegant, wearing white gloves. I remember that he held the morning roll call in front of block one. Those left from the big group of Soviet POW’s, approximately 35 persons, were standing in rags, tattered Russian caps and uniform coats, before him, the elegant one. This contrast was devastating and depressing at the same time. It was at the end of February 1942. [...]

During that roll call he approached the POWs and flicked their military caps. I mean with a dog- or horsewhip. It was not a beating or a mistreatment; it was a disdainful gesture.⁵³

Physical violence is about the body. The manner whereby such violence is perpetrated is important because the body language and the gestures bear meaning. Lashing at the Soviet soldiers with a whip meant for animals represented in a military context a double humiliation. The impeccable uniform of an SS officer contrasted with the shabby outfits of the POWs, symbolizing the superiority and power position of the Nazi representative over the military as well as the ideological and racial enemies of the *Reich*. With this gesture, the *Schutzhaftlagerführer* Hackmann demonstrated his degradation of the Soviet prisoners.

Hackmann, who during the interrogations always devoted visible attention to remaining careful and contained, appeared quite relaxed in Fechner’s documentary when he said:

I came to Lublin in July 1941. The camp was still under construction, Polish civilians and Germans were working under my supervision till late fall. Then there were delivered the first *Unter-* [Hackmann paused for a moment, EMK], well er, I mean, Russian POWs. At that time they stayed in burrows which they had dug into the ground. When they came to Majdanek it had already snowed. One couldn’t see anybody and then, on a whistle they came crawling out of their holes.⁵⁴

It is remarkable that in the late 1970s, Hackmann still spoke of the Soviet POWs in the old manner by calling them “sub humans” (*Untermenschen*), then, noticing his *faux pas*, he censored himself at the last minute. His perception of the Soviet soldiers shows similarities with those revealed by the former commander of Auschwitz in his memoirs.⁵⁵ Höß also implicitly likened the POWs to animals when he spoke about how they “devoured” everything edible they could find, and denounced their “cannibalism” and savageness.

Neither Hackmann nor Höß took account of the extremely harsh conditions into which the camp administrations had placed the prisoners due to their chaotic management, neglect, and disdain. At the arrival of the first convoys of 5,000 Soviet soldiers in Majdanek in fall 1941, there were only four barracks ready. The men were exposed to harsh weather conditions, cold and damp, insufficiently clothed and malnourished, so that within a few months the majority perished. Even in 1975, Hackmann still had in mind only the labour shortage that the high mortality caused for the SS, when he claimed that “because the Russian POWs were mostly ill and therefore unsuited for labor assignments, we had to fall back on others [Jews from the Lublin region, EMK] to actually finish the camp.”⁵⁶

When it came to testifying about the Jewish camp inmates in the Majdanek trial as well as in the Fechner documentary, the former camp guards were very cautious. This might be explained by the fact that the mass killing of the European Jews was the main charge of the Majdanek trial. For the majority of the Austrian and German *Aufseherinnen*—except for those from Berlin and Vienna—the “Jewish question” had most likely been a rather abstract problem until their arrival at Majdanek. In Ravensbrück, the inmates were predominantly political and ideological opponents as well as so-called “asocial” and “criminal” women who, from a social racist point of view, did not fit in the Nazi conception of the “*Volksgemeinschaft*.” Yet at Majdanek, the prisoners were mostly Polish, of which a great number were of Jewish origin.

The so-called Eastern European Jews (*Ostjuden*) had already played a great role in anti-Semitic propaganda before the German occupation of Poland in 1939. Resentments against the Jewish population from Eastern Europe had been rampant in Austria and Germany since World War I and were far more aggressive than the “traditional” anti-Semitism against the assimilated Jews. Since the Eastern European Jews were less assimilated than the Western European Jewish communities, they distinguished themselves from the Christian Austrian and German society not only by their religion, but also by their language, culture and dress.⁵⁷ Hitler himself claimed that the Galician Jews who emigrated to Vienna between 1914 and 1918 had opened his eyes to the “Jewish question.”⁵⁸ After his seizure of power, the easily identifiable Eastern European Jews became the preferred target of discrimination, violence, and aggression.⁵⁹

The enemy images constructed by the Nazi propaganda were characterized by their “ugliness,” “dirtiness,” and “illness.” First and foremost, the “Jewish body” underwent a phenotypical fixation. These attributes were not only aesthetic categories, but also served social and political functions: the enemy embodied the abnormal and deviant and therefore became the projection screen for collective

fears and hate.⁶⁰ Such stereotypical body images were particularly prominent within the movie production industry. The anti-Semitic propaganda film *Der ewige Jude*, produced in 1940, employed visual as well as linguistic metaphors earmarking the Jews as vermin and comparing them to epidemics. The movie was shown to the German public free of charge in 1941, right at the beginning of the mass deportations of the German Jews to the concentration camps. As Paula Diehl points out, these propaganda images contributed powerfully to social imagery.⁶¹

In the GG, prejudices against Jews that had boosted by the propaganda were confirmed and reinforced.⁶² In his study of Austrian and German functionaries of the civil occupation administration, Bogdan Musial speaks of a cultural shock⁶³: the Jews from the GG represented in their eyes the “type” of the “Eastern Jew.” Veit Harlan, who directed the propaganda movie *Jud Süß* travelled to Lublin in 1940 and negotiated with the head of the District the use of 200 Lublin Jews as extras. The plan failed because, in the end, the Lublin Jews did not obtain permits to travel to Berlin.⁶⁴ Yet this detestation of the Jews did not deter the occupiers from employing Jewish housemaids, craftsmen, cooks, tailors, and dentists, who were forced to work without compensation as so-called “house Jews” (*Hausjuden*). The Germans unscrupulously exploited Jewish manpower until the last possible moment, enjoying a degree of comfort that they could have never afforded in the *Reich*. As Elizabeth Harvey showed in her study, the letters of female teachers and settlement instructors attest to the women’s ambivalent feelings, ranging from fascination and curiosity to, at the same time, disdain and disgust, on the rare occasions when they came into contact with the ghetto Jews.⁶⁵

Similar emotional states may also be presumed to have accompanied the assignment of the SS staff in Majdanek, who suddenly found themselves confronted with sick and shabby inmates. As we have seen, the epidemics in the camp were caused by the prisoners’ inadequate living conditions and were therefore a problem caused by the SS themselves. Yet the guards encountered the inmates, who were indeed potential disease carriers, with increasing fear and violence. As Elias Canetti elaborated in *Crowds and Power*, the fear of contagion shifts the social relations in alienating people to others within social groups. Unlike direct confrontations with an adversary, epidemics involve the enemy, e.g. the pathogenic germs, remaining unseen, so that the threat lurks everywhere. In such situations, the feelings that everyone shares are fear and mistrust. Both create an emotional and social distance between people.⁶⁶ In Majdanek, the acute threat of epidemics intensified the already inherent cultural, political and racial motivated distance between the SS guards and the prisoners. During the typhoid epidemics, the prisoner camp was shut down and the inmates were not allowed to leave their barracks, which drastically aggravated their situation and exposed the uncontaminated prisoners to the threat. But even in “normal” times, the conditions in the prisoner camp were so bad that to some extent the camp guards did not go into the prisoners’ barracks. When they came face to face with the physically deteriorated and filthy prisoners, the camp guards experienced disgust and revulsion.

Such feelings had a direct impact on the violence perpetrated and on its fervor. In particular, fear—anger, disgust, hatred and horror all contain elements of fear⁶⁷—was one of the dominant emotions in Majdanek. Not least to avoid the danger of contamination and direct bodily contact, the SS—men and women—used whips and sticks in Majdanek, or kicked the prisoners with their leather boots. “The *Aufseherinnen* were afraid to touch a prisoner,” remembered Rywka Aweonska in the Majdanek trial. “They always screamed ‘itchy Jewess’.”⁶⁸ The instruments used as weapons meant not only a greater vigour, but also an additional humiliation. “They lashed out at us as if we were animals,”⁶⁹ stated Stanislaw Chwiejczak in court. Fear behind the Eastern front bore the direct impacts of the perpetrated violence, as the French historian Christian Ingrao has pointed out.⁷⁰ It is therefore not surprising that sick and deteriorated prisoners, first and foremost Jews, but also Soviet POWs and Poles, were a primary target of physical violence in Majdanek. The extreme violence of the SS guards in the camp can be seen as an attempt to destroy the “objects” of their fear, the ill prisoner or the carrier of disease, and to neutralize their own state of fear.

As the British historian Joanna Bourke states, emotions are about power relations as they link the individual with the social, they animate relationships between the individual and the social, and they negotiate the boundaries between the self and others.⁷¹ Like several of her colleagues, the former *Aufseherin* Hertha E. mentioned in a hearing in 1972 her fear of partisan incidents (*Partisanenüberfälle*).⁷² The danger posed by partisans to the German occupying forces was exploited in the GG for propagandistic reasons and exaggerated in order to mobilize civil society. Within postwar discourse, it also offered a way of seeing and representing oneself as a victim and not a perpetrator. Nevertheless, the real or imaginary fears of the SS staff generated violence against the inmates and, at the same time, engendered solidarity among the SS, because shared emotions bind people together.

Emotions had an impact on the concrete experiences of the female and male camp guards of the GG, in the sense that beliefs profoundly influence individual feelings as well as actions and behaviour. Even though emotions are constituted by politics, culture and the social, the agents, in our case the SS staff in Majdanek, were involved actively in this dynamic process. The female and male SS guards did not merely reproduce Nazi ideology, but rather appropriated it, by charging with meaning and activating it.⁷³ Referring to Alf Lüdtke, the concept of *appropriation* implies a versatile, formative, and sensual interpretation of social norms, discourses, practices and coercions by the agents.⁷⁴ By attributing sense to the world, the SS men made themselves accessible to their environment and at the same time reacted according to the diverse structural and cultural conditions in which they were embedded.

Conclusion

The transfer to Lublin, a peripheral corner of the German empire, was not considered a promotion by the SS personnel, but rather as a punishment and

“imposition.” In general, the female and male guards experienced their arrival at the camp as a shock; the relatively spartan living conditions often caused frustration. Especially for the women, the accommodation in a wooden barracks represented a marked decline. These rudimentary living conditions were due to the megalomaniacal miscalculations of Himmler and his staff, as well as to the chaotic and irresponsible SS administration on the ground, and had disastrous consequences on the inmates’ living conditions and on the inner dynamic of the camp and the violence perpetrated in Majdanek.

As we have seen, emotional states like frustration (about the primitiveness of the camp, the climatic conditions, the uncomfortable living and working conditions) and fear (of the “East” and its inhabitants, fear of disease, as well as fear of disorder and dirt) combined to form a destructive dynamic. In particular, the omnipresent fear of epidemics, which threatened the SS, played a major role in the camp guards’ everyday violent behaviour. Interplay between the fear of contamination and the distaste for the prisoners was a decisive factor in the SS personnel’s indifference toward the suffering of the inmates and should not be underestimated as a main cause for physical violence. As the Polish historian Tomasz Kranz pointed out, 60% of the prisoners did not die in the gas chambers in Majdanek, but as a result of starvation, exhaustion, epidemics and ill treatment by the SS personnel.⁷⁵

In order to understand and explain the camp’s violent dynamics, the cultural colonial context as well as the emotional experiences of the guards is of central importance. In the first half of the twentieth century, German existential orientations (*Befindlichkeiten*) and perceived requirements projected East-Central and Eastern Europe as a space for the creation of a “German East.”⁷⁶ Images of “the East,” constituted during World War I and the period in between the two Wars, served as a basis for the Nazi conception and policies of a “people without space” (*Volk-ohne-Raum*). A culturally defined German feeling of superiority *vis-à-vis* the Slavs had already existed during World War I,⁷⁷ but with National Socialism came a greatly amplified political-racial component. To this was added geopolitical fears of the “Asian” Soviet superpower. The war of extermination on the Eastern front was meant to create a new living space (*Lebensraum*).⁷⁸ The Nazi image of “the enemy” targeted on the one hand the so-called Judeo-Bolsheviks as the evil incarnations *par excellence*, and on the other the Slavs who, according to the ambitious German conquest and settlement plans, were “sub humans” and should play the role of working slaves.⁷⁹

Anxiety and fear of the “East” and its inhabitants, debates about the “dirt” and underdevelopment of the “East” and in particular about the fear of “the” Jews and Russians were used politically to legitimate the Nazi seizure of the new territories; prejudices also comforted and justified the leading German position over “subordinated” groups, as we have seen with Hackmann. At the same time the female and male guards did not simply reproduce emotion labels diffused by the propaganda, but appropriated them in an individual way and therefore contributed towards shaping the Nazi social imaginary. As the German socio-psychologist Gudrun Brockhaus has pointed out in her work, concepts like “order” (*Ordnung*),

“cleanliness” (*Reinheit*), and “hygiene” (*Hygiene*) were individually emotionally charged.⁸⁰ The “East” let Austrians and Germans experience their emotional prejudices in a “live” setting and the intensity of these emotions is still present in their memories.

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