

In the final stages of World War II, the situation in the German Nazi concentration camps was a tragic one. The already bad conditions in the camps had grown much worse, and the staff of the camps were increasingly losing control over the prisoners. The social structure that had formed at the camps during their operation began to disintegrate. After the camps were liberated the military authorities attempted to bring the situation under control, but during the first days their actions had limited effect. Liberation did not therefore bring about an immediate transformation of the camps into new institutions, such as displaced persons camps. Before such transformation came a phase of transition. **The goal of my project is to describe and analyze the functioning of concentration camps in the phase of transition (shortly before liberation and in the first days afterwards) and the mechanisms by which the camps entered and emerged from that phase.**

Prisoners describe the phase of transition as a time of chaos. Adolf Gawalewicz, a prisoner at the Bergen-Belsen camp, wrote: “The first days after liberation were (...) in practice a period of almost complete collapse of authority. To the outside observer these were undoubtedly days of chaos and horror. All dams burst. The force of human passions flowed wide” (Gawalewicz 2000: 135). **In my project I put forward the hypothesis that what was experienced by witnesses as chaos can be captured in scholarly analysis by reference to the category of *necrocommunitas*.**

The notion of *communitas* was introduced to the social sciences by the anthropologist Victor Turner, to describe a society devoid of structure or having only a vestigial structure, in which individuals are equal or differ only to a small degree, and interpersonal communication is usually direct (2008). That author used the term in the context of rites of passage, but it is also well-suited to such times when the sociocultural world somehow ceases to function, as happened at the concentration camps in the phase of transition. **I add the prefix *necro-* (from the Greek *nekros*, meaning ‘dead’) to reflect the fact that, apart from the exhausted prisoners, the most important participants in the world of the camps in the phase of transition were dead bodies.** In many camps, shortly before liberation, there were piles of emaciated corpses or ditches filled with bodies, which might at any time spark an epidemic. Action taken with respect to the bodies intensified after the camps’ liberation, but burying or burning them required time. **In using the notion of *necrocommunitas* I draw attention to the fact that, in describing the functioning of the concentration camps in the phase of transition, I will be pointing out the actions that people took with respect to the dead bodies, and also the ways in which the bodies influenced the living.**

I will research the phenomenon of *necrocommunitas* using the example of three concentration camps: Buchenwald, Bergen-Belsen and Dachau. I have selected these camps because at the end of the war, due to the arrival of new groups of prisoners from camps that had previously been evacuated, the living conditions there—already extremely poor—worsened considerably. Some of the camp staff fled, and many exhausted and often dying prisoners were not capable of undertaking any kind of activity. The liberation of these camps began only with the arrival of American and British troops in April 1945. Due to, among other things, the high death rate among prisoners and the omnipresence of dead bodies, the tragic situation in those places persisted during the first days after liberation.

My analysis will be based on source materials available in the archives of museums established on the sites of the former camps of Dachau, Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen, and in other places, including the Imperial War Museum in London and the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. **To begin with I plan to focus on making a detailed description and analysis of the source material relating to particular camps (case studies). After that I will make a comparison of my three selected cases and formulate a description of a certain type of social structure.**

I became interested in questions relating to the phase of transition when researching the post-war history of the concentration camp at Auschwitz. I observed then that what took place in the last days before liberation and in the first days after it did not resemble either the period of normal operation of the camps, or the period when new institutions were being established on the former camps’ sites. Even today, on every anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz or the end of the war, the media show us piles of dead bodies or ditches filled with corpses, which are intended to remind us of the reality of the camps. However, they do not show us the world of the camps, only its disintegration. They depict the functioning of the camps in the phase of transition, about which we know much less than about the previous operation of the camps. This gap in our knowledge about what happened at that time is one that my project is intended to fill.