

Book Review: The Complete Lives of Camp People: Colonialism, Fascism, Concentrated Memory by Rudolph Mrázek

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Mrázek, Rudolph. *The Complete Lives of Camp People: Colonialism, Fascism, Concentrated Memory*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020. vi + 485 pages. Paperback, \$32.95.

In *The Complete Lives of Camp People*, historian Rudolph Mrázek makes a fresh contribution to Duke University Press's year-old series, *Theory in Forms*. Like his previous works that examined diverse types of documents fitting the historical themes, and forms, under consideration, Mrázek takes as his central point of analysis in this new work a comparison between the Nazi-era concentration camp Theresienstadt and the Dutch East Indies camp Boven Digoel. Born in Prague, where he received his Ph.D. in history from Charles University, and pursuing a research agenda that has focused on Indonesia, Mrázek is uniquely situated to cast the net broadly to compare these two camps on a multitude of fronts.

The Theresienstadt camp-ghetto functioned from November 1941 until the defeat of Nazi Germany in May 1945. A labor camp, a camp for "prominent" Jews, and a transit camp to Auschwitz (but always targeting Europe's Jews), Theresienstadt served many purposes. Mrázek recounts its propaganda use, a demonstration to the Red Cross and others of the presumed humane conditions in all Nazi camps. By contrast, Boven Digoel, open between 1927 and 1943, operated as an isolation center for Indonesian rebels, primarily communists, who had in 1927 and 1928 attempted to overthrow Dutch colonial rule. Mrázek reminds the reader often that neither camp was Auschwitz, overtly removing that comparison from the equation of his analyses.

The book's title is apt, as Mrázek has indeed constructed a "complete" description of life in these camps. This work folds many social science disciplines into the history told, in particular philosophy and anthropology. References to philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and Max Horkheimer are frequent, and while Clifford Geertz is mentioned only once and Benedict

Anderson rarely, the entire work is itself a thick description (à la Geertz) and an exploration of every type of community imagined (Anderson) within the camps.

Mrázek organizes this work in five parts, or five things: Fashion, Sound, Light, City, and Scattering. Each part is subdivided into three or four component things, for example, Clothes and Sport under “Fashion,” or Clearing, Enlightenment, and Limelight under “Light.” In each of these thematic chapters, Mrázek brings together every type of pertinent, even oblique, reference one could possibly consider. For instance, in the chapter “Beauty Spots,” Mrázek delineates the empowering functions of wearing lipstick, of fashioning accessories like armbands and patches, and of making cosmetic changes to camp uniforms. Likewise, he discusses a preoccupation with skin tone and color, with “pink” indicating valuable good health. Throughout this section, Mrázek utilizes camp regulations and reports, memoirs and diaries, novels, and philosophy tracts to support his interpretations of modernity in the camps.

In the section on Light, the reader experiences how Mrázek uses philosophy to augment history. He draws on Heidegger’s concept of “Lichtung,” which translates to clearing, but which also, with its root “Licht,” references light itself, and illumination, and by extension, Enlightenment. This is a good example of how Mrázek plays with overlapping words, concepts, and canonical thinking to examine a camp, in this case Boven Digoel, where clearings in the jungles needed to be made to even create the camp. Theresienstadt also had to be cleared of Czechs in advance of its use by the Nazis. Almost cubist in perspective, where every Thing is observed from multiple angles, Mrázek’s tactic is thoroughgoing.

A strength of this work is its emphasis on portraying the lives of camp people as they *lived* them. Mrázek leads his reader through the quotidian activities of the camps, touching on theatre, music, study—even the geography of the camps in their block arrangements. He

references the Viennese philosopher Hans Vaihinger, who developed the idea of “as if.” Vaihinger quotes Friedrich Nietzsche when he concludes “This is ‘the wisdom of illusion’” (p. 192). In memoirs, camp inhabitants related how they were living “as if”—as if it were a life. Perhaps illusory, but engaging life as one met it, within the limits of the camps, enabled prisoners to fashion a life modeled on a memory of a previous life.

One aspect of the writing that one might sometimes find misplaced were the occasions where Mrázek in essence broke the “fourth wall” of historical writing. He includes his own first-person commentaries on quotes from memoirs, or events at the camps. He guesses at the gender of letter writers based on his assessment of their handwriting; he imagines the last moments of a prisoner being hung with “I try to imagine the song at the moment it ended, the last tone, or shriek of it” (p. 110). Each of these examples is in the chapter titled “Voice”; they illustrate Mrázek’s agility in bringing together a multitude of sources in each chapter to portray all aspects of his themes.

In turn, this book requires intellectual agility on the part of readers. The references, while well-explained, are so comprehensive that it challenges readers to concentrate their own memory of their catalog of knowledge. This challenge should be gladly accepted, as Mrázek has provided the means of developing entirely new analyses of the history of concentration camps.

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