

Historical Authenticity and Social Reflection: A Study of Dark Tourism at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial Site

Xinyue Mao

School of Arts and Social Sciences, The Australia National University, Canberra, Australia

Abstract: Holocaust memorial sites, as central destinations of dark tourism, hold profound significance in historical education, social introspection, and emotional engagement by exposing the extreme brutality in human history. Using Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp as a representative case study, this study investigates its social impact as an infamous historical memorial site established during World War II. The study reveals that visitors' motivations encompass learning historical truths, commemorating victims, probing into the form of dark tourism, and forging emotional bonds with survivors. Through visiting the relics such as gas chambers and crematoria, visitors undergo a psychological transition from sympathy to empathy, interweaving personal recollection with collective memory, thereby prompting deep reflections on humanity, peace, and racial violence. The social impact of such memorial sites is primarily manifested in three interrelated aspects: first, enhancing social cohesion through affective education; second, encouraging critical thinking about racial discrimination and violence; and third, reinforcing the perception of historical authenticity through tangible artifacts and historical records. These sites function not only as silent witnesses to history but also as stark warnings for the future, compelling individuals to uphold the values of peace, justice, and human rights.

Keywords: Holocaust Memorial Sites, Dark Tourism, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Historical Education, Social Impact.

1. Introduction

Dark tourism sites denote locations associated with past violence, armed conflicts, genocide, or natural disasters, including prisons, concentration camps, battlefields, war memorials, and cemeteries. It is a phenomenon of traveling to sites connected with catastrophic historical events like mass death, human suffering, and large-scale disasters. These locations often carry immense political and historical significance, particularly tied to the worst atrocities. Currently, with a growing recognition of historical consciousness for future development, forms of tourism emphasizing historical authenticity and commemorative value, including dark tourism, are gaining popularity.

Memorial sites of massacres constitute significant components of dark tourism, offering platforms for historical education and cultural dialogue, and serving as profound reminders of the horrors of war and the necessity of peace. Like a deep chasm beneath the ladder of peace, these memorial sites, by reflecting on traumatic historical events, highlight the fragility of peace. This paper takes the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp as an example to examine the social impact exerted by memorial sites of massacres as dark tourism destinations, beginning with the historical background of Auschwitz-Birkenau and elucidating visitors' motivations and emotional experiences.

2. The Historical Background of Auschwitz-Birkenau

Auschwitz-Birkenau was one of the principal extermination camps established by Nazi Germany, used to carry out the systematic mass murder of Jews. At this site, millions of Jews and other prisoners were imprisoned, abused, and cruelly slaughtered. The Auschwitz concentration camp was initially established in 1940 by German authorities in the outskirts of Oswiecim, intended to incarcerate individuals

classified as enemies by the Nazi regime and German occupation administration. In 1941, Nazi Germany further expanded the Auschwitz concentration camp and established Birkenau camp (Auschwitz II) and Monowitz (Auschwitz III), comprising the IG Farben factory. These locations became major sites for the large-scale slaughter of the prisoners [1]. The establishment of the Auschwitz concentration camp was due to the number of people arrested exceeding the capacity of local prisons. The initial purpose of its establishment was not for genocide but for the confinement of forced laborers. Nevertheless, from 1942 onwards, Auschwitz-Birkenau evolved into the largest extermination center, serving as the primary site for the Nazi extermination of Jews and other prisoner groups. Birkenau camp constitutes the largest part of the entire camp complex, equipped with large-scale extermination facilities and the entire camp was permeated with "terror, genocide, and massacre." Tens of thousands of people perished in the camp's gas chambers.

The Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp was liberated by the Soviet Red Army in January 1945, becoming a central memorial site following the conclusion of World War II [2]. On June 14, 1947, the Auschwitz State Museum was officially opened, designated as a "monument to the martyrdom of the Polish nation and other nations," with the mission of collecting evidence and documentation related to Nazi crimes and opening them to the public for exhibition [3]. The memorial was established primarily for commemoration and education, seeking to reveal the atrocities committed by the Nazis through the dynamic interplay between the landscape and memory [4], encouraging visitors to learn from the experiential lessons derived from their visit. The expansion of the global tourism industry has led to a steady increase in visitor numbers to the Auschwitz concentration camp. Over time, Auschwitz has progressively become an international memorial and historical education site. It functions not only as a historical landmark of the Holocaust but also as an essential platform for advancing historical understanding,

human rights education, and the development of human society.

3. Visitors' Motivation for Visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau

Tourist motivations are widely regarded as one of the key factors shaping tourist behavior and on-site experiences [5]. Dark tourism research have long focused on tourists' motives for visiting. The motivations of dark tourists typically encompass seeking new experiences or adventures, acquiring knowledge and expanding their understanding of previously unknown things, and seeking deeper levels of cognitive and emotional resonance [6]. These motivations largely affect both people's choices of specific tourist destinations and their experiences during visit. For historic sites like the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, tourists' motives for visiting are particularly important because these motives directly impact their attitudes, behavioral responses, and emotional experiences throughout the visit.

Firstly, visitors with an intense interest in history are primarily motivated by a desire to comprehend the truth behind the events through direct engagement with historical sites. These visitors aspire to deepen their understanding of historical truths by learning about the development history of the Auschwitz concentration camp and gaining insight into the related events and living conditions of prisoners.

Secondly, certain visitors are driven by a desire to commemorate the victims. These visitors may include empathetic persons with personal experiences of similar situations, or descendants and relatives of those who perished in the camp. They visit the camp to understand history and to express remembrance and respect for the victims of persecution. For these visitors, visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau represents a religious, moral, and emotional experience, serving as a commemoration of the human suffering and tragedy [7].

Auschwitz-Birkenau is a prominent dark tourism destination, where the sites represented by the Auschwitz concentration camp provide visitors with opportunities to directly witness and explore the locations where these events unfolded, functioning as tangible manifestations of history or testimony of death [8]. Numerous visitors' motivations for visiting closely correlate with their interest in this type of tourism. Driven by curiosity to explore sites of tragedy and to gain a unique travel experience through dark tourism, these visitors view visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp as part of an exploration into humanity's tragic histories.

Furthermore, the motivation of certain visitors is to establish a meaningful connection with Holocaust survivors. They engage in conversations with the survivors to access and understand the most authentic living conditions during the historical period. Through these interactions, they strive to deeply resonate with the survivors.

4. About visitors' emotional responses

During their visit, tourists can see various preserved buildings including barracks, workshops, gas chambers, and crematoria, alongside exhibitions and memorials presenting historical documentation and survivor testimonies. Compared to other dark tourism destinations, visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau, a site where real tragedies occurred, falls into a relatively darker category of dark tourism [1]. This form of tourism can evoke profound emotional resonance among

visitors. In contrast to other tourist destinations, the experience at Auschwitz-Birkenau is more authentic and sobering. Visitors are not just sightseeing; they are, in a way, participating in a heart-wrenching drama on the cruel stage of history. This first-hand experience enables visitors to intensify the perception of historical violence, eliciting resonance, reflection, and psychological shock.

The visit to the Auschwitz-Birkenau memorial site is a journey where initial sympathy transforms into deeper empathy. Prior to the visit, tourists' cognitive understanding is often limited to abstract terms such as "death" and "suffering," which stand in stark contrast to their own relatively peaceful lives. As a result, many visitors may struggle to fully grasp the scale and horror of the Holocaust, and their emotional response remains at the level of general sympathy. However, upon stepping into the camp, direct observations and first-hand experiences immerse visitors in the atmosphere, allowing them to viscerally perceive the pain and agony of prisoners subjected to extremely cruel punishments. Stark juxtaposition provided by certain items, such as broken prostheses, human hair, and the slogan "Arbeit macht frei" ("Work sets you free"), also evoke profound psychological resonance.

The crematoria, which the Nazis utilized to incinerate the bodies of countless victims, stand as one of the most brutal symbols of the Holocaust [9]. Witnessing the crematoria first-hand, where millions of innocent lives were extinguished under the Nazi regime, can evoke a more visceral emotional response than words or pictures. Viewing such iconic items prompts visitors to contemplate and deepen their comprehension of the extreme cruelty of the Holocaust, shifting their psychological state from merely "recognizing the pain of the victims" to "experiencing pain in response to victims' suffering."

A visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau signifies a progression for the visitor from remembering the dead toward a deeper engagement with historical memory. Auschwitz is a symbol of the Holocaust as a whole and a specific site for tourists to confront the realities of the past in a physically and emotionally immersive way. Tourists typically visit the camp to learn about historical events and commemorate the dead, and through on-site engagement, they undergo a psychological and emotional impact, and ultimately achieve a more authentic understanding of the historical events. For many tourists, the motivation to travel to Auschwitz-Birkenau stems from a desire to bear witness—standing in solidarity with the victims and commemorating the suffering of the innocent. They come with a sense of awe, realizing that they stand at a crossroads of history. They are not just passive observers, but active witnesses and guardians of historical memory and truth. In this burial place of history, visitors' emotions are stirred. Through personal experience, tourists gain a deeper, more nuanced understanding of historical events.

Meanwhile, the act of visiting Auschwitz is also a process in which individual memory and collective memory jointly constitute a reflection of human nature. Auschwitz, for instance, the Holocaust Memorial Site is imbued with an atmosphere of death, suffering and violence, and tourists can see the personal letters, photographs and other items left behind by the victims who were brutally killed under extreme brutality. Through these remnants, they emotionally connect with the victims. This tangible proof of individual memory can make the abstract historical knowledge more concrete and

provoke deeper contemplation. Collective memory, distinct from individual memory, is constructed through the transmission of meaning from the lasting group memory, involving not only the group's perception of past events, but also the group's interpretation of the symbolic significance of these events [10]. As integral part of social consensus and cultural tradition, collective memory reflects the "social" and "cultural" values of a society, tribe, or nation. In other words, it represents the "spirit" and "heart" of a society, tribe, or nation [11]. Visitors can engage with collective memory through commemorative ceremonies, monuments, and so forth. The presentation of collective memory helps people recognize the Holocaust as a destruction of civilization and history, an obstruction to peaceful human life. This synthesis of individual and collective remembrance fosters critical reflection on the causes, processes, and consequences of the Holocaust, and ultimately leading to deeper contemplation on human nature.

5. The Social Impact of Visiting Holocaust Memorial Sites

5.1. Promoting Social Unity through Emotional Education

Emotional education refers to the cultivation of social-emotional abilities through structured processes and methods, including understanding, processing, managing, and appropriately expressing social emotions in daily life [12]. The significance of emotional education lies in fostering individuals' positive emotional attitudes and behaviors, enhancing their social adaptability and abilities to handle interpersonal relationships.

Memorials are sites endowed with affective and pedagogical value, capable of guiding visitors toward conclusions that conform to ethical principles and historical truth through the presentation of public information [13]. As an important carrier of emotional education, memorials elicit deep cognitive and emotional reflection on human tragedies by showcasing the cruelty and sorrow of history. This reflection not only contributes to the commemoration and warning against historical repetition but also encourages people to uphold the humanitarian spirit in contemporary society, fostering a more harmonious and inclusive social environment.

Holocaust memorials, through the presentation of historical events, the experiences of victims, and testimonies from survivors, cultivate a sense of responsibility for safeguarding peace and development, and inspire commitment to respecting and protecting human dignity, rights, and well-being. They promote social recognition and reflection on core humanitarian values, thus advocating for the principles of peace, justice, equality, and human rights.

5.2. Reflecting on Racial Violence through Memorial Site Visits

The Holocaust fundamentally involved systematic racial discrimination and large-scale slaughter. Memorial sites underscore the immense suffering inflicted upon victims through violent acts, fostering visitors' profound aversion to violence and urging them to pay attention to and reflect on contemporary social issues such as violence and racial discrimination. By confronting the historical brutality, visitors come to comprehend the severity of racial violence and the inhumanity of war.

The concept of racial discrimination can be traced back to the era of slavery, when African slaves were treated as inferior races, establishing deep-seated inequalities and segregation between racial groups. In contemporary society, racial discrimination has evolved into pervasive forms of inequality [14], such as implicit biases in professional and social environments, as well as structural discrimination embedded in resource allocation within social systems and institutions. Visiting Holocaust memorial sites enables individuals to reflect on the devastating consequences caused by historical racial discrimination and further consider the ongoing marginalization and unfair treatment of specific social and ethnic groups in modern society due to discrimination and systemic bias.

5.3. Understanding Historical Authenticity through Field Trips to Holocaust Sites

History is essential to the progress of human society, and historical authenticity entails facing up to historical facts and respecting historical truth. Nowadays, historical authenticity is increasingly challenged by the inherent limitations and fragmentary nature of historical records. The initial stage of historical learning involves engagement with recorded historical content, which forms the primary basis for our understanding of the past. The significance of this process lies in the fact that without knowledge of relevant historical information, it becomes exceedingly difficult to grasp the essential nature of the phenomena we encounter. For example, one may observe a plum fruit yet fail to recognize it as such without prior relevant knowledge [15]. Consequently, if there is a bias or distortion in the historical authenticity of what we are exposed to, our perception of the essential nature of the phenomenon may be flawed or even wrong.

The paramount value of respecting historical authenticity lies in the ethical imperative of honoring memories. Visiting the Holocaust Memorial Museum in person is a way to come into direct contact with history. During field visits, individuals can witness the historical traces, can perceive the tragedies of the dark period more intuitively, and derive genuine understanding through first-hand experience. As vital testaments to historical authenticity, physical materials are an indispensable component of Holocaust remembrance sites. Through field viewing and contact with these physical objects, visitors gain deeper insight into the details of historical events more deeply, fostering a more nuanced and grounded connection to historical authenticity. In the field visits, they can also listen to the survivors' relevant narratives, facilitating a multi-faceted, in-depth understanding, and acquiring the correct perception of history.

6. Conclusion

As a significant site of dark tourism, the Holocaust memorial not only condemns and criticizes historical violence and wars but also provokes profound reflection on human morality and humanity. When visiting these locations, the heart-wrenching remnants and painful memories compel visitors to think deeply about the darkest chapters of human history. Visitors are not merely watching or observing the cruel scenes of history, but also embarking on a spiritual journey. They must confront the severe consequences of man's atrocities against man, and consider each individual's role and responsibility for history. The reflection prompted by a visit to a Holocaust memorial site extends beyond historical

retrospection to encompass an examination of human nature and aspirations for the future. It arouses people's deep yearning for global peace and social justice, and inspires action and responsibility for building a more equitable and humane world.

This study has discussed the social impact of visiting Holocaust memorial sites, with a specific focus on Auschwitz-Birkenau. The insights derived from this study may be of assistance to my further research on dark tourism. The study acknowledges several limitations. For example, there was a lack of comprehensive visitor data, leading to limitations in robust data support. Despite these constraints, this study substantiates and confirm the argument that Holocaust memorial sites serve as crucial platforms for societal reflection, exemplifying the notions of "Don't forget" and "Never again."

References

- [1] Delasalas, N. (2014). Auschwitz-Birkenau: A Memorial. *OUR Journal: ODU Undergraduate Research Journal*, 2(1), 3.
- [2] Kondoyanidi, A. (2010). The liberating experience: war correspondents, Red Army soldiers, and the Nazi extermination camps. *The Russian Review*, 69(3), 438-462.
- [3] Boiti, A. (2018). Multilingualism as cognitive reserve: delaying the onset of dementia in the elderly. *A Journal for Undergraduate Research in the Netherlands* Volume 2, number 1 June 2018, 2(1), 6-11.
- [4] Cole, T. (2013). Crematoria, Barracks, Gateway: Survivors' Return Visits to the Memory Landscapes of Auschwitz. *History and Memory*, 25(2), 102-131. <https://doi.org/10.2979/histmemo.25.2.102>.
- [5] Dann, G. M. (1981). Tourist motivation an appraisal. *Annals of tourism research*, 8(2), 187-219.
- [6] R. Sharpley, P.R. Stone (Eds.), *The darker side of travel: The theory and practice of dark tourism*, Channel View, Tonawanda (2009), pp. 109-128.
- [7] Cohen, E. (2018). Thanatourism: A comparative approach. In P. R. Stone, R. Hartmann, T. Seaton, R. Sharpley, & L. White (Eds.), *Handbook of dark tourism* (pp. 157-171). Palgrave Macmillan.
- [8] Martini, A., & Buda, D. M. (2020). Dark tourism and affect: Framing places of death and disaster. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 23(6), 679-692. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2018.1518972>.
- [9] Rozett, R. (1997). A SEMINAR IN AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU: Some Personal Reflections. *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe*, 30(1), 108-116. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41431167>.
- [10] Kucia, M., Duch-Dyngosz, M., & Magierowski, M. (2013). The Collective Memory of Auschwitz and World War II among Catholics in Poland: A Qualitative Study of Three Communities. *History and Memory*, 25(2), 132-173. <https://doi.org/10.2979/histmemo.25.2.132>.
- [11] Gedi, N., & Elam, Y. (1996). Collective Memory - What Is It? *History and Memory*, 8(1), 30-50. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25618696>.
- [12] Cohen, J. (2001). Social and emotional education: Core concepts and practices. *Caring classrooms/intelligent schools: The social emotional education of young children*, 3-29.
- [13] Webber, M. J. (2014). Memorial Sites as Educational Sites: An Ethical-Rhetorical Approach. 2. *Grundlagen der Erinnerungsorte und Erinnerungskulturen*, 59.
- [14] Kendi, I. (2016). *Stamped from the beginning: The definitive history of racist ideas in America*. Bold Type Books.
- [15] Sagoff, M. (1978). Historical Authenticity. *Erkenntnis* (1975-), 12(1), 83-93. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20010580>