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Discussing the Holocaust. Curatorial and educational approaches at the House of Austrian History[1]

The House of Austrian History is the Republic's first nationwide museum for contemporary history. Located at Heldenplatz square in the Neue Hofburg, the museum is embedded in an environment charged with historical significance, as will be further elaborated in this paper. The hdgö's exhibitions offer insights into the most important political, social, cultural and economic developments of the last century up to the present day. Even though there were many efforts to establish a nationwide history museum in Austria, it took decades before such a museum could be opened. Plans for a "Geschichtekammer" (History Chamber) evolved as early as 1919, and actual work on a "Museum der Ersten und Zweiten Republik" (Museum of the first and second Republic) began in 1945. Based on ideas put forward by President Karl Renner, display cases were commissioned, objects collected and a first room was set up in the Leopoldinischer Trakt building of the Vienna Hofburg in the following years. This initiative can be situated in the context of Austrian identity construction after 1945, a process which aimed to distinguish Austria as much as possible from German identity attributions. After Karl Renner's death in 1951, the project was discontinued and the collection was divided up. Part of the collection formed the basis for the "Museum of Austrian Culture" (MÖK), which was first on display in the Neue Hofburg and then in Eisenstadt from 1987 to 1994. In the 1980s and 1990s, discussions arose about a "Haus der Republik" (House of the Republic), a "Haus der Toleranz" (House of Tolerance) or a "Haus der Zeitgeschichte" (House of Contemporary History) – sometimes at the occasion of commemorations of 1945 and 1955. The starting points for these discussions were, on the one hand, the demand for a musealisation of a now widespread understanding of an Austrian nation and, on the other hand, the desire for a place to come to terms with the period of Nazi rule in Austria. Eventually, in the 2000s, several studies were commissioned and concepts developed. The establishment of a "Haus der Geschichte Österreich" (House of Austrian History) was finally announced in 2014 and enshrined in law in 2016. In the same year, however, the exhibition space and budget were massively reduced once again. After a very short lead time of 21 months between the appointment of founding director Monika Sommer in February 2017 and the opening of the house around the 100th anniversary of the proclamation of the First Republic, the doors of the hdgö finally opened to visitors in November 2018.[1] The hdgö's main exhibition focuses on the period from 1918 onwards. Since the opening, objects linked to current topics and discussions have been added frequently. The hdgö's first special exhibition was dedicated to the life and work of Viennese musician Alma Rosé and her father Arnold Rosé, both of whom were persecuted as Jews during the Nazi era.[2] The special exhibition area on the central plateau of the grand staircase was renamed the "Alma Rosé Plateau" at the opening. This commemorates the musician who, after her deportation to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, led the women's orchestra there and in this role saved the lives of many Jewish women. The renaming is a deliberate decision in view of the directly adjacent spaces in the Neue Hofburg that were contaminated by Nazi use.

A PLACE BURDENED BY NAZI PAST

On the one side, the Alma Rosé Plateau adjoins the exhibition areas of the "Sammlung alter Musikinstrumente" (Collection of Old Musical Instruments). From September 1938 to March 1940,

1 https://hdgoe.at/vorgeschichte-hdgoe (last access: 19 August 2025).

2 https://hdgoe.at/hdgoe_on_tour_alma_und_arnold_rose_en (last access: 19 August 2025).

these rooms were used as a "Zentraldepot" (central depot) for works of art and cultural assets looted from the property of people who were persecuted as Jews. Many of the art objects were passed on to various museums, used by Nazi elites or even used to furnish the Neue Hofburg.[3]

On the other side, the Alma Rosé Plateau borders the "Altan" of the Neue Hofburg, a terrace on the central canopy of the building's access ramp. This area was used as a speaker's platform for the so-called "Anschluss" rally on 15 March 1938. The Neue Hofburg and this central location were deliberately chosen by the Nazis in order to establish visual continuities with the Holy Roman Empire, which had been directly linked to the Habsburgs for centuries. During the Nazi era in Austria, a memorial stone commemorating this moment of the official proclamation of the Nazi takeover of power was placed in the parapet of this terrace and another was set into the ground. Today, both stones are no longer there – but the former position of the stone slab in the floor is still recognizable.[4] This terrace of the Neue Hofburg is still the central symbol of the "Anschluss" of Austria today – on the one hand because of the powerful propaganda photographs of the speech, which are still shown in many productions depicting Nazi history, and on the other hand because of the mass of over 250 000 people who gathered on Heldenplatz for this speech and enthusiastically cheered Adolf Hitler. These images and recordings represent a clear contradiction to Austria's claim to have been the first victim of Nazi Germany, which shaped the official position of the Second Republic on the rule and crimes of National Socialism until the early 1990s. Both the terrace and Heldenplatz are places of contemporary historical relevance that are burdened by Nazi appropriation – this was certainly the central reason for the political decision to locate the hdgö at this particular site. In the present day, however, the two sites are treated very differently. As one of the large open spaces in the centre of Vienna, Heldenplatz is used for cultural, military, religious or sports-related events. Due to its proximity to the presidential office and the chancellor's office, the square is also frequently used for large demonstrations and rallies. The square is also characterized by green areas and many parking spaces. It is bordered by the "Äußeres Burgtor", a building that has served as a monument to official state remembrance since World War I at the latest. Transformed into the "Heldentor" (Heroes' Gate) during the Dollfuß–Schuschnigg dictatorship, the building now houses the official state memorial for fallen soldiers of the Austrian Armed Forces as well as a "Weiheraum" (consecration room) for the victims of Nazism. Commemorative cultural events, such as the "Festival of Joy" to commemorate the end of Nazi rule and World War II, are also held at Heldenplatz – as a deliberate counterpoint to Nazi-apologetic events organized by German nationalist and/or right-wing extremist associations, which were held at this location until 2012 to mark the anniversary of the capitulation of Nazi Germany

Since 2021, every summer, members of the hdgö education team have taken the *Bewegtes Museum* (Moving Museum) to the square for several days. Each year, a small photo exhibition about one historical perspective of the square is shown on this museum wagon. The educators seek out conversations with people who use the square today.[5] On the one hand, they ask people passing by about their wishes for the future of the square. On the other hand they ask them about their current use of the square and about their individual associations with the square. In the discussions so far, it has become clear that many people associate Adolf Hitler's "Anschluss" speech in 1938 with the square, even in the present day, although there is no commemorative sign. However, only few people feel that their current usage of the square is influenced by their knowledge about this event. The "Altan" of the Neue Hofburg, on the other hand, has been closed to the public since the beginning of the Second Republic and some people could only enter it at a few exceptional occasions. Before the opening of the hdgö, however, there was no long-term examination of this terrace and its significance for the shared respon-

3 https://hdgoe.at/neue_burg_raubkunst-depot_en (last access: 19 August 2025).

4 https://hdgoe.at/neue_burg_belastete-orte_en (last access: 19 August 2025).

5 https://hdgoe.at/bewegtesmuseum_heldenplatz_2024 (last access: 19 August 2025).

sibility of Austrians for the crimes of Nazism. With a web exhibition on the history of the use of the terrace, the hdgö offers information about the site. This is also accessible via a touch screen on the Alma Rosé plateau – right next to a locked door with glass elements that separates the plateau from the "Altan", but allows a view of the terrace.[6] A vote has also been running since 2019 in which visitors can choose between two options: Should the place remain closed or should it be opened up? So far, over 194 900 votes have been cast in favour of opening and over 25 900 in favour of keeping it closed.[7] Visitors and people from all over the world can also leave their suggestions as to what they would do with the terrace if it was opened. They can upload graphic ideas or leave sketches on site, which are integrated in a web exhibition. The exhibition can be accessed via a touch screen on site and is also freely accessible on the web.[8] The hdgö invites visitors to engage with and discuss the terrace and thus encourages them to think about ways of dealing with places burdened by National Socialism in the present day.

NATIONAL SOCIALISM AND THE HOLOCAUST AS PART OF AUSTRIAN HISTORY

Even though there was no nationwide museum of contemporary history in Austria before the hdgö, temporary exhibitions of contemporary history were sometimes held to commemorate the end of the war in 1945. In some of these exhibitions, Austrian history ended in 1938 and began again in 1945, with the argument that Austria (as a state) did not exist during the period of Nazi rule.[9] For the hdgö, the period of Nazism and the Holocaust are not only part of Austrian history, but are essential in order to place developments before 1938 and after 1945 in context. The period of Nazi rule in Austria cannot be viewed in isolation from the social and political changes that preceded it. These include the widespread antisemitism that was also used politically by the parliamentary parties of the First Republic; the militarization of society; the rise of fascist parties, such as the Heimatblock in the 1930; National Council elections and the Nazi-party in the last regional elections in 1932; or the violent attacks, terrorist attacks and the attempted coup during the dictatorship that ruled Austria under Chancellors Dollfuß and Schuschnigg from 1933 to 1938, when the Nazi-party was banned in Austria. The main exhibition at the hdgö deals with the Nazi era with a focus on the terror of Nazi rule. The crimes are perceived as a Europe-wide phenomenon in the context of a Europe that was largely controlled or influenced by the Nazis – but the focus is on connections with Austria. Stories of people from Austria who were persecuted or murdered during the Nazi rule are told and objects related to them are shown. Many of these are personal objects that were created by the people themselves, sometimes during the time of persecution and in some cases after liberation. These objects and the associated agency of the persecuted persons are the focus of the exhibition. The aim is to show that, despite their unimaginably large number, these are not nameless persecuted and murdered people, nor are they just a multitude of names, but people who each pursued their own wishes and goals in life and had their own social and political viewpoints. While for some of the people only such objects can be shown that tell something about the person, in most cases they are ego documents or objects that were deliberately produced by the people in order to convey their perspective, position and agency. References to the places of terror can be established via objects of persecuted and murdered people, which are arranged along the central showcases in the display. Each of the biographies is linked to one of the associated extermination and concentration camps or a place of Nazi crime. In this way, some of these places of planned and organized terror are taken up and contextualized. By discussing and exposing sites of crime, the exhibition adds another perspective that has been suppressed from the official memory landscape in Austria for decades – the question of Austrian perpetrators of Nazi crimes.

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6 https://hdgoe.at/altan_geschichte_en (last access: 19 August 2025).

7 Count of votes by 19 August 2025.

8 https://heldenplatz.hdgoe.at/ (last access: 19 August 2025).

9 Benedik–Sommer 2021: 37.

At the front of table showcases with personal objects of the persecuted and murdered persons, there are smaller containers that are linked to a site of forced labour and murder. Inside the containers are removable cards with a photo and a short text on the biography of a total of 23 selected perpetrators from Austria. In addition to perpetrators and victims from Austria, the exhibition also names places of terror in present-day Austria – not only the Mauthausen concentration camp and the killing site at Hartheim Castle, but also subcamps and satellite camps. Using the Ebensee subcamp as an example, the exhibition switches the narrative from people who were deported from Austria, to the perspectives of people who were deported to Austria. The exhibition shows objects made by Jan Kupiec, a Polish resistance fighter who, after the Nazi invasion of Poland, had to help build the main camp of the Auschwitz concentration camp and was one of the last to leave the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp in January 1945, when he was taken to the Mauthausen concentration camp and finally to the Ebensee satellite camp. After his liberation from the satellite camp on 6 May 1945, he began to write down his memories and documented scenes from the camps using detailed drawings, which he drew on the backs of postcards with tourist motifs from Austria.[10] Some of these drawings by Jan Kupiec can be seen in the main exhibition at hdgö. In this way, a part of this European dimension and the spatial interdependence of the crimes is also made visible. Another focus in this part of the main exhibition is on the escalation of terror and murder at the end of the war. In the final weeks of World War II, concentration camps and other places of forced labour were evacuated, and the so-called death marches began – from decentralized places of forced labour in eastern Austria to the Mauthausen concentration camp and from there finally to an improvised camp in Gunskirchen near Wels, among other places. Between 30 000 and 40 000 Hungarian-Jewish forced labourers were forced to march through what is now Austria for weeks on end. In the context of these death marches, excessive violence and targeted killings against the detained were committed by local people in many places – often Nazi officials, executives or civilians from the "Volkssturm".[11] In total, over 23 000 forced labourers lost their lives or were deliberately murdered – many more died in the weeks after liberation as a result of the hardships.[12] These traces of violence run through present-day Austria. By discussing these crimes in the exhibition, decentralized forms of violence are made visible.

EXHIBITING VIOLENCE WITHOUT REPRODUCING VIOLENCE

A fundamental principle of exhibiting at hdgö is to address contexts of violence without reproducing explicit records or depictions of violence in the exhibition. This does not refer exclusively to the Holocaust – but seems particularly relevant in its context. In many exhibitions, images of violence are shown – on the one hand from the stocks of photos taken by allied soldiers or their picture services after the liberation of the concentration camps, and on the other hand photos taken by perpetrators who used them to document their crimes with apologetic intent or even regarded them as a kind of trophy. In many of these images, the victims of violence appear as a nameless mass of murdered bodies – the individual person becomes invisible in this representation. These images taken by the perpetrators reproduce their view of the victims and record a situation of helplessness of the victims and the dehumanization committed by the perpetrators in the long term. Deborah Hartmann, Matthias Haß and Eike Stegen describe it as a second degradation of the victims when these images of extreme violence are reproduced in an uncensored manner. They also warn against visitors being overwhelmed by the open confrontation with these images and the resulting emotional overload.[13] Gerhard Paul uses the term "Ich-Regression" (ego regression), in which the viewer can no longer separate themselves, increasingly perceives themselves as part of this environment and

10 Johler–Lichtblau–Rothländer–Staudinger–Sulzenbacher 2015.

11 Lappin-Eppel 2010.

12 Binder–Hoffmann–Sommer–Uhl 2016: 120.

13 Hartmann–Haß–Stegen 2021: 63f.

can therefore only act reflexively.[14] Against the background of such reflection, when exhibiting events of extreme violence, hdgö tries firstly, to not use objects that represent violence as illustrations, but to contextualize them precisely and to only use them if there are sufficient opportunities in the exhibition narrative to critically and precisely embed them in their specific contexts. Secondly, an attempt is made to avoid exhibiting violence through objects belonging to the perpetrators, so as not to reproduce or perpetuate their perspective. On the contrary, thirdly, objects of the victims, survivors or family members are repeatedly shown in order to focus on their perspective and agency. This also makes it clear that the victims of violence were not only victims, but also led a diverse life, to which visitors can connect based on their own lives. The historical experience of the victims is not equated with the experiences of the visitors, but common aspects of the human experience might enable moments of connection on a personal level. One example of this are several personal objects that were unearthed at the killing site of Malý Trostinec, near Minsk, during scientific research into the mass graves. Only those objects with a direct connection to Vienna and an individualized history are on display. These are everyday objects such as drinking vessels, coins, a comb or a tablet box for painkillers that were produced in Vienna and sold in one specific pharmacy. People wore these objects on their bodies during their murder. In total, almost 10 000 Jews were deported from Vienna to Minsk or Malý Trostinec, where they were murdered immediately after their arrival. Instead of showing degrading photos of the corpses or presenting objects of violence by the perpetrators, the focus is on the objects of the victims. The objects can be used to talk about the context of extreme violence, but also about life before it. However, violence is also visible in the written documents of the perpetrators, in which the pejorative perspective on the victims expresses itself through wording and the choice of terms. Here, too, an undisturbed and uncontextualized exhibition of these objects would allow visitors to see the crimes through the eyes of the perpetrators. In the exhibition texts of the hdgö, Nazi terms are replaced by analytical terms wherever possible or marked as Nazi terminology and contextualized.

This problem becomes particularly noticeable in educational programs – where Nazi rule is discussed in exchange with participants of workshops or guided tours. Terms and attributions of Nazi ideology are often used in descriptive statements or questions from participants, but are not recognized as such. Racial ideological terms such as "half-Jew" or the juxtaposition of "Jews" and "Germans" in statements reify these racist ideas of Nazism. While the personal contact during guided tours and workshops allows for such situations to be resolved in conversation, using such vocabulary in exhibition texts would reaffirm the ideology behind them and, in the worst case, even reinforce these terms and attributions among visitors.

RELEVANCE FOR THE PRESENT, INTERACTIVITY AND DISCUSSION

The hdgö understands exhibiting history as an ongoing process in the present. Based on current issues, perspectives on events of the past and their interpretation also change. In the exhibitions, the question of the significance of content and knowledge for the present and future is repeatedly addressed. In order to keep the main exhibition up to date, objects are regularly exchanged, entire sections are revised or individual topics are added. For this reason, the hdgö does not refer to it as a permanent exhibition, but as a main exhibition that remains flexible and changeable. This means that new research findings, exciting objects or perspectives on the diverse topics of the main exhibition can be introduced. A separate section of the exhibition entitled *Erinnern* (Remembering) is dedicated to dealing with and remembering the Nazi crimes from 1945 to the present day. Four chapters focus on the debunking of the victim myth, Nazi continuities in the Second Republic and the denial of recognition for the victims of Nazi terror and antisemitism in Austria after 1945. A number of examples illustrate how Nazi rule and the associated crimes shaped the Second Republic, which forms of remembrance and repression

14 Paul 2013: 652.

were established and how these have changed over the decades. The installation *RINGEN UM ERINNERUNG* (CIRCLING AROUND MEMORY) by artists Anna Artaker and Iris Andraschek is at the centre of this exhibition area. It takes the form of four intertwined rings of LED strips, which are suspended from the ceiling and create the impression that the rings are floating above the exhibition area. The LED-text shown on the four rings communicates different content for remembrance, and moves across the displays at different speeds. The content can be constantly updated by the hdgö team. One of the rings is filled with quotes from contemporary witnesses and survivors of Nazi crimes. Another LED ring displays media headlines in connection with remembrance of Nazism or current (Neo-)Nazi activities in Austria. The third ring is used for claims which were contributed to a web exhibition with user-generated content, called *Baustellen der NS-Erinnerungskultur* (Memory Culture of the Nazi past – sites and works in Progress). This web exhibition is intended to encourage a critical examination of memorials to Nazi rule and provide a platform for presenting the results of these debates. It collects diverse contributions on the use and design of current monuments, demands for redesigns or for the erection of as yet missing memorials to events and crimes of Nazi rule.[15] In addition to memorials in public spaces, the museum also offers a place to publicly collect questions about Nazism and remembrance for all visitors. "What to remember? And how?" are the central questions in the heading of the M*essage Board*, an analogue chat option – also centrally located in the *Erinnern* area. Visitors can write their questions on cardboard cards and leave them there using small magnets or formulate and add an answer to a question already placed there. The accumulated questions and answers make visible the desiderata of the culture of remembrance as well as visitors' references to the present. In addition to personal discussion formats, hdgö also tries to promote exchange between visitors through such interactive parts in the exhibition. Dealing with Nazi crimes often raises questions among visitors, which are also left in the exhibition via this tool. Other visitors respond to them – and other visitors read the conversation and can thus be encouraged to reflect. Remembrance and the culture of remembrance cannot be determined or prescribed by politicians, historians or museums. They are social processes that are constantly being renegotiated. These interactive parts of the exhibition are intended to encourage visitors to become actively involved in this debate and the negotiation of remembrance of Nazism.

BIOGRAPHIES AS ACCESS POINTS, ACTIONS AND DECISIONS AS CRITERIA

In many guided tours and workshops with pupils, a tendency towards the language and ideas of the Nazi era emerged, which prompted the hdgö education team to develop a workshop specifically on this topic. Pupils often directly associated exclusion, persecution, deportation and murder with the person of Adolf Hitler. Statements in discussions often began with "Hitler did this…", "Hitler imprisoned the people…" or "Hitler murdered the people…". Even if it is important to name the strongly hierarchical structures of the administration and Nazi-party organizations, the entire mass of supporters, the many perpetrators, followers and profiteers are ignored and a simple answer to the question of guilt is given. At the same time, such statements raise the question of whether the complexity and extent of the Holocaust was adequately conveyed in class if the deeds are attributed to a single person. Another and much more obvious interpretation would be that it is a linguistic simplification, which can also be derived from the person-centredness of Nazi propaganda on Adolf Hitler, which is still uncritically reproduced in popular representations of history. When asked about the possible actions of individuals during the Nazi era, pupils often answered that no one could have acted differently. The reason often given for this was the idea that the person who resisted would have been murdered immediately – an idea that has long been disproved in academic literature.[16] All in all, many pupils had a picture of Nazi rule in which everyone was unfree and, in various forms, dependent on and at the

15 https://hdgoe.at/mitschreiben/erinnerungsbaustellen (last access: 19 August 2025).

16 Browning 1992.

mercy of Adolf Hitler himself. Even the members of the NSDAP, the SA and SS, even the guards at concentration camps?!

In the workshop *Fragmente der Erinnerung. Biografische Auseinandersetzungen mit dem Nationalsozialismus* (Fragments of Memory. Biographical Confrontations with Nazism), precisely these ideas are contradicted. In the seemingly impersonal masses perceived as collectively unfree, the focus is placed on individuals, their life stories are summarized and their personal decisions are highlighted. The biographies of ten persons were chosen from the number of people already represented by objects in the exhibition. Biographical information, a photo of the person, a quote and one further source were selected in small information packages. The latter differs depending on the person and can take the form of a document, a photo or a work of art by the person. The life stories contain different perspectives, attitudes and possible courses of action during the Nazi era and in some cases afterwards. People persecuted as Jews, Nazi party members, politically persecuted people, members of the SS guards in the camps, persecuted Romani women, resistance fighters or profiteers of the murder. People who went into exile, others who refused to flee and people whose escape was unsuccessful. People who were killed and people who murdered, people who risked their lives to save others, people who were later held accountable and others who were later highly decorated despite their violent actions. By examining the biographical information in connection with the objects on display in the exhibition about the respective people, it is possible to ask about decision-making options and motivations – especially on the part of the perpetrators and resistance fighters. At the same time, it becomes clear how the options available to the persecuted persons became increasingly limited. In some of the life stories of those persecuted, the possibilities for independent action and decision-making only began after liberation when it came to the question of how to deal with and remember the Holocaust. It also becomes clear that the perpetrators in this selection of life stories had the majority of options for action and made many active decisions through which they supported, planned or even carried out the deprivation of rights, persecution and murder of other people.

Biographical approaches enable a more direct approach and make it easier to establish more personal connections. The focus on personal actions in a social context also opens up the possibility of incorporating various didactic principles, such as plurality and perspective into the workshop.[17] This can contribute to a differentiated view of Austrians during the National Socialist era and break the notion of being collectively at the mercy of others. It also raises questions about the historical perception of these life stories: *"How would I have acted in this person's situation?"* However, this question is difficult or even impossible to answer, as none of the workshop participants know the full extent of the person's life during the National Socialist era and therefore cannot judge how they themselves would have acted.

Much more relevant for the present and the future, however, is the question of the current meaning of *"never forget!"* and *"never again!"* – two of the central demands and, at the same time, guiding principles of remembrance work on the Holocaust and the Nazi regime. At the end of the workshop, the question is raised what these statements mean in the present and what each individual can do to ensure that this *"never again!"* does not become a hollow phrase, but can also be meaningful and effective in the present. The answers from the participants in these workshops show how active remembrance work and awareness of social responsibility can intertwine when making decisions in the present. The answers are in turn made visible on the fourth of the LED rings of the art installation *RINGEN UM ERINNERUNG* (CIRCLING AROUND MEMORY) above the *Erinnern* area in the main exhibition. Arranged by date of contribution, the statements of the groups run together with the group name and context in an endless loop, making the students' recommendations for action visible to all exhibition visitors and also encouraging individual visitors to make references to the present.

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17 Gautschi 2019: 2.
https://www.fluchtpunkte.net/_files/ugd/48859b_262d1d7615c640958f574e71d532e7d9.pdf (last access: 19 August 2025).

CRITICAL DESIGN AND DISPLAY

An important question when exhibiting Nazi objects is not only the "what" but also the "how" to exhibit them. How can objects from the period of Nazi rule be exhibited responsibly? The aim of exhibiting objects relating to Nazism is to achieve a presentation that is as unagitated and sober as possible and invites debate and discussion.[18] In many exhibitions, sections on Nazi rule are kept in black or a dark grey, thus spatially serving the metaphor of the "dark time". Likewise, the colours of Nazi propaganda – red, black and white – are often used in the display, thus extending the colour language of these Nazi objects to the entire area. In the main exhibition of the hdgö, neither the propaganda colours nor the dark colour scheme or reduced lighting is used in the design. On the contrary, the display colour white is used here, as in the other exhibition areas. The aim is not to emotionalize through the design, but to pursue an educational approach and enable analytical access.[19] In the *Erinnern* area or in the exhibition *Hitler entsorgen. Vom Keller ins Museum* (Disposing of Hitler. Out of the Cellar, Into the Museum), an attempt was made to make the objects visually accessible from all sides as far as possible – in other words, not to make the objects disappear in a display case that would literally only provide a single perspective. Similarly, Nazi objects are not hidden behind flaps or doors that have to be opened by visitors. This form of presentation harbours the danger of imposing a voyeuristic view on visitors, in which they can only look at objects by opening the flaps, which are thus associated with the allure of the forbidden in addition to any existing attributions. On the contrary, the objects are visible from as many sides of the display case as possible. In some cases, the layout of the showcases is very tight in order to avoid creating an awe-inspiring space in this presentation and thus counteract the proverbial development of an aura.[20] The objects are positioned in the display cases in such a way as to alienate them as far as possible from their original contexts of use. In the exhibition *Disposing of Hitler*, two sculptures of larger-than-life Hitler heads were exhibited, which were found in 2017 during the renovation of the Austrian Parliament. The heads were positioned lying on their sides and not standing on a pedestal, as intended in their original use.[21] In addition, the face and thus the view of the Hitler heads was not directed towards the centre of the room, but to the side. This positioning also made damage to the sculptures more visible, which also brought the history of their use more into focus in the presentation. Similar to the two sculptures, other objects with propagandistic content or Nazi symbols are also positioned in the display cases in such a way that their symbolism is not openly visible or their message is not reproduced without disruption. In the main exhibition of the hdgö, for example, advertising materials such as posters or stickers for the vote after the "Anschluss" in Austria are not presented side by side in full size for this reason, but only partially rolled out and overlapping in order to draw attention to the quantity of the various propagandistic advertising articles and to enable an examination of them, but not to disseminate their message and effect again. This approach is reflected not only in the positioning of the objects in the showcases, but also in the display design and arrangement of the showcases. In the *Macht Bilder!* (Make Images!) section of the main exhibition, reproductions of posters from the public space are shown in chronological order. For the Nazi era, almost all of these posters contain direct Nazi propaganda content or fundamentally misanthropic statements. Some of these posters are shown reversed so that the front does not appear in the room, but can only be seen by consciously positioning one's own body at the edge of the exhibition. The visual language of the posters is also repeatedly disrupted by the bars of the display frame, so that no affirmative photo motifs are created. The white backs of the posters, on the other hand, point into the room, which can also be read symbolically as empty spaces created by the strict censorship of the totalitarian regime. The selection of objects is complemented by

18 Benedik–Langeder–Sommer 2021: 15.

19 Benedik–Sommer 2021: 39.

20 Beckershaus–Benedik–Fösl–Langeder–Meran–Sommer 2025: 86.

21 Ibid.

a visual message from the resistance, which takes a satirical turn on the visual language of Nazi propaganda. In displays with objects of perpetrators, these are not positioned above or in front of objects of persecuted and murdered persons, so as not to reproduce the hierarchy of violence in the hierarchy of presentation and viewing in the exhibition. Another example is the *Erinnern* section in the main exhibition, in which content-related object contexts are established via vertical display elements. For example, a display case with archive boxes in which Simon Wiesenthal collected evidence about the crimes of the unit of the former SS-Obersturmführer and party chairman of the FPÖ (1958–1978) Friedrich Peter is attached to a pole of the display. Further down on this pole is a screen on which a television interview with the then youth spokesman and later party chairman of the FPÖ Jörg Haider can be seen. In the interview, he speaks out against confronting politicians with their Nazi past, as it would only bring unrest into politics

If objects and content from the contexts of both perpetrators and victims are shown in the same part of a display case, the victims' perspective is given the central space through the selection and presentation of the objects. An example of this is the presentation in the Nazi terror section, in which objects of victims of Nazi crimes are displayed centrally in the large table showcases, but the containers with biographical information on the perpetrators are deliberately placed at the front edge of the tables, below the victims' objects. The biographies of the perpetrators are relatively small and are therefore given much less space and visibility than the objects and stories of the persecuted and murdered in the exhibition. Nevertheless, the cards of the perpetrators are spatially closer to the visitors and stand between them and the objects of the victims.

Experience to date with these approaches to exhibiting and mediating has been largely positive. The biographical approaches in the mediation work make social plurality and the scope of the decisions of individual people tangible. The open and brightly designed display and the well-considered presentation of objects from the period of Nazi rule allow an analytical examination of the objects without already creating an emotional setting through the design. The late debunking of the victim myth and the associated start of a critical public debate about Nazi crimes in Austria in particular means that visitors are particularly interested and have many questions about this subject area. The fact that this form of presentation and the opportunities for discussion are met with interest by visitors can be seen not least in the entries in the guest book and other forms of written and verbal feedback.[22]

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22 *"It was very interesting. Coming originally from Moldova I also had the impression that Austria was a victim of the Nazi regime but I learned that they were people who also contributed to the atrocities. I learned a lot. Thank you!"* anonymous feedback card, 27 August 2024; *"Es ist eine wahnsinnig gelungene Ausstellung. Kritisch, differenziert & ehrlich. Sehr großes Kompliment"* [It is an incredibly successful exhibition. Critical, differentiated & honest. Very big compliment], anonymous feedback card, 8 December 2023.

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