

Name of the event	Visit of the former concentration camp of Mauthausen by the International Winter Semester Students
Institution, which organised the event	Theresan Military Academy
Country of the organiser	Austria
Year of the event	2024
Date of the event (from-to)	27 November 2024
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In November 2024, participants from the international winter semester, alongside Austrian cadets united in a profound exploration of history at the Mauthausen concentration camp memorial in Austria. This site, etched into the collective memory of the Holocaust, served as a stark reminder of the atrocities committed during World War II and the enduring necessity to confront humanity's darkest moments.



International Semester in front of the former Nazi-concentration camp Mauthausen.

Photo: Livia Pistracher.

The visits began on 21 November 2024 with cadets from the United States Military Academy, a midshipman from the United States Naval Academy, and Austrian cadets walking the grounds of the former camp. A week later, on 27 November 2024 the others from the international winter semester followed the same path, further emphasising the universal importance of preserving the memory of those who suffered and perished.



Memorial Crematorium.

Photo: Dominika Lachowska.

Mauthausen, a place of unspeakable suffering, was one of the most brutal concentration camps operated by the Nazis. Between 1939 and 1945, more than 90,000 individuals – including thousands of Poles – met their deaths here through forced labour, starvation, and systematic executions. The infamous “*stairs of death*”, which led from a stone quarry to the camp above, epitomised the torment endured by the prisoners. Exhausted and malnourished,

labourers were forced to carry heavy stones up these steps, collapsing under the weight only to be beaten or killed by their guards.

The guided tours provided the cadets with an unflinching narrative of the camp's operation, offering a window into the stark dualities of life at Mauthausen. While prisoners suffered unimaginable horrors, the SS officers stationed there lived in grotesque comfort. Cadets

observed remnants of leisure facilities such as soccer fields and a swimming pool used by the SS, a macabre juxtaposition to the barracks, gas chambers, and crematoria where human dignity was systematically stripped away. Perhaps most unsettling was the sight of a photograph showing an SS officer celebrating his wedding inside the camp, a chilling testament to the normalisation of cruelty.

As the tours progressed, cadets delved deeper into the mechanisms of dehumanisation employed at the camp. They learned about the showers where prisoners were stripped, shaved, and issued clothing taken from dead inmates – often stained with blood or riddled with bullet holes. These acts of degradation extended to the barracks, where overcrowding and disease were rampant. Barracks 20, infamous for its appalling conditions, was described as a place where prisoners rarely survived longer than four to six weeks.



Room of Names / Photo: Michael Ragland.

The culmination of the tours brought the cadets to the “*Room of Names*”, an emotionally charged space where the names of over 90,000 victims were illuminated in the darkness. This exhibit

conveyed the staggering scale of the atrocities committed at Mauthausen, its haunting silence offering a powerful reminder of the lives cut short. The names of Polish patriots, Austrian citizens, and countless others from across Europe underscored the shared grief borne by many nations.



Polish midshipmen at the memorial of Polish victims.
Photo: Dominika Lachowska.

For the Polish Naval Academy cadets, the visit concluded with a solemn act of remembrance. At the monument dedicated to Polish victims of Nazi reprisals, they laid candles as a tribute to those who perished. This gesture symbolised not only an acknowledgment of the past but also a reaffirmation of the importance of preserving memory for future generations.

The experiences of both groups transcended national boundaries, uniting the cadets in a shared commitment to remember and honour the victims. The tours fostered reflection on the capacity for both, human cruelty and resilience, leaving a lasting impact on all who participated.

As they spent time grappling with the emotional weight of the visit, the cadets discussed the lessons to be drawn from history and their relevance to contemporary challenges.

Through their journey to Mauthausen, the future leaders were reminded of their responsibility to safeguard the values of humanity and justice. The visits served as a powerful testament to the importance of remembrance – not only as a tribute to the victims of the past but as a warning against the resurgence of hatred and intolerance. By confronting the harrowing realities of Mauthausen, the cadets ensured that the memories of those who suffered there would endure as a call to action for generations to come.