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The **Journal of Heritage, Memory and Conflict (HMC)** is an international, peer-reviewed, diamond open access Journal that critically analyses the tangible and intangible remnants, traces and spaces of the past in the present, as well as the remaking of pasts into heritage and memory, including processes of appropriations and restitutions, significations and musealization and mediatisation. This interdisciplinary journal addresses the dynamics of memory and forgetting, as well as the politics of trauma, mourning and reconciliation, identity, nationalism and ethnicity, heritage preservation and restoration, material culture, conservation and management, conflict archaeology, dark tourism, diaspora and post-colonial memory, terrascapes, migration, borders, and the mediated re-enactments of conflicted pasts.

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From the last hut of Monowitz to the last hut of Belsen

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Abstract

The article offers an in-depth investigation into the history of, and post-war practices around, the most fundamental and indispensable architectural structure of the Nazi camps: the wooden prefabricated barrack hut.

Key Words

architecture, Auschwitz-Birkenau (Monowitz), barrack hut, Bergen-Belsen, Nazi camps

In December 2012, I found myself in the company of Rob van der Laarse, Carlos Reijnen, some other academics, a few cineastes, the visual artist Hans Citroen, and my wife Miriam Greenbaum, daughter of Auschwitz survivor Jakub Grünbaum, on the threshold of a ruined barrack near the Polish city of Oświęcim, known for being the site of the former Auschwitz I (Main Camp) and Auschwitz II (Birkenau) concentration camps. For almost a quarter century I had visited Oświęcim annually, and I was convinced the place did not hold any more surprises. Yet as we set out to visit the site of the former Buna synthetic rubber factory, Hans, who knew the area well, suggested we make a detour and visit a small farmhouse not far from the factory site.

We arrived at a site in the area that had been occupied by Auschwitz III (Monowitz), the Auschwitz satellite built to house the inmates working on the construction of the Buna plant. The camp site itself had not been included in the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. We found half of a barrack hut, partly ruined, that was attached to a small farmhouse. In the aftermath of World War II, many Poles expelled from Oświęcim had returned home to find their lands covered by camps and their houses destroyed. They also discovered, however, that it was easy to dismantle the wooden barrack huts used in concentration camps and re-assemble them elsewhere. Thus many huts became provisional dwellings or workshops. Most of these recycled buildings had rotted away in the 1960s. But somehow one had survived in Monowice.

We entered and found ourselves in the partly ruined building. I recognized the structure: “Good, an authentic *RAD-Mannschaftsbaracke Type RL IV* [Reich Labor Service Crew Barrack Type RL IV],” I thought, clutching to the safety offered by identifying our discovery with its proper label. I noticed inscriptions on the beams and walls summoning inmates to adhere to certain standards of hygiene, which suggested the barrack had been an infirmary. “This is Primo Levi’s barrack,” Hans told us with the self-confidence that is uniquely his. “Which one?” “The barrack of the ten days...” “You mean Ka-Be?” We looked at one another, realizing in astonishment that this ruined and rotting structure might have been Ka-Be, short for *Krankenbau* [infirmary] – the most important site in Primo Levi’s memoir *If This Is a Man* (1947), a key text in the bibliography of the Holocaust and the education of the members of our group. The suggestion that this barrack hut might have been Ka-Be had a profound impact: we all knew, with greater or lesser clarity, that we stood at a site where a universe of the imagination composed of words met a universe of observation composed of space and matter.

As I re-evaluated this barrack hut, I also became acutely aware of how little I knew about the history of the *RAD-Mannschaftsbaracke*. When I returned to Canada, I began to investigate the literature on prefabricated barrack huts built in Germany and German-ruled Europe between 1933 and 1945. A few young scholars in Germany, most notably Axel Dossmann, Jan Wenzel, Kai Wenzel



Figure 1. The barrack in Monowice, December 2012. Photographer Carlos Reijnen.

(2007) and Ralph Gabriel, had mapped some of the terrain in several publications, but it appeared that their very valuable contributions to the topic had not yet led to a monograph on the history of the wooden prefabricated barrack hut, such as the one I had entered in Monowice.

Reflecting on the prospects and problems of a research project on the barrack hut, I realized it might be energized by the contradiction between the very marginality of the building type as an object of consideration by architects, clients, historians and theorists, and its historical impact in the second half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. Until about 1970, major building types such as temples, churches, palaces, town halls, theatres and libraries were the focus of sustained theoretical consideration and historical study. This reflected the fact that these building types provided the architectural profession with work and income, while architectural historians were thus given clear examples of the evolution of styles and with built, archival and literary evidence. Minor, vernacular building types – barns, stables, cottages, market stalls and so on – attracted little attention: these had seldom been built by notable architects, while their construction had left little evidence with which scholars could work.

This tendency also applies to the common hut – the usually crude and bare single-storey, single room building, constructed from readily available building materials (wooden boards, logs, branches, loam or stones for walls, and boards, shingles, straw, turf, skins, canvas, matting

or cardboard for the roof), and without permanent foundations. Both laymen and scholars consider the wooden hut the oldest and most universal form of architecture. Their logic is based on the general availability of wood in most parts of the world and the relative simplicity of using wood for construction. Yet their assumption is not supported by much material evidence: wooden buildings, unlike stone ones, have relatively short lifespans and tend to disappear without a trace. The sorry state of the wooden hut in Monowice is a case in point.

In the year that followed our visit to Ka-Be, I began to sketch out a biography of the barrack hut – a version of the common hut that did make world history. It is the story of a lightweight hybrid between a shack, a tent and a conventional building that was easy to erect, take down and transplant part by part. It is a story of a standardized, serially made product that offered instant shelter to those forced by design or circumstance to survive away from home: soldiers; ill people forced into quarantine; laborers working on infrastructural projects or in resource-extractive industries in sparsely populated areas; foreign laborers; people who had become homeless as the result of earthquakes, great fires or bombing raids; and prisoners. It is the story of a building type that always remained a product of necessity without ever becoming an object of aspiration or, for that matter, affection.

The barrack hut entered the world stage with a bang in 1854. British and French expeditionary forces in the Crimea proved unable to conquer Sevastopol and were

forced to lay siege to the city. Thanks to a telegraph connection, the British public learned that soldiers were freezing in their tents, and a few British builders set out to make simple, prefabricated huts for use in the Crimea. The British and French governments bought into the plan. A design was produced within days and the parts became available in weeks. Shipped to the Black Sea with great publicity, the barrack huts saved the expeditionary forces. At the same time, both the British and French governments decided to create large camps consisting of barrack huts at home to provide realistic training conditions for the militia that provided the reserves for the standing armies. The 2,000 barrack huts built at Aldershot near London and Châlons near Paris became the focus of public interest. Finally, after it became clear that sick and wounded soldiers who were lodged in field hospitals consisting of flimsy barrack huts healed much more quickly than those housed in large brick or stone hospitals, the barrack hut became a cure-all in every emergency situation.

The American Civil War demonstrated the full remedial potential of the barrack hut. The American Army adopted the structure, standardized it and made it the backbone of a system of managing mass casualties, including aid stations, field hospitals and general hospitals. Military surgeons were able to obtain extraordinary medical results in these hospitals, with many making a direct link between the design of the buildings and patients' dramatically lower morbidity and mortality rates. In addition, the barrack hut proved a panacea when, for the first time in history, armies were left with tens of thousands of prisoners of war. The Union Army built large prisoner-of-war camps, each consisting of up to a hundred barrack huts surrounded by a wooden stockade.

The experience of the Civil War was closely studied in Europe. The highly professional German military medical system made the barrack hut a basic building block of its infrastructure, and, after the creation of an experimental and somewhat upgraded civilian version at the Charité Hospital in Berlin, it became the model for patient wards in Central and Eastern Europe. During the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71) military barrack-hut-hospitals and hutted prisoner-of-war camps were built all over Germany. In contrast to the United States, where all barrack huts followed one standard type, every German municipality or army jurisdiction commissioned its own design, with the proliferation of different versions of the barrack hut providing opportunities for research and comparison.

In the decades that followed the Franco-Prussian War, barrack huts multiplied: they were used as quarantine hospitals for epidemic diseases, colonies for children infected with tuberculosis, temporary settlements for construction workers in faraway places, spas, inner-city schools, instant settlements in the colonies, and emergency shelters after the 1908 Messina earthquake. An important new development was the search, initiated by German Empress Augusta and taken up by the International Committee of the Red Cross, for a barrack hut that could not only be prefabricated, easily transported and quickly

built, but also easily taken apart and reconstructed elsewhere. The patented design by Danish tentmaker Johan Gerhard Clemens Døcker won the first prize in a large international competition organized in 1885, and the purchase of Døcker's patent by the German firm Christoph & Unmack marked the beginning of barrack hut production on an industrial scale.

Until 1914, the barrack hut's reputation was largely benign: it provided instant shelter for those who needed it. But the outbreak of war, the mass arrest of so-called enemy aliens, the flood of civilian refugees from Central and Eastern Europe dislocated by conflict, and the capture of hundreds of thousands of soldiers led to the construction of vast internment camps, each of which consisted of an overcrowded compound with hundreds of badly maintained and ever more cheaply built barrack huts surrounded by barbed-wire fences. The public perception of the barrack hut changed: the dominant association became one of squalid captivity.

The Nazis tried to change this when they came to power. They aimed to alter society radically by creating many networks of camps dedicated to bringing Germans into line, in order to discipline, mobilize, militarize and heroize the German nation. There were also camps for the construction crews working on German highways and the fortified defense works in the west known as the Siegfried Line. The basic building block of all of these camps was the *RAD-Mannschaftsbaracke*, a perfected version of the *Doecker Baracke*, which was now produced under license by sawmills all over Germany. In 1935, the *RAD-Mannschaftsbaracke* Doecker was adopted by the German Army, and two years later the SS placed a first order for *RAD* barrack huts for use in its concentration camps.

The Second World War saw the zenith and nadir of the barrack hut. From the summer of 1940 onward, most civilian construction in Germany came to a halt, and from 1942 onward, this ban was absolute. The only exception applied to four different variations of the original *Doecker Baracke*, which now came to dominate the landscape and cityscape of German-controlled Europe. Hundreds of thousands of these barrack huts were produced, housing soldiers, forced laborers, civilians bombed out of their homes, and concentration-camp inmates. Thus the wooden barrack hut and its immediate context, the camp, became a crucial stage for the key drama of the twentieth century: The Holocaust.

The post-war fate of the hundreds of thousands of barrack huts involved a somewhat embarrassed re-use followed by demolition. The fate of one barrack hut in Bergen Belsen stands out, however. When units of the British Army entered the camp on April 15, 1945, they encountered a catastrophe: everywhere they saw unburied corpses and sick and dying prisoners – mostly Jews – living in overcrowded, filthy barrack huts. The soldiers made a heroic effort to bury the dead and move the living to a nearby army base. On May 19, the last of the survivors left the Belsen compound. Immediately thereafter, a Vickers Armstrong MK II Universal Carrier drove to-



Figure 2. The last barrack at Belsen. Photographer Bert Hardy. Collection Robert Jan van Pelt.

ward the now abandoned wooden barrack huts and used a flame-thrower to set all but one ablaze.

The burning of the last barrack hut happened two days later with a bit of staging orchestrated by the commanding officer, Colonel H.W. Bird. He arranged for a 1933 model of the War Ensign, which carried an image of the Prussian Iron Cross, to be nailed to the structure, along with a large portrait of Hitler. And he ordered the erection of a large stake in front of the barrack hut, one which was to also serve as a flag pole. Sergeant Bert Hardy, who had been photographing in Belsen for a month, carefully set the rest of the scene for posterity. The barrack hut itself was soaked in gasoline and, after a few words from Col. Bird and volley shots fired as a salute to the dead, set on fire. The crowd cheered, the Union Jack floated out from the top of the flagpole, and the shutter of Sgt. Hardy's Leica clicked.

That desperate *auto-da-fé* ended a relatively limited act of physical erasure – sixty barrack huts burned – and initiated a larger process of forgetting, at least as far as barrack huts were concerned. Sgt. Hardy's picture suggests that this barrack hut, and by implication all the Belsen barrack huts, *deserved* to disappear from human memory. The Allied discovery of the horrors contained within the barrack huts marked a moment of truth from which the imagination has not yet recovered. In burning the barrack

hut, the British soldiers sought to make a clear statement: we need to move on; everyone needs to move on; let's erase a terrible, inassimilable past. But, as we have learned, things are never that simple: a second generation arose that felt burdened by that very past while also feeling short-changed because they had somehow missed one of the most momentous events of the twentieth century.

This, then, may help to explain why I began to visit Auschwitz in the late 1980s, and why I continue to do so today. It explains why I have read and reread Primo Levi's writings as if they were Holy Scripture, and why, in December 2012, my heart skipped a beat in that ruined and rotting barrack hut when Hans Citroen announced: "This must be Primo Levi's barrack."

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To count or not to count: British politics of framing and the condition of “illegal infiltratee” in the Bergen-Belsen DP camp (1945–1948)

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Abstract

This article explores the politics of humanitarian assistance in the aftermath of the Second World War, by examining the act of framing certain groups of Jewish refugees as “infiltratees”, in the context of the British occupation zone of Germany, and the Bergen-Belsen DP camp more specifically. Based on archival sources and the available literature, it dissects this legal categorisation to help understand who the different individuals categorised as infiltratees were, the wider political conjuncture that informed this framing, and the real consequences felt by those who were framed as such. This article demonstrates the extent to which the attribution of legal categories to those on the move, with tangible effects for those individuals, represents a deeply politicised practice in Europe, which has been operating at least since the first half of the twentieth century, and which continues today.

Key Words

Framing, Germany, humanitarian assistance, Jewish refugees, postwar Europe, regimes of legality, state of in-betweenness

Introduction

The Jewish census of 29 October 1946 and the politics of counting

In December 1946, Josef Rosensaft, leader of the Jewish Displaced Persons (DPs) of the Bergen-Belsen camp (or Hohné)¹ in the British occupation zone of Germany, wrote a letter to Noah Barou of the World Jewish Congress to complain about a census of the camp’s Jewish population carried out in October by the British military government (Rosensaft 19 December 1946). The British authorities counted 10,535 people, whereas Rosensaft claimed a number of 10,942 registered people and 2,500 unregistered “refugees”. Apart from refugees, elderly people, children and people travelling between camps to visit relatives were also excluded from the count. Rosensaft complains that these “miscalculations” were intentional and aimed to serve the interests of “certain people”

in the military government. In his letter, however, he does not clarify who these people were, nor the political implications of these “miscalculations”. What is clear is that this difference in numbers would have had implications for the assistance people would (or not) receive, since the British authorities sent the results of the census to the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). Since the end of 1945, the UNRRA was responsible for running the camps in Germany and supplementing food and clothing provided by the occupation governments (Lavsky 2002: 59, 91).

The “refugees” Rosensaft mentioned were not counted because they were not officially registered at the camp and hence could not receive assistance from the UNRRA nor the British authorities. To count as eligible for assistance, one had to possess documents issued by the British military government, confirming one’s registration at Bergen-Belsen as a DP. These refugees corresponded to a group of people often labelled in correspondence and

¹ Hohné was the name given by the British authorities to the Bergen-Belsen DP camp. I choose to use Bergen-Belsen, following the choice of the Jewish DP population (Lavsky 2002: 75).

other post-1945 sources as “infiltrates”. This article focuses on this ‘label’ of infiltrate, as understood by the British authorities after the Second World War in the British zone of Germany. The infiltrates or “illegal infiltrates”² were Jewish individuals from Eastern Europe (mostly Poland) who left their homelands, often due to the presence of anti-Semitism in the aftermath of the war. The term infiltrate reveals a condition of being outside the law and performing an action – to infiltrate – which was seen as illegal. This term implies the criminalisation of individuals for entering a space they are not entitled to – in this case, the Jewish DP camps in the British zone.³ The camps constituted the loci of humanitarian assistance after the war, where DPs were provided with shelter, food, and other basic needs (Cohen 2012: 36). To be denied access to the camps meant to be denied basic assistance. This act of labelling or framing (and thus differentiating) groups of people and the political stakes of this framing are central to this article.

I focus on the concept of infiltrate and its reality effects, to examine British politics of humanitarian assistance between 1945 and 1948 and the binary legitimate–illegitimate, encapsulated in this concept. “Counting” expresses two intertwined meanings: the action of adding up the number of something/someone in a group to find out how many there are; and the idea that if something/someone counts, they are seen as valuable or important and thus entitled to something. The anecdote with which I began this article is particularly representative of the politics of humanitarian assistance through the act of counting. It reveals that the choice of who counts and is counted was determined not only by the human condition of one in need, but also by one’s possession of a legitimate status. This status was conferred by the British occupation authorities according to their criteria, as examined below, and effectuated in the act of registering and providing individuals with documentation. With appropriate documentation, one would be counted in for food rations and other needs. Only those entitled to be included in a census would count, i.e. be entitled to assistance.

The politics of framing: British postwar policies towards Jewish individuals

Much has been written about the refugee issue after the First and Second World Wars, and about DPs during and after the Second World War. Especially since the 1980s, many authors have focused on the latter (see, for example, Lavsky 2002; Shephard 2010; Cohen 2012). Other categories related to the Second World War included German expellees from Eastern Europe, Prisoners of War (POWs) and internationally displaced Germans (or evac-

uees) (Hilton 2018: 8). Regarding Jews, a 1947 report written by the Advisor on Jewish affairs⁴ explains that “various sections of the Jewish population in the British Zone can be regarded as Poles, Hungarians, Rumanians, Germans, etc. or they can be regarded as DPs, Infiltrates, Refugees, Expellees, etc.” (Graham-Smith 1947). What all these and other labels express is, on the one hand, the scale of population movement between 1945 and 1948 (especially in Germany), and on the other, the framing of individuals and, implicitly, their dependence on contemporary occupation (and national) politics.

The British policy towards Jewish (would-be) DPs was characterised by several factors. First, the British authorities were very strict regarding who was entitled to DP status and movement to and from their zone. The British authorities only considered two categories of DPs: victims of the Nazis and Allied partners, and enemy Germans and Nazi collaborators (Lavsky 2002: 52). At the end of 1945, Jews amounted to circa 5 percent of all DPs in Germany, but with time their number increased because of the repatriation of non-Jewish DPs to their homelands and the arrival of thousands of Jews fleeing Eastern Europe (often designated infiltrates). Initially, most Jewish DPs were located in the British zone, but this soon changed since the British were reluctant to admit Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe. In December 1945, the British zone closed to newcomers and refused to accept potential DPs, hence many refugees left for the American zone (Kochavi 2001: 31).

At the end of 1945, the British government in London started receiving reports of thousands of Jews from Hungary and Poland who were beginning to ‘infiltrate’ the British occupation zones in Germany and Austria (Kochavi 2001: 43; Cohen 2012: 15). Correspondence between British authorities dated to January 1946 states: “a considerable number of Polish Jewish who have voluntarily left their homes in Poland since the end of hostilities due to alleged anti-Semitic demonstrations are entering Hohne D.P. camp although they are not officially entitled to D.P. status” (Office of the Deputy Military Government 1946). A subsequent letter explains that Polish Jews had been “trickling into the DP Camps at Hohne during the past 4 months at the rate of 30 a day. There are now 9,000 Jews at Hohne, 70% of whom are Poles, and most of whom, apparently, are confident of migrating to Palestine this year” (King 1946). This seems to indicate that there was a connection between the entry of Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe, the closing of the British zone to newcomers at the peak of these arrivals, and the process of illegalising this group of people – the infiltrates – due to their entry into the British zone illegitimately.

To prevent ‘illegal’ entry, the British introduced an intelligence system to block attempts even before refugees

2 The adjective “illegal” used to qualify the “infiltrates” often appears in the archival sources.

3 It should be noted, however, that the categorisation of “infiltrates” was also applied in the context of the American occupation zone and in the British occupation zone of Austria (and possibly other contexts) (Grossman 2007: 1–2).

4 The name of the Advisor on Jewish affairs is not mentioned in the archival sources.

reached their zone (Lavsky 2002: 54). For this purpose and to control the existing DP population, all occupation authorities carried out censuses, like the one of October 1946. These started in earnest in March 1946, following a resolution of the UNRRA that established that all DPs should be registered in assembly centres (or camps). The initial motivation was to facilitate efforts of repatriation, but once repatriation halted the screening procedures became stricter. In mid-1946, the avowed aim of the Allied occupation authorities and the UNRRA was to get rid of suspicious collaborators, traitors and war criminals, thus allowing the authorities to ‘sanitise’ the DP communities by removing the ‘unworthy’. This selection was also motivated by practical (and less publicised) concerns – the Allied occupation authorities aimed to drastically reduce the number of camp inhabitants (Kochavi 2001: 50).

Another aspect that characterised British postwar policies towards Jewish refugees was their disregard for their “Jewishness”. This meant that the British officials downplayed their necessity to be a part of a Jewish community having lost family and friends during the Holocaust. Whereas the Americans changed their initial non-segregation policy in the DP camps relatively fast, the British only started changing their policy in 1946. According to the British authorities, the reason behind this insistence was to avoid practising racial discrimination like the Nazis did, thus preventing the increase of anti-Semitic feelings (Lavsky 2002: 51–53). Some authors, such as Hagit Lavsky, argue that such policies represented a continued “deep-seated animosity toward the Jews” (2002: 54). According to other authors, however, this view downplays the refugee problem faced by the British military authorities in Germany after 1945, as well as Britain’s difficult position between its obligations towards the Jewish victims of Hitler as well as the Arab majority in Palestine (Herbert 2005: 116).

British policies towards DPs and other categories of Jewish refugees (including infiltrees) were greatly influenced by the economic situation in the UK and British involvement in the Arab region. The war had taken a substantial financial and human toll, which helps understand why the British were eager to lighten their financial burden and solve matters fast. They were also concerned about large-scale emigration to the UK. Their reluctance to allow more Jewish refugees into their zone is thus partly explained by the country’s postwar financial situation (Kochavi 2001: 1; Lavsky 2002: 54). Furthermore, since the late 1930s, British policy revolved around safeguarding the country’s position in the Arab world. When Hitler got to power in Germany, emigration to Palestine increased significantly, causing the alarm of the local Arab population. Pressured by the Arabs and their interests, the British started restricting this movement just as the situation of the Jews in Europe worsened

(Kochavi 2001: 7–10). After the war, it became clear that many Holocaust survivors could or did not want to return to their homelands in Eastern Europe and wished to resettle in Palestine. The British government, however, continued to adhere to the principle that had guided its politics since the late 1930s by maintaining a separation between the issue of the Jews in Europe and the question of Palestine. From the mid-1940s onwards, this became virtually impossible – opposition of the Jewish DPs in Bergen-Belsen led by Rosensaft with the support of Jewish organisations, and concerns of the US regarding the predicament of the Jewish DPs in the British zone led the UK to compromise regarding its policies. Nonetheless, the UK remained steadfast in its guiding principle at least until late 1947, which significantly influenced its policies towards Jewish DPs (Kochavi 2001: 7–10, 59). Although efforts remained limited, the British did not forbid emigration to Palestine altogether. For instance, in 1947 they initiated operation “Grand National”, through which 350 certificates were allocated monthly for Aliyah (transfer to Palestine). However, the limited number of certificates meant that attempts were also made at ‘illegal’ Aliyah (Lavsky 2002: 197–198).

Dissecting a category of illegality

The infiltrees were far from a homogenous group: correspondence and other contemporary sources and the available literature refer to them several times between 1946 and 1948 in different ways, meaning that probably unrelated individuals, with different reasons for being on the move, were often jumbled together into this category. Furthermore, the word “refugee” seems to have been used interchangeably with “infiltrate” to refer to Jewish people from Eastern Europe fleeing their homeland and trying to enter the Allied occupation zones.⁵ Although the infiltrees have been written about (by the British, international Jewish organisations or Rosensaft), it seems like the infiltrees themselves left few or no records. Therefore, and given contemporary politics and shifting conflicts of interest, when considering what is said about the infiltrees, one needs to be wary of who is saying what and with what purpose.

Atina Grossman, writing mostly about the American occupation zone,⁶ hints at the lack of homogeneity of those labelled as infiltrees when she explains that they constituted three different yet sometimes overlapping groups. First were survivors of concentration and labour camps and death marches, freed in Germany and returned to their hometowns hoping (often in vain) to find family members or repossess property. The second were Jews who had survived among the partisans, in hiding or concealing their Jewish identity. The third and largest (yet

⁵ For the sake of consistency throughout, I will henceforth refer to this group as infiltrees.

⁶ A significant amount of the literature available focuses on the American zone, which is probably related to the fact that many more Eastern European Jews chose to go to this zone, due to the stricter policies of the British occupation authorities.

least studied) group “comprised perhaps 200,000 Jews who had been repatriated to Poland from their difficult but life-saving refuge in the Soviet Union and then fled again, from postwar Polish antisemitism” (Grossman 2007: 1–2, 159–162). Anti-Semitic violence culminated in the Kielce pogrom of July 1946 (Cohen 2012: 127), leading to the escalation of the influx of infiltrtees entering Germany (Grossman 2007: 92).

Several reasons are identified to explain the arrival of Polish Jewish infiltrtees in the German occupation zones: the search for safety from the threat of racial violence (one of the most common) (Grossman 2007: 93), economic collapse, the inability to retrieve property left behind, the loss of family members and the grim political and economic forecast (Lavsky 2002: 33). From correspondence dated to December 1946, Rose Henriques (a British Jew who served as Head of the Germany department of the Jewish Committee for Relief Abroad or JCRA) explains that the recently arrived infiltrtees came to Bergen-Belsen in search of Jewish communal life and religious facilities, and of relatives or friends (Henriques 5 December 1946). Possibly the most common motivation for entering the British occupation zone (and connected to the other reasons), however, was the hope to emigrate to Palestine through the DP camps (Lavsky 2002: 33; Shephard 2010: 5). The British authorities refused to accept that these Polish Jews were fleeing the threat of racial persecution, despite their awareness of anti-Semitic violence in Poland (Kochavi 2001: 52). The British were pressured from many sides (the US, the UNRRA, Jewish organisations) to change their policy concerning the infiltrtees, but they remained steadfast, leading to many discussions between different parties (Kochavi 2001: 52–54). For the British, these Jews were leaving Poland out of free will, and therefore were not entitled to assistance.

Behind the British decisions were concerns that infiltrtees would intensify Zionist sentiment amongst DP communities, thus increasing the pressure to grant them permission to emigrate to Palestine (Cohen 2012: 136). Lavsky mentions that the British believed that some of these infiltrtees were even helping the Jewish DPs to organise and, together with Zionist organisations, would pressure the British Mandatory authorities in Palestine to allow them to migrate (Lavsky 2002: 54). The British suspicions, often expressed in contemporary correspondence (Lavsky 2002: 198), had some grounds in reality. As Lavsky explains, especially after the British closed their borders at the end of 1945, Aliyah became a focus of Zionist activity. This was done, for example, by helping the Briha (or escape) into the British zone by smuggling refugees into camps and preparing Jewish people for legal or illegal Aliyah. While most of these activities were

the responsibility of Palestinian and international Jewish organisations, the integration of infiltrtees for a temporary stay in the British zone was mostly the responsibility of Rosensaft and his colleagues. They did so by providing them with falsified documentation and by dealing with welfare organisations and the British authorities (Lavsky 2002: 198). This shows how groups conditioned by the framing of the occupation authorities were able nonetheless to assert their agency by working towards what they believed themselves to be entitled to.

The British occupation authorities were against removing the ‘illegitimate’ refugees from the camps by force. Hence they would enforce the status of illegality upon Eastern European Jews attempting to enter the zone to prevent and dissuade more from doing so, and to encourage the ones already there to leave. Once infiltrtees had “infiltrated” the DP camps, two strategies were planned and in some cases applied: the resettlement of infiltrtees in the British zone into (often non-Jewish) German communities, while treating them in the same way as German refugees;⁷ and the enforcement of politics of humanitarian assistance through the act of (not) counting. This assistance was reflected in the provision of food, shelter, health, education and religious services, and being part of Jewish communal life.

Grossman maintains that food politics worked “as important terms through which questions of guilt, victimization, and entitlement were conceptualized – and enforced – in the early postwar years” (2007: 177). I argue that this idea can be extended to the denial of other forms of assistance, visible in post-1945 archival sources referring to what the infiltrtees were *not* entitled to. For instance, a 1946 letter from Rosensaft to Robert Solomon expresses his concerns regarding the British refusal to provide space, food and education to infiltrtees (Rosensaft 31 January 1946). Another example are the minutes of a 1948 conference about the future of the Glynn Hughes Hospital in Bergen-Belsen, that explains: “an entitled patient could only be a Displaced Person eligible for PC/IRO care and maintenance and in possession of a blue D.P. card. [...] Dr. Gottlieb stated that speaking from the point of administration of the hospital he was concerned as to who would pay charges for the infiltrtees” (P.W. & D.P. Division 1948).

Final thoughts

In this article, I explored British politics of humanitarian assistance at work in the Bergen-Belsen DP camp in the aftermath of the Second World War, by examining the category of the “infiltrtee”. This categorisation should be understood within a “politics of framing” that operated at

7 We see in contemporary correspondence (namely between members of international and British Jewish organisations, and with British occupation authorities) that this ruling was very controversial and discussed at length for a considerable amount of time. This was seen by members of Jewish organisations as not responding to the needs of Jewish individuals, for instance, to have access to Jewish communal life and religious facilities (see, for example, Henriques 22 October 1946; Solomon 1946; Henriques 5 December 1946; Pink 1947).

this and other camps during this and other periods. For Nancy Fraser, “framing” implies a distinction between members and non-members of particular entities, by establishing boundaries amongst groups of people based on politically-informed criteria (2005: 11). This article shows how, between 1945 and 1948, the conceptualisation of the category of infiltree – and the consequences felt by the individuals who were attributed this category – was deeply motivated by varying and shifting politics. It also demonstrates how the British authorities exerted their power in selecting who did or did not count for humanitarian assistance, by defining the terms of legitimacy vs illegitimacy. Through certain policies, and the use of adjectives such as “bona fide” or “genuine” to qualify the DPs (as opposed to the infiltrees), the British established who was seen as a member and as a non-member of this category, and who was therefore entitled to humanitarian assistance and who was not.⁸ Furthermore, it could be argued that the process of illegalising the infiltrees can also be seen as a consequence of the agency these individuals exerted in challenging the power of the British occupation authorities to establish who counted as “legitimate” and in choosing to enter the occupation zone regardless of British policies.

In this framing process, the British authorities were essentially establishing who counted, that is, who was worthy of empathy and humanitarian assistance. While the Jewish DPs, who were essentially stateless, could receive assistance (including access to food, shelter, education, religious communal life and health services), the Jewish infiltrees, having renounced their nationality by choice (even if out of necessity) – and not fitting into the category of DP as defined by the British – would enter a state of in-betweenness where they could evoke no rights, and thus be granted no humanitarian assistance. The decision of the British authorities to offer no support to the alleged infiltrees was thus an act of framing who did not count.

Such politics of framing and of choosing who does and who does not count for assistance resonates with Europe’s so-called “migration crisis” from 2015 onwards. In this context, the framing of individuals along the categories of “refugee” and of “migrant” has been used to distinguish between those on the move and the legitimacy (or alleged lack thereof) of their claims to international protection and assistance. This framing, based on shifting political agendas (as well as public opinion influenced by news media), has been used in recent years to justify policies of inclusion and exclusion, with important implications for the way in which the individuals on the move are treated, whatever the categories imposed upon them (see, for instance, Goodman et al. 2017; Crawley and Skleparis 2018). Examples such as this one, as well as the one addressed in this article, demonstrate the extent to which the attribution of different categories to those on the move

for a variety of reasons, represents a deeply politicised practice in Europe at least since the first half of the twentieth century. By exploring the post-Second World War category of the infiltree, ascribed to individuals better characterised by their state of in-betweenness, I hope to have contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of those on the move (whether regarded as legitimate or not), and on the potential real effects of the politics of framing.

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The mass graves of Hohne and the French attempt (and failure) at exhumation (1958–1969)

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Abstract

The Bergen Belsen Nazi concentration camp has been widely described and studied, especially as the images taken by British troops at the moment of the camp's liberation shaped the very representation of Nazi crimes and the Holocaust. Much less-known are the debates about the exhumations of more than 20 000 corpses of inmates, the ones who died in the weeks before or after the liberation. The French mission in search of corpses of deportees, the so-called 'Garban mission', tried to negotiate the access to the camp grounds. After an international uproar and a decade of negotiations, the permission was finally not granted.

Key Words

Exhumations, Holocaust, Nazi camps, Postwar, WWII

The Bergen-Belsen Memorial is today one of the most widely visited former concentration camps and sites of terror in Germany. It is a 'city of memorials', with a complex structure of commemoration and many layers of memory¹. There are many individual memorials, a symbolic tombstone for Anne Frank, a place of worship, and a huge museum. Bergen-Belsen is known and remembered for the gruesome images that were taken by British troops immediately following the liberation of the camp on April 15, 1945. These images have often been taken from the (heavily edited) newsreels shown in cinemas in Britain and all over Europe². They were also widely used in subsequent documentary movies shown both at Nuremberg and in other high-profile trials, and with the aim of 'reeducating' the Germans. The many visitors to the Memorial do not know (and are not told) that the site is also a huge cemetery, with the corpses seen in the photographs displayed within the museum, located both on

the main camp sites (where mass graves are now marked and with the approximate number of deaths being given) and not far away from them – not in Bergen-Belsen itself but in the nearby military camp at Hohne (where the Wehrmacht barracks were located, in which many survivors were sheltered). In the military camp, only a few individual graves are marked, when the trenches in which the corpses were aligned are not. Today, the military camp belongs to the Bundeswehr; after the fall of communism and the reunification of Germany, it was transferred from the British troops that had occupied it for decades. In contrast to other camp sites in Germany, no exhumations have been performed in Bergen-Belsen and no attempts have been undertaken to rebury the corpses in individual, identified, decent graves³. In Dachau, for example, the mass graves of the Leitenberg (about 10 000 corpses of inmates who died in the last weeks of the camp's existence and following its liberation), were opened from

¹ See the website of the Memorial <https://bergen-belsen.stiftung-ng.de/en/>.

² On those images, see for instance the seminal Bardgett S, Cesarani D (2006) (Eds), *Belsen 1945: New Historical Perspectives*, London/Portland, 250 pp.

³ The treatment of corpses that had not been cremated and which were found when the camps were liberated or abandoned by the guards remains a spot of the research on the camp and Holocaust memory.

1952 onwards. Some corpses were identified and repatriated (mostly to France), while others were put in mass graves as part of a landscaped memorial cemetery that today forms part of the official Dachau memorial.

None of this happened at Bergen-Belsen. Not because no plans were drawn up to exhume over 12 000 dead bodies of victims who, after the liberation of the camp, died from exhaustion, disease (typhus) or as a consequence of mistreatment by SS guards. The driving force behind the plan to exhume was the *Mission Garban*, an offspring of the ministry of Veterans, War Victims and Deportees⁴. The French mission was named after Pierre Garban, its director between 1946 and 1965. Launched in 1946, it took over from the French occupation forces, which had started exhuming any corpses considered 'French', whether those of fallen soldiers or any category of deportee (Resistance fighters, Jews or hostages). The French mission was far from the only one to search for the bodies of its nationals; Italy, Belgium and Norway, for example, instigated similar operations. Representatives of the *Mission Garban* toured the sites of concentration camps, went along the roads of death marches, and exhumed a total of 50 000 corpses, including 7000 that were identified as French by means of traditional forensic techniques of identification. Information given by survivors on the circumstances of death was taken into consideration, as well as the measurements of corpses provided by the families and close examinations of victims' teeth.

At first, the *Mission Garban* only opened graves containing small numbers of corpses. The forensic techniques employed after the First World War somehow seemed to have been forgotten – then huge mass graves were opened and soldiers' corpses repatriated to families. It was only from 1956 on that the French mission dared to open increasingly larger graves. The last endeavour was to be performed at Bergen-Belsen. In April 1958, everything was prepared, with tents installed at the site to shelter the equipment that was to be used to disinter and examine the corpses. However, this coincided with April 15, which is the day of the anniversary of the liberation of the camp; at this time, a small group of camp survivors were holding a ceremony at the site and they spotted the equipment and the facilities. Upon learning that French officials were about to exhume the dead, the survivors immediately notified Joseph Rosensaft, the leader of the International Committee of Bergen-Belsen. Rosensaft, at that time a resident of New York, was himself a survivor and, after the liberation, the leader of the Jewish com-

mittee of the Displaced Persons' Camp established at the site. Rosensaft was well connected and apprised Nahum Goldmann, the president of the World Jewish Congress, who raised the issue with Konrad Adenauer⁵.

From the very beginning, this controversy over the exhumations at Bergen-Belsen was handled at the highest political level. Several interest groups engaged with the idea of exhumations, favouring or opposing it for various reasons. The survivors of Bergen-Belsen were supported by the organised West-German Jewish community, the *Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland*. Although their demand for the graves to remain untouched was never formally based on Jewish religious law, they consulted various rabbis to ascertain their opinion. When asked, German rabbis opposed the exhumations on religious grounds. The Israeli chief rabbi, in turn, permitted disinterment. He, too, quoted religious reasons (to give at least some Jews a Jewish funeral and to bury them in a Jewish cemetery). Jacob Kaplan, the Chief Rabbi of France, also approved exhumations. Associations of French deportees, mostly Resistance fighters in support of the mission's endeavours, lobbied the French government and the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They claimed that the French had the right to exhume and repatriate the corpses of their comrades in arms to French soil. The Jewish representatives from the other side accused them of nationalism⁶. Yet, in reality, the West German authorities could hardly prevent the exhumations, as a French-German agreement on the 'consequences of deportation', which granted the French Government the right to repatriate the corpses of all deportees from the territory of the Federal Republic of Germany [FRG], had been signed in October 1954.

Several attempts at negotiations were made, with meetings taking place in Paris under the auspices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Nahum Goldmann met with French Jewish leaders and German diplomats to strike a deal. Several solutions were suggested: it was proposed that limited exhumations could be permitted but only if the French could prove that they had precise information about the localisation of the corpses they were looking for. This was, of course, impossible, especially in view of the hasty and disordered condition in which thousands of corpses had been buried in huge mass graves in April and May of 1945. The proposed solutions were never implemented and for years the situation remained at a standstill. The French associations of Resistance fighters were determined to see the exhumations start as soon as possi-

4 I am currently writing a monograph about *Mission Garban*. My research is informed by the fact that postwar exhumations of deportees have not only been forgotten in the social and cultural realms but have indeed been neglected by the current, though extensive, research on the aftermath of deportations. On the mission, see Dreyfus J-M (2015), *Renationalizing Bodies? The French Search Mission for the Corpses of Deportees in Germany, 1946–58*. In: Anstett E, Dreyfus J-M (Eds), *Human Remains and Violence: Methodological Approaches*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 67–78. The volume is accessible in open access at file:///C:/Users/JeanMarc/Downloads/628394%20(9).pdf

5 There are many archival materials pertaining to this controversy. I mostly used the diplomatic archives of the French Ministère des Affaires étrangères (La Courneuve, EU, RFA, n° 1706, 3037) and the German Diplomatic Archives in Berlin (PAAA, B86).

6 For a more detailed description of the negotiations, see Dreyfus J-M, (2015), *L'impossible réparation. Déportés, biens spoliés, or nazi, comptes bloqués, criminels de guerre*, Flammarion, Paris, 180–191.

ble. At that time, the most influential association was the *Réseau du Souvenir*. Its members were not communists and were politically well-connected in Gaullist circles. On its behalf, the duchess d'Ayen, the widow of Jean de Noailles d'Ayen, wrote to Maurice Couve de Murville, who was at that time Minister of Foreign Affairs. Her husband had been deported to Neuengamme and from there transferred on a death march to Bergen-Belsen, where he died on April 13, 1945, two days before the liberation of the camp. In her letter, the duchess pointed out a contradiction in the position of the Jewish families and organisations. She rightly noted that some French Jewish families had seen the remains of a relative repatriated by the *Mission Garban*. In April 1959, a small delegation of French survivors visited Hohne only to find that some of the small number of tombstones erected at the site had been desecrated by anti-Semites.

An Arbitration Commission first was called to life in 1965 by the Europe desk of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs; this was permitted by the 1955 Bonn agreement on German sovereignty. A diplomatic agreement was signed in June 1966 to create the Commission. The Commission organised consultations, with memorandums from both sides (in this case, the French state and the Federal Republic of Germany). The German delegation worked closely with the *Zentralrat*, which was represented by its general-secretary Henrik van Dam. Long and detailed hearings were held in the Koblenz castle, where the Commission had its seat. In its detailed memorandum, the French delegation explained the techniques it employed to exhume and identify deportees' corpses. In the case of the prospective works at Bergen-Belsen, the investigations were to be based on a few identified graves; the French claimed to have at their disposal a precise count of Jewish and non-Jewish victims (1700 and 980 respectively) buried in the Hohne mass graves. These debates are fascinating precisely because they are indicative of the state of memory in the mid-1960s – the emphasis was on the memory of Resistance but Jewish memory was on the rise. The lawyer Arrighi, the spokesperson for the French delegation, advocated a universalised memory of deportation in order to sustain demands for exhumations. Some of his statements were dubious, leaning as

they did towards anti-Semitic tropes. He also contrasted the weight of the French rabbinate, which represented 600 000 Jews, to that of its German counterpart, where 35 000 Jews lived at the time. The court even travelled to Bergen-Belsen and the visit was reported by three mainstream media outlets: the German weekly *Stern*, *The New York Times* and *Associated Press*. There was no further press coverage of this year-long debate. Only on 30 October 1969, more than 11 years after the controversy started, did the Arbitrary Commission reach its decision. Exhumations were refused. Eight judges opposed them with only one vote in dissension (the French judge). Strangely enough, the main argument advanced by the Commission centred on the meaning of the 'landscape of memory': the landscape of the camp site was seen as part of survivors' memory and should be respected. In this sense, the exhumations would disturb this set landscape. To this day, no exhumations have taken place in Bergen-Belsen.

This specific case is interesting in many ways: it shows the last attempt to exhume large graves in Germany and it is a reminder of the importance of postwar exhumations not only in the FRG, but also across Europe. It documents the process of differentiation between the memory of the Holocaust and the memory of resistance and deportations. It also illuminates how, very early on, politicians at the highest level had to deal with issues of memory and religious sensitivities. The minimal press coverage contrasts, nevertheless, with the high-profile controversies that would emerge in the 1980s and 1990s, such as the one around the Carmelite Convent at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

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Graves of the ‘Other’: Norway and the commemoration of soviet prisoners of war

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Abstract

The memory of other nationalities and their wartime suffering on Norwegian soil are mainly part of a local narrative. While the subject of Soviet prisoners of war is common knowledge in local historical studies, both oral and written, there is virtually no space for a living memory about the Soviet POWs on a national level. Despite forming the largest group of casualties on Norwegian soil during the war, the Soviet POWs have not been included at the national level of the Norwegian history of occupation.

Key Words

Collective memory, Exhumation, Operation Asphalt, Soviet victims, War graves, War memorials

Between 1941 and 1945, nearly 100,000 Soviet prisoners of war (POWs) were transported to Norway. About 90,000 of them were soldiers of the Red Army and nearly 9,000 were so-called *Ostarbeiter* (RA, Kontoret for flyktninge-og fangespørsmål, eske 0417). The people in these two categories were Soviet citizens driven into forced labour by, and for, the Germans. Among them there were about 1,400 women and 400 children. In Norway alone, the Germans established nearly 500 prison camps for the Soviet POWs, most of them in the northern part of the country (Soleim 2018). The size of the camps varied from a few prisoners to several thousand in the same camp. According to the Norwegian War Grave Service and information from German prison cards, approximately 13,700 Soviet POWs died in Norway during the War (Soleim 2018; www.obd.ru). Other sources quote different figures: Soviet authorities claimed that the number of missing soldiers reached 16,000. German sources give a number of about 7,000 (RA, Krigsgravtjenesten, sovjetiske krigsgraver 1946–1952, boks 26). The history of Soviet POWs provides a good example of how dramatic war experiences from the Eastern front were transferred to Norway, with both individual and collective memories

connected to these prisoners indicating a will (or the lack of thereof) to remember ‘Others’ in a national context.

The memory of other nationalities and their wartime suffering on Norwegian soil are mainly part of a local narrative. While the subject of Soviet prisoners of war is common knowledge in local historical studies, both oral and written, there is virtually no space for a living memory about the Soviet POWs on a national level. Despite forming the largest group of casualties on Norwegian soil during the war, the Soviet POWs have not been included at the national level of the Norwegian history of occupation (Soleim 2010). One reason for this absence is the prisoners’ destiny after their repatriation to their homeland in 1945. Around 84,000 Soviet citizens were repatriated from Norway, and until the beginning of the 1990s there was almost no contact between Norwegians and former Soviet prisoners. Another, and perhaps a more important reason, points back to a set of politically charged practices that in the early post-war years evolved around the human remains of the Soviet POWs (Soleim 2016). Known under the codename Operation Asphalt, they involved mass exhumation and reburial of the bodies and, in the longer run, contributed to effective

removal of Soviet victims of the war from the national memorial landscape.

A few years after the surviving POWs were sent home, the dead Soviet victims of the German occupation received considerable publicity in Norway. In 1951, the Norwegian government decided to move graves of the Soviet POWs from Finnmark, Troms and Nordland to Tjøtta War Cemetery on the Helgeland coast outside Sandnessjøen. The work was given the codename Operation Asphalt probably because the excavated bodies were transported in asphalt bags. The planning of Operation Asphalt began in 1948 with the aim of establishing a joint graveyard to which all remains of Soviet POWs, exhumed from the burial sites spread throughout the northern part of the country, would be relocated. The excavations carried out within the framework of the Operation Asphalt constituted an extensive task for the Norwegian authorities. They covered approximately 200 grave sites, 95 of which were located in the three northernmost counties. The relocation of Soviet POWs was completed in 1951. In the aftermath, several further victims were buried at Tjøtta. In 1952, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that 8804 Soviet POWs had been transferred to the site, of whom 978 had been identified. Obviously, it was difficult to get an exact number from the material after the move was completed. The figures provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1952 do not correspond with information given at the monument at Tjøtta, which lists 6725 unknown and 826 identified victims.

Many monuments dedicated to the dead POWs located at the local burial sites were demolished in the process, while some of those destroyed memorials are still visible near the roads in the mountains. The Norwegian authorities presented several arguments to justify the operation, with the monuments at the centre of their argument. It was claimed that the monuments made moving the corpses difficult, that they prevented local farmers from cultivating the land and, finally, that they spoiled the view for tourists along the main road. All these arguments had no basis in reality. The monuments were not placed above the graves, there were no farmers who needed to remove them in order to get access to their fields and, moreover, most of the monuments were not placed in central areas along the main road but rather in forests or in hidden places. The real, unofficial reason for exhumations, reburials, and destruction of the monuments was the Norwegian government's fear of Soviet espionage. The Norwegian officials did not want to give the Soviet authorities any opportunity to honour the memory of dead Soviet prisoners, considering their visits to the sites merely an excuse to tour sensitive military areas (Soleim 2016). At the beginning of the Cold War, this was a convincing argument to justify Operation Asphalt. While the local community in several towns in northern Norway tried to stop the operation, they only succeeded in one locality (RA, Krigsgravtjenesten, Notat, Gravsaken Mo i Rana, Oslo, 2 November 1951). Protests and demonstrations in these towns are indicative of the strong individual sympathy

among Norwegians towards the memory of the Soviet prisoners who died in Norway, but the operation also led to a weakening of collective memory of the prisoners on the local level.

Entangled in the political tensions of the Cold War, the conditions surrounding the relocation of Soviet war graves in Northern Norway contributed to the invisibility of the fate of Soviet POWs on Norwegian soil. Operation Asphalt briefly drew attention to the POWs – the destruction of memorials and the secrecy of the excavation work rendered locals in northern Norway into horrified spectators of what they described as macabre actions. But this, I argue, in the long term, resulted in an important aspect of Norwegian occupation history being forgotten. Physically, the excavation and destruction of the memorials removed the only anchor that could provide the basis for a worthy and lasting memory of the fate of the thousands of Soviet POWs who died in Norway during the war.

Immediately after the liberation in 1945, the Soviet POWs were generally afforded attention and sympathy. By the 1970s, they had disappeared from the Norwegian national memorial landscape. The politics of memory in the country has hardly included Soviet POWs. Until the 1990s, in cultural celebrations it was mainly Norwegian victims of the war that were remembered, while many schoolbooks still do not mention the Soviet prisoners. Since the late 1980s, awareness and knowledge of the Soviet POWs fate in Norway has been increasing. From the beginning of the 1990s, we have several examples of Soviet POWs who have contacted (or been contacted) by private individuals in Norway and returned to commemorate their wartime experiences. Academic research, local celebrations and Soviet veterans visiting Norway have provided an opportunity to inscribe the former prisoners into collective memory in the country. Several museums and local people are working with the preservation of the memory and history of the Soviet victims of the war, while in some places the monuments have been restored, becoming an important part of local remembrance. In several local communities in Norway, the culture of remembrance of the Soviet prisoners is strong. On May 1 (International Workers' Day) or May 8 (Liberation Day) there are often speeches or special arrangements at the Soviet war graves. One example is the Russian Embassy's participation at commemoration arrangements on May 1 at Ørmelen in Verdal and in the Falstad Forest. This kind of commemoration has continued since 1945 at Ørmelen and since the 1960s in the Falstad Forest. Yet, these efforts remain fragmentary and unfold mostly at the local level. Reflecting the conflicts of memory in Norway more generally, local memory is not visible on a national level and the forms of remembering are dependent on a local initiative.

War cemeteries are places invested with a certain symbolic value. The anonymity present there not only reminds us of the one soldier who died, but also about the bloodbath of the war. In Norway, the establishment and maintenance of war monuments and memorials dedicated to Soviet POWs are also dependent on local initiatives. The

absence of memorials or a lack of interest in them gives us a clear signal about the will of communities to remember the destiny of other nationalities that died on Norwegian soil during the Second World War. Nowadays, more than forty memorials have been erected to the memory of the dead Soviet prisoners in Norway. Where the victims' names are known, they have been listed on the monuments. A lot of local communities have taken care of the monuments where the names of the victims are known.

There are several monuments at Tjøtta International War Cemetery. The main memorial, a seven-metre-high monolith, was unveiled in 1953. It bears the inscription: "In grateful memory to the Soviet Russian soldiers that lost their lives in Northern Norway during the war 1941–1945 and who are buried here." (Helgelands Blad undated, 1953). Another, smaller monument cites the number of 7,551 victims buried at Tjøtta. At the graveyard, one can also find nameplates, placed on the ground, for the 826 identified victims. In 2002, all the nameplates were removed from the graves by the Central War Grave Service authorities in Oslo; the Soviet prisoners were again reduced to anonymous victims (Helgeland Arbeiderblad 2008). The quoted reasons for the removal were pragmatic: the nameplates sank down into the ground and damaged the lawnmower while maintaining the memory location. The decision to remove the plaques met with protests from local people and local authorities. Most of this local engagement had its background in the catastrophe of the ship *Rigel* in the autumn of 1944, which took place near the future cemetery. More than 2,000 Soviet POWs lost their lives as result of the British airstrike, killed by the bombs directly or by the ensuing fire on board the ship. Only the strongest and those who could swim were saved. Today, apart from some iron scrap by the sea, there are no visible traces of this catastrophe. The victims are buried at Tjøtta; a memorial that commemorates their tragic deaths was unveiled on December 1, 1977 (Helgelands Blad 1977). Representatives from the Russian Embassy in Oslo, the Norwegian Government, the Norwegian Defence and local authorities participated in the ceremony. The Tjøtta name plates were restored only at the end of 2008. Yet this solution is not permanent (Helgeland Arbeiderblad 2008).

One of the reasons for this is the fact that in 2009, the Norwegian governmental War Grave Service and the Falstad Memorial and Human Rights Centre launched a project *War Graves Seek Names* that seeks to establish the identity of the unknown Soviet POWs buried in Norway (a project in which I was personally involved). It is based on research into prison cards obtained from Russian archives. By 2009, only 2,700 of the Soviet victims had been identified by name thanks to material available in the register of the Norwegian War Grave Service. With the help of the newly launched identification project, we have been able to establish over 4,000 new names of

the Soviet POWs. For this purpose, we make use of the Russian database OBD Memorial with digitalized prison cards from Russian and German archives. The database www.krigsgraver.no which provides information on the identified dead, was inaugurated on March 23, 2011. According to the plans of the War Grave Service, once the project concludes, all newly identified names will be set up at the Tjøtta International War Cemetery (FAD, Merking på Tjøtta sovjetiske krigskirkegård, Høringsnotat, 4 June 2012).

The Falstad Memorial and Human Rights Centre represents another local memorial site with national and international perspectives. Situated in mid-Norway, in the main building of the former Prison Camp *SS Strafgefängenenlager Falstad*, this national education and documentation centre was officially opened in October 2006 (the foundation was established already in 2000)¹ The museum exhibition *Face to Face* consists of eleven rooms covering the development of Nazism, the establishment of the Third Reich, the SS and the concentration camps, the politics of race and the euthanasia programme, the war on the Eastern Front, the Norwegian Holocaust and the history of SS Strafgefängenenlager Falstad. The fate of the Norwegian Jews and Soviet POWs form an important part of the exhibition. The post-war years, including the trials against German war criminals, the development of the United Nations and human rights, genocide, crimes against humanity and mass murder after 1945 are the topics addressed in the final rooms. The exhibition highlights the development of modern human rights. The material used in the exhibition comes mainly from the collections of the Falstad Museum archive, including letters, diaries, paintings, uniforms and interviews with former prisoners.

The Centre's focus on the wartime and post-war fate of the Soviet POWs is articulated most powerfully in the Falstad Forest – a former execution and burial site located one kilometre south of the museum building. Approximately 220 prisoners of the camp were killed there between 1942 and 1943: about 100 Soviet POWs and 74 Yugoslavian and 43 Norwegian political prisoners (Reitan 2006). Every year on May 1, representatives of the Russian Embassy in Oslo take part in commemorations of the Soviet prisoners of war at the site. Many local people also participate in the ceremony. This connection between the embassy and the local residents is crucial for preserving the memory of both Soviet and Norwegian victims shot in Falstad Forest. Two monuments erected in the forest are dedicated to all victims, regardless of their nationality.

In the Mo i Rana area of northern Norway, too, the memory of the Soviet POWs has been preserved through local efforts. In 2004, the local historical society together with the residents restored and unveiled a previously destroyed monument for Soviet victims at Hjartåsen in Rana.² This type of commitment to local history, which includes victims from a foreign country, invests collective

1 (http://falstadsenteret.no/3_stiftelsen/arsberetning%202002.pdf and <http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/ud/aktuelt/taler> 12 May 2018).

2 <http://www.russia.no/s/rb-06-minnet-lever.pdf> (12 Mai 2018).

memory with a broader perspective. The remembrance of the Soviet victims in local communities in northern Norway demonstrates that it is possible, and desirable, to remember the destiny of other prisoners who died on Norwegian soil. Such local remembrance offers us a good opportunity to examine how efforts undertaken by small communities transform broader awareness and memory of the war. The work of local communities and museums to maintain the memory of the Soviet victims is also important in the education of younger generations. Yet, despite this growing interest in the history of the Soviet POWs, there is still a lot of work to be done in order to transfer this remembrance from the local to national level.

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Archive

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Uncovering war crimes: Hidden graves of the Falstad forest

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Abstract

This paper presents and discusses historical and archaeological data regarding war crimes committed by Nazi occupants during Second World War in the vicinity of the SS Prison Camp Falstad in Central Norway, and the issue of still unknown graves of executed prisoners in the Falstad Forest. Specialists from several Norwegian and foreign institutions are at present developing a set of advanced methods to be deployed during surveys of the Forest in search of hidden graves.

Key Words

Falstad camp, dead bodies, hidden graves, archaeology, forensic science

Introduction

Dead human bodies are part of crucial biological and cultural factors of all societies. The omnipresence of death as the most natural final stage of human existence has created complex mind sets, ideologies, frameworks, and rituals. Death by natural causes is usually followed by mourning processes, burial rituals, and creations of social memories of the dead seen as crucial element of *post-mortem* human dignity. Death caused by war crimes often creates contradictory processes such as the confiscation of dead bodies by perpetrators, hidden anonymous graves and attempts to erase the victims from social memories and depriving them of fundamental elements of *post-mortem* human dignity.

During the Second World War, Norway gained special status within the Nazi Germany war-strategy to secure Nazi supremacy in northern Atlantic and Barents Sea. According to Adolf Hitler himself, Norway was the Destiny Area (*ger. Schicksalszone*) for the outcome of WWII (Fricke 1942). Consequently, enormous numbers of Nazi troops, weapons, navy ships, and other military resources were deployed. The construction of *Festung Norwegen* (Fortress Norway), consisting of the Norwegian part of

the *Atlantervollen* (the Atlantic Wall and other giant investments, such as the Arctic Railway and main motorway to the northernmost part of continental Europe, Finnmark (*Norlandsbanen* and *Riksvei 50*), demanded a massive and constant supply of manpower. Norway housed the largest number of German troops and foreign prisoners (when seen in relation to the native population) of all Nazi-occupied countries in Europe. More than 140,000 prisoners of war and slave labourers from at least 15 European nations were transported by German Nazis to Norway, most of them from the Soviet Union, Poland, Yugoslavia, and Germany, of whom about 20,000 died on Norwegian soil as a result of multiple executions, cruel treatment, disease, or malnutrition. These horrors took place within a network of approximately 500 (smaller and larger) Nazi camps for prisoners of war, slave labourers, political and penal prisoners and Norwegian Jews, which was run by the Wehrmacht (in cooperation with Organisation Todt) and the SS from 1941–1944, and from 1944 exclusively by the SS (Reitan 1999; Soleim 2004). Apart from these forced labour camps, the Nazis established in 1941 some special Prison Camps run by the SS and Gestapo, the two most infamous were *Polizeihäftlingslager Grini*, close to



Figure 1. The Falstad Camp after liberation (Courtesy of the Falstad Center).

Oslo, and the SS *Straffgefängelslager Falstad*, the biggest prison camp established in Central Norway.

In the European context, the Falstad Prison Camp must be considered a rather minor camp and cannot by any means be compared to the most infamous Nazi concentration and extermination camps in terms of the number of prisoners and atrocities on its grounds (Jasinski et al. 2013; Jasinski 2015, 2018). And yet it encapsulates the trajectory of violence albeit on a smaller scale: from social/spatial isolation and frequent executions to *confiscation* of dead bodies and burials in hidden graves. Established in the fall of 1941 as a punishment prison camp, Falstad drew on the existing spatial infrastructure of exclusion. The main building of the camp was erected in 1921 as a special section for delinquent boys in an ordinary, state-run boarding school and was based on a model of traditional prisons and houses of correction. The prison-like design was the most probable reason for the Nazis to take over the building and further adopt it for their purposes. From 1941 to 1945, altogether some 4,300 to 5,000 people of at least 16 different nationalities went through Falstad, many to be deported to other camps or executed in the nearby Falstad Forest.

During the Nazi occupation, the Falstad camp-complex consisted of several main structural elements, namely the camp itself with its main square building with courtyard, surrounded by newly constructed prisoner barracks, a guards barrack, and watch towers, as well as a commander's villa, the stone quarry in the vicinity of the camp, and execution grounds a walking distance away in the Falstad Forest, one km from the camp. In addition to Soleim's article in this volume on the post-war exclusion of Soviet prisoners from Norwegian memorial culture, the present paper focuses on the physical fate of these, and other,

'forgotten' bodies of executed prisoners in the forest. Besides the traces in the archival sources, our research revolves around the application of new forensic-archaeological methods to investigate traces of hidden graves in this darkest part of the former Nazi campspace.

The Falstad forest on the eve of liberation

On the evening of May 4, 1945, several lorries with German soldiers from Trondheim arrived at the SS Prison Camp Falstad. The following night, lorries drove repeatedly between execution areas in the nearby Falstad Forest and the small harbor at the village of Ekne in the vicinity of the camp. This activity was noticed by some prisoners of the Falstad Camp and inhabitants of the local village. An old wooden fishing boat docked at the harbor was loaded with the 'cargo' from the lorries. The purpose of the operation was to exhume the bodies of camp victims buried in the Falstad Forest, transfer them to the harbor, put them on board the boat, and then make them disappear in the depths of Trondheim Fjord. Although the initial aim was to disinter the human remains of all prisoners executed and buried at the site, which at the time was estimated to be 300 people, only around 20–30 bodies were dug up and loaded onto the boat. It transpired that the operation was more difficult than anticipated and it was eventually called off on the evening of May 5 (Risto Nielsen and Reitan 2008). The next night, on May 6, 1945, the vessel – laden with bodies and weighed down with stones – was ultimately allowed to sink in the fjord.

The search for the vessel, framed in the local narratives as a “corpse boat”, was initiated immediately after the liberation of Norway on May 8, 1945. The efforts by the Norwegian Navy to locate the boat on the bed of the fjord and recover the remains of the victims of the camp ultimately proved futile. Similarly, a search carried out in 2007 by archaeologists and marine scientists from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, commissioned by the newly opened Falstad Center tasked with providing documentation and education about the history of the camp, did not produce the expected results (Jasinski and Stenvik 2010). The application of advanced technologies of deep-water archaeology, such as sonars and remote operated vehicles (ROV), did not help to locate the boat in the vast fjord. It could therefore be said that the operation carried out at the beginning of May 1945, although on a smaller scale than the Germans had initially planned, was ultimately successful. The bodies loaded onto the vessel and sunk in the fjord effectively disappeared and will, perhaps, never be recovered. For those 20–30 people, there will be no reburial, no graves with assigned names and no relatives receiving repatriated remains. The violence exercised on them claimed them in their totality: not only their lives but also their bodily remains became subject to its reign.

The case of the Falstad boat serves as a telling example of the role dead bodies play in the ontology of political violence. The forms of disposal of victims’ corpses – whether those of genocidal atrocities or political opponents – not only complement but also correspond to the ‘logic’ of exclusion which political violence instantiates and through which it operates. This starts with the production of political and/or social frameworks that lead to atrocities and legitimize mass killings based on the ‘othering’ and exclusion of a specific group, either in terms of social/political belonging or from social geographical spaces. By placing people in detention centers or camps, where committing crimes is simpler from a logistical

point of view, the violence (and those excluded) can, at least temporarily, be hidden from the view of society. This exclusion does not, however, cease after death. In most cases of state-sponsored violence, the dead bodies of victims are not returned to their families but ‘confiscated’ by the regime: they are buried in unmarked graves, disposed of in rivers or caves, cremated and mixed with the ashes of other victims (Anstett and Dreyfus 2017). The main incentive behind the practice of the *confiscation of bodies* is to erase all traces of the crime: the corpses offer the most compelling evidence that the crimes occurred. In her seminal work on the Soviet GULAG camps, Élisabeth Anstett argues, however, that the consequences of the *confiscation of bodies* are even more far-reaching. The practice itself comes to serve as a powerful means of terror: its objective is to keep society in a state of uncertainty resulting from the lack of information on the date of death, the causes and circumstances of deaths, and burial places (Anstett 2014). This affects, first and foremost, the relatives of the dead, yet it also has political and social ramifications. Deferred mourning puts the relatives of the dead in an emotional vacuum between psychological presence and physical absence, effectively preventing closure, while it also postpones the eventual rise of opposition. Moreover, by *confiscating* victims after their death, the perpetrators work towards their erasure from the realm of social memory, thus completing the victory.

Transformed into both an execution ground and a burial site for murdered inmates, the forest constituted the darkest element of the Falstad landscape. It was there that the prisoners were placed on the edge of a prepared grave and murdered by a gunshot to the neck or head from a pistol. This method of killing was confirmed in 2018 by two surface finds discovered during a short one-day archaeological trial survey of a selected area carried out in 2018 by the present authors. The two objects were an unfired pistol round, caliber 9 mm and a casing of fired round of the same caliber both of German production dated to the 1930s.



Figure 2. Monument in front of the main execution area in the Falstad Forest (Photo by Marek E. Jasinski).

Between 1942 and 1943, several mass executions were carried out at the site. On November 6, 1942, martial law was imposed by the German *Reichskommissar* Josef Terboven. The very next day, ten prominent inhabitants of Trondheim were taken by the Nazis as hostages and executed in the forest in retaliation for acts of sabotage carried out by the Norwegian resistance. The bodies of these ten victims have not yet been found. Another mass execution of Norwegians took place on October 8 and 9, 1942. Twenty-four men were executed in Falstad Forest after facing a military trial for their role in hiding weapons. They were buried in two mass graves located in two different burial fields of the Falstad Forest. During the operation of the camp, Soviet and Yugoslav Prisoners of War (POWs) and forced laborers were also frequently executed in the forest. An account of an execution of Soviet POWs was given to British officers during their postwar interrogations of Josef Schlossmacher, a Gestapo official in Trondheim:

“In the wood a grave had already been made ready. One of the Schutzpolizei then brought a prisoner to the grave side. [Walter] Hollack [a Gestapo officer tasked with prosecuting political opponents] shot the prisoner in the neck with his pistol. He then fell dead to the ground and was laid in the grave. Hollack then gave orders to shoot the other Russians in the same way and they were all brought to the grave. I carried the order out with my 7.65 mm pistol.” Schlossmacher also

recounted an execution of Yugoslav prisoners: “Four or five of us then fetched 13 Serbs out of the barracks and bound their hands behind their back. These were then put in a closed truck. Here they had to wait about an hour until Hollack and [Werner] Jeck [the camp commander] came out. They were both drunk. When they came to the graveside, Hollack ordered a Serb to be brought to him, whereupon Hollack shot him with his pistol [...] We then returned to Falstad Camp, were given a *schnapps* of vodka and drove on later to Trondheim.” (War Crimes Investigation Branch of the Allied Land Forces in Norway. Interrogation of Joseph Schlossmacher, 24.10. 1945. National Archives London, WO 331/21-90416).

It is estimated that at least 100 Soviet POWs, 74 Yugoslavian and 43 Norwegian political prisoners, and several Jewish men were killed and buried at the site (Reitan 2006, 47). The task of digging the graves before planned executions was often delegated to prisoners of the camp. Some of those requisitioned to prepare the graves survived the war, like the Serbian prisoner Ljuban Vukovic, who later gave an account of his work. The operation of May 1945 was, therefore, an attempt to erase the presence of both bodies and the graves – but also one countered by the memory of the former inmates and the material presence of buried remains, neither of which the Nazis managed to destroy.



Figure 3. German prisoners exhuming graves in the Falstad Forest after liberation of the camp (Courtesy of the Falstad Center).

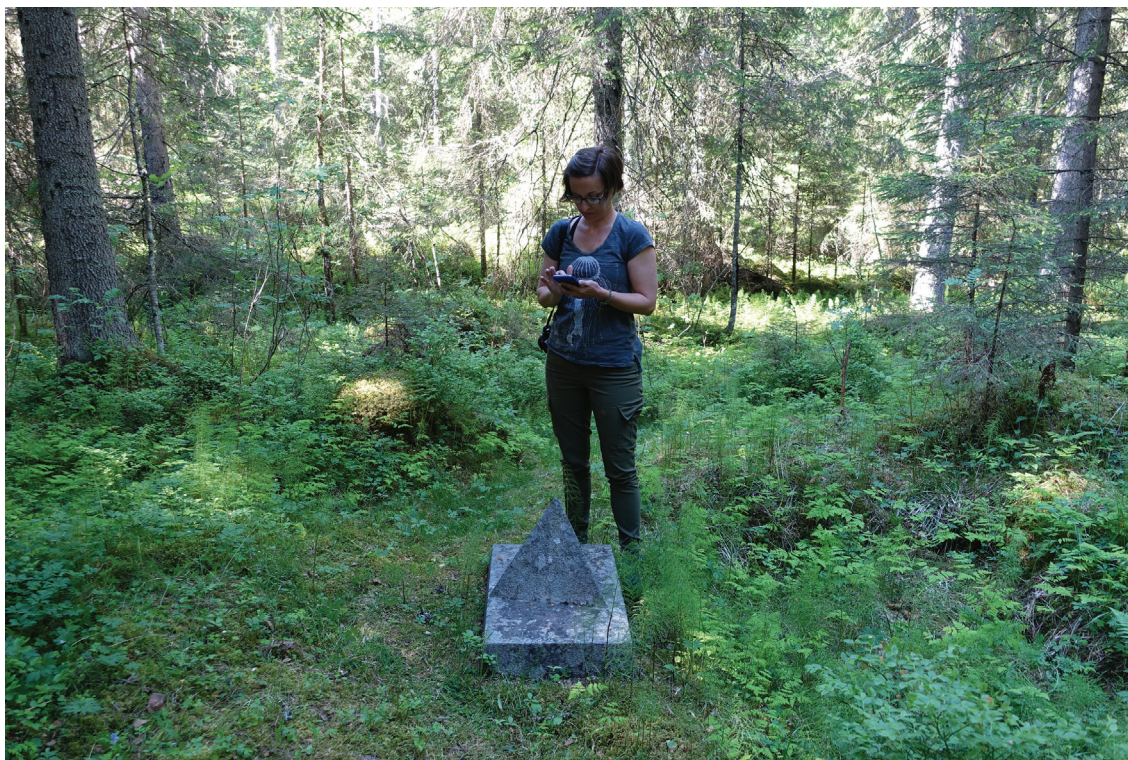


Figure 4. Kate Spradley surveying graves in Falstad Forest in 2018 (Photo by Marek E. Jasinski).

It is largely thanks to Vukovic's testimony that, immediately after the liberation of the camp, Norwegian authorities were able to locate 40 of the graves hidden in the Falstad Forest (Langaas 2012). Directed by Vukovic, exhumation teams searched for and opened the graves, some of which, however, turned out to be empty as a result of the actions associated with the "corpse boat". Most of the exhumation work was done by German soldiers and Norwegian collaborators now imprisoned in the camp¹, who were directed by Norwegian experts whose primary objective was finding and identifying the bodies of Norwegian victims; they succeeded in this endeavor for 28 individuals. Far less attention was paid to the 60 bodies believed to be Eastern European victims, most of whom were exhumed in 1953 and cremated immediately afterwards without any attempt at personal identification. The reasons for this lack of identification attempts were most probably threefold. First, it was obviously much easier to identify Norwegian victims on the basis of family statements and medical/dental records than to contact foreign families and authorities for this purpose. Secondly, there was a strong national demand to discover and exhume *Norwegian* graves, so that the bodies could be returned to their native region for a proper reburial, giving closure to the families and allowing the victims to live on in memory. Finally, the case of Soviet and Yugoslav war victims was even more complicated. The social pressure to identify "communist" victims disappeared soon after liberation due to the escalation of

the Cold War and the transformation of both the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia from war allies to enemies of the West. All in all, between 1945 and 1953, when these state-run exhumations were put to a halt, 49 graves were opened and 88 bodies disinterred – a number far removed from the estimated, but still contested, number of between 220 and 300 victims of the camp. Many unidentified and unmarked graves might still exist in Falstad Forest.

The Falstad archaeology and forensic science program

In the wake of the failed attempt in 2007 to localize and recover the boat sunken in Trondheim Fjord (and, thus, the bodies of the anonymous victims of the Falstad camp), a broader archeological project devoted to the material legacy of the camp was launched by my team from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). Between 2008 and 2011, geophysical surveys were carried out throughout the camp, including the Falstad Forest (Jasinski and Stenvik 2010; Jasinski 2015, 2018). The objective was to evaluate possible geophysical methods that could be used to detect unmarked and unknown mass graves. Nevertheless, as with the search for the boat, this research has not produced conclusive results: no new graves could be identified and opened.

¹ Immediately after liberation in May 1945, the former SS *Strafgefangenenlager Falstad* was handed over to the Norwegian Ministry of Justice's Department of High Treason. Under Norwegian administration, the *Innherred Tvangsarbeidsleir* functioned until 1949 as a forced labor camp for Norwegian Nazi collaborators and sympathizers convicted of treason (Nilssen and Reitan 2008).

As part of archaeological field works of the iC-ACCESS project (funded by the EU HERA program “Uses of the Past”), a new survey conducted in 2018 identified some areas in the forest as possible sites of unknown graves. This prompted the authors of this article to establish the *Falstad Archaeology and Forensic Science Program* (2020), which benefits from the exchange and deployment of expertise in forensic anthropology, archaeology and forensic genetics, and direct cooperation of the authors on similar projects in Poland and Texas, USA. In 2022 the program established close co-operation with technology company BioDrone from Trondheim, and the program team is at present developing methods to be employed in the Forest. GIS, LIDAR and GPR aerial surveys and the use of artificial intelligence with specially developed logarithms will facilitate further searches for still hidden and unknown graves in the Falstad forest and hopefully lead to the future rediscovery of lost bodies and their return to public memory.

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Holocaust victims, Jewish law and the ethics of archaeological investigations

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Abstract

Dead bodies – and the graves in which they are interred – are often highly contested within Holocaust camps. Although photographs of bodies at places like Bergen-Belsen, Dachau, and Ohrdruf emerged in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the exhumation of mass graves of Holocaust victims for either judicial or humanitarian reasons has become something of a taboo subject. Whilst some see dead bodies in these environments as evidence of a crime, others view them as relatives, friends, and loved ones who require a proper burial, a marked burial site, or should be left undisturbed. Disputes arise between governments, communities, individuals, and religious groups when accounting for Halacha (Jewish Law) and the dead. This paper highlights how a non-invasive methodology, derived from archaeology and other disciplines, offers one way of locating and classifying graves whilst respecting the ethical sensitivities involved in their investigation. This is a growing field of research and one which has proven ability and future potential to shed new light on the crimes perpetrated across the European Holocaust landscape.

Key Words

archaeology, ethics, forensic, Halacha, Holocaust, mass graves

The bodies of the victims of mass violence often exist within the boundaries or in the liminal spaces of camps. This is particularly true of Holocaust-era camps where sites were either dedicated to mass extermination or where people died in large numbers as a result of how they were treated there. As photographs of places like Bergen-Belsen, Dachau and Ohrdruf emerged in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War showing the dead bodies of the victims and with Holocaust memorialization practices placing ashes, hair, teeth and prosthetic body parts at the heart of their exhibitions, the foundations were laid for dead bodies to become entrenched in the iconography of the Holocaust.

However, despite these trends and the initial impetus to exhume the mass graves of Holocaust victims for either judicial or humanitarian reasons, searches and recovery operations for Holocaust victims have become something of a taboo subject (Sturdy Colls 2012 and 2015). This is perhaps evidenced by the fact that although there has

been a significant increase in the number of archaeological and forensic investigations of Holocaust camps and killing sites over the last four decades, dead bodies have either been absent from the foci of these projects or their investigation has been contested, often to such an extent that exhumation works have been forced to cease (Sturdy Colls 2016). There are numerous such examples from all over Europe – perhaps most famously in Bełżec (Poland; Kola 2000), Jedwabne (Poland; Polonsky and Michlic 2004) and Iasi (Romania; Murray 2010). However, the origins of such contestation are located many decades prior to these projects. In another article in this issue, Jean-Marc Dreyfus describes the evolution of mass grave investigations after the Second World War and highlights the example of exhumations at Bergen-Belsen in the 1950s, when disagreements between the national agencies undertaking exhumations and the Jewish community led to the cessation of all searches for Holocaust victims at this site (Rosensaft 1979).

Ultimately, here – as in other places – disputes over dead bodies arose due to the conflicting nature of Halacha (Jewish law) governing Jewish burials and the pursuit of scientific, judicial or political aims. Halacha stipulates that graves of Jewish persons should not be disturbed, except in extreme cases where they come under threat (e.g. from man-made or natural landscape change). This rule – which centers on the belief that to disturb the grave of a person is to disturb their soul – is applied to graves created legally or illegally (as in cases of individual or mass violence such as the Holocaust) (Schudrich 2014). Scientific analyses of dead bodies – such as autopsies and DNA sampling – are also prohibited under Halacha. Conversely, civil legislation in many countries stipulates that victims of crimes should be recovered regardless of their religious denomination. This therefore creates tensions between governments, religious groups and individuals. This is not a problem unique to Jewish graves but one that persists whenever exhumations are not wanted by religious, cultural or familial groups. The perceived sacred nature of Holocaust sites, particularly those which have remained undisturbed for decades, the fear of the deceased on the part of some Roma and Sinti groups, and practical issues around the costs and logistics of exhuming large numbers of human remains may all be reasons why excavations may not be deemed desirable or necessary. Against these wishes, some nationalist governments have sought to reinvigorate searches for their citizens and claim ownership over the dead – often for political rather than humanitarian reasons. Contestation over the disturbance of Holocaust-era graves is therefore likely to intensify rather than diminish.

As argued by Sturdy Colls in her book *Holocaust Archaeologies: Approaches and Future Directions*, the apparent mismatch between religious law, archaeological practices (which often centre on excavation) and, sometimes, the wishes of survivors and family members of the deceased, has also rendered many sites ‘off limits’ to researchers and practitioners who seek to investigate Holocaust sites outside the remit of legal investigations. Having made this observation back in 2007, we developed a methodology that attempted to account for the ethical sensitivities surrounding the investigation of Holocaust-era graves whilst facilitating their thorough investigation. This approach has since been applied at a wide range of Holocaust sites and other places of mass violence across Europe, first as part of my doctoral studies and the Holocaust Landscapes Project, and now, most recently, as part of iC-ACCESS.

This methodology consists of the use of a suite of non-invasive methods drawn from archaeology, forensic investigation, digital humanities, history, geography engineering, computing, heritage studies and various other fields of study. Starting with desk-based assessment – which includes the examination of archival sources such as documents, photographs, maps and audio-visual materials – the work progresses to the collection and analysis of satellite and aerial imagery, the collection of airborne and terrestrial remote sensing data, and geophysical surveys (to map below-ground remains). Drones, airborne and terrestrial laser scanners (LiDAR), GPS and other survey equipment, photogrammetry equipment, Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR), resistance survey and other 3D



Figure 1. Ground Penetrating Radar survey at Oświęcim cemetery in Poland aimed at locating unmarked individual burials and mass graves (Copyright Centre of Archaeology).



Figure 2. LiDAR mounted UAV rig (Flythru Ltd) used to complete digital terrain modelling through overgrown vegetation at SS Lager Sylt, Alderney, the Channel Islands (Copyright Centre of Archaeology).

visualization techniques provide the opportunity to map surface and below-ground traces that may indicate the presence of burials when multiple datasets are compared. All this can be achieved without disturbing the ground and thus in accordance with Jewish burial laws while also accounting for the concerns of others who may not wish exhumations to take place.

Since 2010, this approach has been applied successfully at the site of Treblinka extermination camp (Poland) where between 800,000 and one million victims (mostly Jews) were murdered during the Holocaust. The graves of these victims had largely gone uninvestigated up to this point since it was generally believed that excavation offered the only means of searching the area. Once the locations of the mass graves had been determined using non-invasive methods, excavations of selected parts of the remaining camp landscape (including the gas chambers and camp waste pit) were able to proceed in 2013 and 2017 without fear of disturbing human remains buried within graves (Sturdy Colls 2014; Sturdy Colls and Branthwaite 2016; Sturdy Colls and Colls 2020). This approach also offered the possibility to protect the identified mass graves in the future. The Rabbinical, museum and conservation authorities all welcomed this approach as an ethical and responsible compromise between religious considerations and the undisputed need to further investigate the site. A variety of non-invasive methods have now also been used to examine a wide range of Holocaust

landscapes. Some – such as the camps in Bergen-Belsen and Adampol, and killing sites across Poland and Ukraine (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance 2014) – were found to contain unmarked graves. This approach therefore affords the same level of protection to these sites as at Treblinka.

Despite the successes of this methodology – both in terms of its ability to account for Halacha and to successfully identify the locations of dead bodies that have remained unidentified for decades – non-invasive research is not without its challenges and ethical issues. One of the most prominent limitations of this approach is the fact that no method or combination of methods exist that could prove the existence of human remains to the same degree of certainty as excavation. Whilst it is possible to present a case for the existence of graves based on a wide range of evidence derived from these methods, only excavation can reveal the bodies themselves and facilitate their detailed examination (Figure 5). A key problem is that we may not know exactly who is buried in a grave until we excavate, but we may not be allowed to dig due to fears over who might be buried therein. In these situations, decisions regarding whether to excavate following non-invasive research may be particularly problematic when individuals from Jewish and non-Jewish backgrounds are believed to be buried in the same grave or campscape, with lengthy discussions once again potentially ensuing if one group favors invasive work while another does not.



Figure 3. Ground Penetrating Radar survey in rural Ukraine aimed at locating unmarked mass graves under rabbinical supervision (Copyright Centre of Archaeology).

Once prospective graves have been found, debates may be reignited or emerge about whether to excavate them, causing rifts between communities with different views on these issues. We have encountered cases where (Jewish) family members want graves to be excavated but Halacha, and thus Rabbinical authorities, say this cannot take place. Likewise, the extent to which Halacha is implemented at Holocaust sites can vary somewhat depending upon how orthodox a particular Rabbi or Jewish community may be. Hence, the ban on excavation has not been universally applied to Jewish burial sites around the world so it cannot always be assumed that non-invasive research will be the end of the process (for example Kola 2000; Golden 2003).

Looting may occur once the locations of graves are publicly revealed via non-invasive means and there may be no guarantee of protection by local authorities when non-invasive evidence is presented. In my experience, non-invasive data is often easier to ignore by local authorities who may already lack the political will to engage with their Holocaust history or finance costly memorial projects. The results of non-invasive research might conversely spark panic amongst memorials, museum and other communities, particularly if the accepted narrative of a site is challenged by them.

Taking the decision to implement non-invasive methods in the first place also requires lengthy consideration, particularly at campsites where histories are highly contested. For example, the numbers war that is being

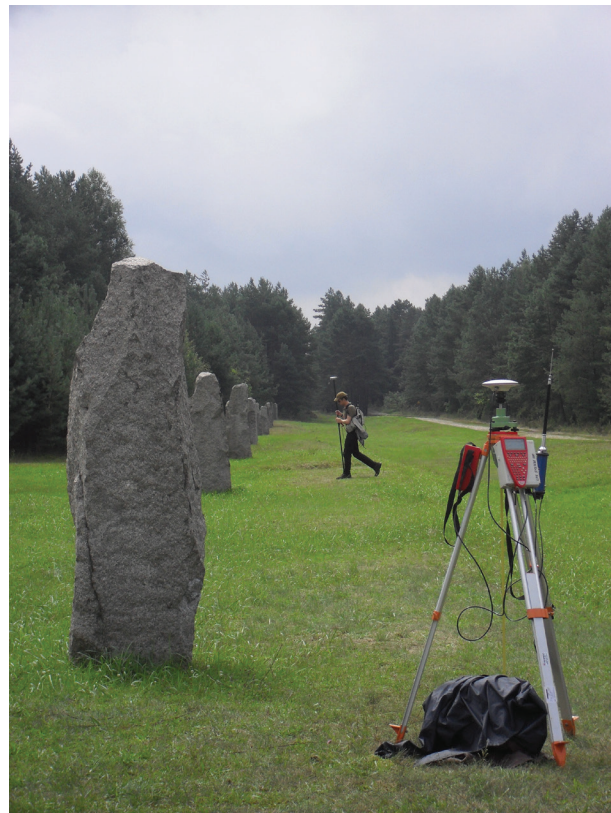


Figure 4. Topographic modelling at the landscape of Treblinka in Poland (Copyright Centre of Archaeology).



Figure 5. After non-invasive investigation, an archaeological test pit was completed in central Ukraine to confirm the presence of a burial pit. No bones were disturbed during the work – which was supervised at all times by rabbinical support. (Copyright Centre of Archaeology).

waged between Croatia and Republika Srpska regarding the events that occurred in Jasenovac concentration camp means that examining the mass graves at the burial site Donja Gradina, even using non-invasive methods, would almost certainly result in the findings of any archaeological work being used in this debate (Benčić 2017; van der Laarse 2017). As has already been observed, non-invasive geophysical methods can provide details regarding the dimensions of potential graves but not the number of bodies contained within them. Hence, this could give rise to archaeological data being misused to create speculative higher or lower mortality rates. Dead bodies, or their absence, have also been used as a central part of revisionist arguments in the decades following the Holocaust. Non-invasive research in particular is prone to getting drawn into these arguments. Some revisionists, when writing about archaeological projects at campsites, have claimed that these methods prove that no graves exist and that numbers of victims are lower than expected. Others have even claimed that the stipulation of Halacha that excavation is not permitted is a ‘big excuse’ to disguise the fact that the Holocaust did not occur at all. Therefore, archaeological work can be misused and/or

politicized for a range of reasons, often with the archaeologists carrying out the work having little control over the process. This is something that must be considered before the work is even carried out.

Aside from cases involving buried remains, it is also important to acknowledge that human remains may be encountered on the surface within campsites, sometimes during archaeological fieldwork or when the public visit sites. Likewise, they may be encountered scattered amongst other remains e.g. building rubble, when excavations of other camp features are permitted. In the case of scattered surface remains, they are likely to be deemed to be under threat and therefore their burial is likely to be preferred. The approach taken will likely vary depending upon whether or not remains have come to the surface as a result of looting or animal activity (thus they were originally buried in a grave) or whether they exist on the surface because they were never interred in a grave in the first place. If remains have been removed from a grave, many Rabbis would prefer that they remain in situ and thus they will likely request that they be recovered. If remains have never been buried in a grave, their collection and interment may be necessary. This may therefore

apply to both scattered remains and those found during other excavations. These approaches require sensitive handling of the remains to ensure that religious laws are respected and that they can be adequately protected. A suitably qualified archaeologist should be used so that local and international standards on how remains are treated can also be followed. It should be noted that regarding the Jewish victims' remains, Rabbis are likely to request that prosthetic body parts, teeth, fillings and hair are treated in the same way as bones or soft tissue in terms of their handling and interment.

Dead bodies – and the graves in which they are interred – are often highly contested within Holocaust campsites. This is not least of all due to the laws governing the treatment of Jewish burials and the various views that might exist with regards to whether excavation of remains is necessary or permitted. Whilst some see dead bodies in these environments as evidence of a crime, others view them as relatives, friends and loved ones who are in need of a proper burial or marked burial site. At some sites, campsites are off limits, spaces to be avoided, which may conflict with desires to scientifically locate remains and/or reveal new information about the history of sites. Non-invasive methods, derived from archaeology and other disciplines, may offer one way of locating and classifying graves whilst respecting the ethical sensitivities involved in their investigation. Whilst these methods are not without their issues and challenges from a practical and ethical standpoint, they can allow sites to be examined in a way that avoids ground disturbance whilst successfully documenting new evidence relating to graves and their surrounding environment. This is a growing field of research and one which has proven ability and future potential to shed new light on the crimes perpetrated across the European Holocaust landscape.

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Archaeology of *Zigeunerlager*: Results of the 2018–2019 investigation at the Roma detention camp in Lety

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Abstract

Archaeological research in Let carried out within the framework of the Accessing Campscapes project has revealed the location, and preserved material traces, of the Roma detention camp from the period of the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia, the area of which was partly destroyed and superseded by the industrial pig farm in the 1970s. The investigations have not only produced tangible evidence regarding the camp operation, structure, buildings and living conditions of the inmates but have also provided a means for the Roma to reclaim their neglected heritage. The planned Memorial to the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti in Bohemia will take account of the results of the archaeological project and transform the site into a Romani memorialscape.

Key Words

Roma and Sinti, Holocaust, conflict archaeology, WWII archaeology, campscape

In recent decades, former Nazi labor, concentration, and extermination camps have become the subject of intense archaeological research. Investigations at the locations of the Holocaust, mapping of campscapes and studying their materiality – based on archaeological techniques, including novel, mostly non-invasive methods – have come to represent a dynamically evolving field of research within modern archaeology (Kola 2000; Gilead et al. 2008; Theune 2010; Jasinski and Sternvik 2015; Sturdy Colls 2015).

Nevertheless, until recently, those attempts have rarely been directed at assessing the material testimony of the Romani Porajmos. The first project of this kind was undertaken at the former Roma camp in Lety between 2016 and 2019. It was carried out by archaeologists from the Department of Archaeology at the University of West Bohemia in Plzen within the framework of project Accessing Campscapes: Inclusive Strategies for Using European Conflicted Heritage.

In this paper I present contextualized research results of the archaeological investigation of the site carried out between 2018 and 2019. Lety Camp: History and Postwar (Mis)use Lety served as one of two internment camps for Roma that were established in 1942 in the

Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren [Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia], a part of Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia. Czech Romani were concentrated there before being sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Around 90% of the prewar Romani community did not survive the Holocaust.

As early as 1942, legal measures, mirroring those that laid the ground for the system of prosecution of Sinti and Roma in the Third Reich were implemented in the Protectorate. On 9 March 1942, an ordinance prescribing preventive custody of “Gypsies and people travelling like Gypsies” was issued. On June 22, 1942, the General Commander of the non-uniformed Protectorate police ordered all “Gypsies, mixed Gypsies and people of Gypsy lifestyle” to register. According to registration lists created at that time, a total of 6,500 people were sent to both *Zigeunerlager* set up on August 1, 1942, in Lety (Písek district) for the territory of Bohemia and in Hodonín (Blansko district) for the territory of Moravia (Nečas 1981). The camp was located around two kilometers southeast from the village of Lety. It was erected at the site of a former penal labor camp, operational between 10 August 1940, and 31 July 1942. From August 1942, 1,309 Sinti and Roma passed through the camp. 327 of

them died at the site, including 28 of the 36 children born in Lety. The Protectorate Police and Gendarmerie oversaw transport to the camps and were in charge of its operations. Prisoners' belongings (mostly wagons, horses, money, and jewelry made of precious metals) were confiscated upon arrival; men, women and children under 12 were separated. The inmates were forced to perform labor in the vicinity of the camp, including road construction, logging, working in quarries and agriculture. Due to very poor hygienic conditions and severe malnutrition, prisoners' health deteriorated quickly, leading to the outbreak of a typhus epidemic, which cost the lives of many inmates.

The first transport from Lety to extermination camp Auschwitz II (Birkenau) took place on 4 December 1942; the second on 7 May 1943 (Nečas 1995, 1996, 1999; Klinovský 2016). The camp covered an area of 6,600 m². Due to its overpopulation, a triangular extension was added in 1942 to the earlier part of the camp that was based on a rectangular plan. The original camp consisted of four wings of wooden cabins (2.5 × 3 meters) and one large barrack (9 × 12 meters) lining the central yard, a kitchen, a cellar, some workshops, a storage area, dispensary, washroom/laundry, detention quarters, garage, shed and latrine. An administrative building was located outside of the fenced-in area, along with five small buildings, which housed camp guards. Later on, three additional larger barracks and some other facilities were erected at the camp. As a result of the typhus epidemic and emptying of the camp during the summer of 1943, all wooden buildings were burned and the area disinfected with chlorine lime. The camp was officially liquidated on 8 August 1943 (Nečas 1995). According to oral history research carried out in parallel to archaeological investigations at Lety, in May 1945 the Red Army used the area of the former camp as a gathering place for German prisoners of war. The witnesses claim that the graves of some POWs are still located in the nearby forest. As we learn from the 1960s documentary *Nezapomeňte na tohle děvčátko* [Don't forget this little girl], devoted to the extermination of Czech Romani, the remains of the former camp, ditches and debris from buildings were still visible on the surface 15 years after the war.

Nevertheless, in the early 1970s, the local Communist government decided to establish a large, industrial pig farm at the location of the former camp. Built in two phases, in 1972–1974 and in 1978, it consisted of 13 big halls housing 1000 pigs each (Pařízková 2008). A memorial to the camp victims was founded in the nearby wood as late as 1995 in a part of the site which was believed to have corresponded with the camp cemetery, however the pig farm remained in operation until 2017. Archaeology of Lety camp Determining the exact location of the Roma camp was the main aim of the first archaeological research undertaken at the site between 2016 and 2017. At that time, no research activities were permitted within the premises of the pig farm by the owner, the AGPI, a joint stock company that privatized the enterprise after the Velvet revolution in the 1990s. Both survey and test-pitting

were therefore carried out in the area outside the pig farm. The results showed that a small section of the camp was situated outside the fenced pig farm on municipal ground and its archaeological remains were well preserved underneath the current terrain. For instance, the stone foundation of the administrative building and its floor level were uncovered outside the fenced area, also the remains of the western row of small barracks and part of the camp yard were exposed. Burnt remains of wooden structures, as well as the presence of lime, provide confirmation of the testimony from documentary evidence about the burning of camp buildings and disinfection of the area. Burnt debris contained several iron artefacts used in the barracks' construction along with glass from the windows of the barracks, but also artefacts that may be linked to prisoners, mostly dress accessories. Small glass beads found in this context further strengthen existing written evidence that girls and women lived in this part of the camp. However, most traces of the camp were expected to be found within the complex of the pig farm (cf. Vařeka and Vařeková 2017, 2018; Vařeka 2018, 2020; Vařeka et al. 2018).

The archaeological research carried out in 2016 and 2017 focused on five objectives: 1) determining the exact location of the camp, 2) assessment of anthropogenic remains on the surface in the area around the camp, 3) detecting the character of archaeological remains of the camp and establishing the possibilities for interpretation in order to identify the camp structure, 4) collecting material evidence which may elucidate everyday life in the camp and 5) determining the exact location of the camp cemetery and its layout.

The first phase of the research, conducted in the autumn and winter of 2016 and 2017, was based on non-invasive techniques, such as surface and topographic surveys, and geophysical surveys. Complementary methods helped give a more complete picture – aerial scanning data processing (LiDAR), documentary and visual evidence, and analysis of post-WWII aerial images. During the second phase, carried out in July 2017, we conducted trial excavations. Small-scale sondage of the accessible north-western part of the camp tested results of non-destructive research methods and sampled the archaeological situation. The archaeological research, which received extensive media coverage, contributed significantly to the heated public debate regarding the scandalous situation in Lety (van der Laarse 2017). Research activities were broadly presented to the experts and the public, including Roma organizations (including the Committee for the Redress of the Romani Holocaust and Romea; reports on the field research elicited a high level of public/media response in July 2017) and to government representatives (especially the Ministry of Culture and Minister of Human Rights, Equal Opportunities and Legislation). An expert committee was convened at the site on July 14, 2017, consisting of archaeologists, historians and national heritage representatives. As regards the research findings, the committee strongly recommended that action should be

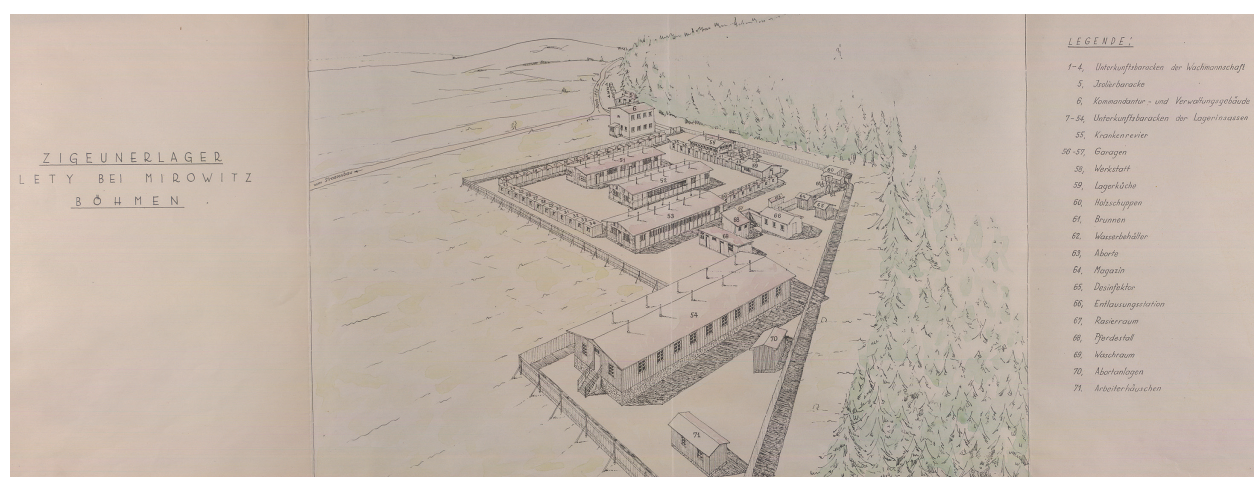


Figure 1. Axonometric drawing of Lety camp (undated; probably beginning of 1943; National Archive Prague, GKNP – Addendum).

taken to declare this site a cultural monument. Retrieved archaeological data were immediately communicated to the Ministry of Culture and the Czech Government decided to purchase the pig farm; this process was completed by the end of 2017. In the spring of 2018, the pig farm was transferred to the Museum of Romani Culture which started preparing demolition of the industrial farm complex and an open architectural competition for the new Czech Roma and Sinti Memorial in Lety (Berkyová et al. 2020). Archaeological research within the area of the pig farm represented part of the preparatory works and its results were included in the tender documentation. A survey and trial excavations of the presumed location of the camp cemetery were also carried out as part of the Accessing Campscapes project. Detention Camp The first phase of the archaeological research within the pig farm consisted of a non-invasive survey. A ground penetration radar (GPR) survey was carried out in autumn 2018 by Will Mitchell and his team from Staffordshire University (Mitchell and Colls 2019: 39–45). Additional geophysical surveys combining both magneto-metric and GPR technique were completed in summer 2019 by Michal Vágner and his team from Masaryk University (Vágner 2019). Both surveys detected the majority of the remains of the camp complex in the unbuilt north-eastern section of the pig farm. From late August to December 2019, a total area of 406 m² was excavated using 1 m wide interventions that intersected all parts of the camp area situated in the pig farm. One intervention was extended to provide a representative sample of the discovered cesspit (additional 10 m²; Figs 3, 4). Members of the Roma communities were involved in the excavations. A combination of the geophysical survey and trial excavations revealed an almost complete camp plan, showing its structure and providing detailed information about individual sections. Excavations also showed the extent of damage to the site caused by the construction of the pig farm in the 1970s. Interpretation of archaeological situations was based on archival sources, post-war aerial photographs and newly recorded testimonies of local people who remembered the site before the construction of the pig farm (Vařeka 2020;

Vařeka et al. 2020). The research uncovered an outline of the prisoners' yard measuring 45 × 55 m of the western section of the camp which was lined with small wooden prisoners' barracks (2.5 × 3 m) and one large barrack of post-built construction situated on its south-eastern side (9 × 29 m). Two more large wooden barracks with stone foundations (9 × 28 m) were built in the central part of the yard, probably in autumn 1942, to increase the accommodation capacity of the camp which had proven completely insufficient (Figs 3, 5). Remains of the camp's fence were traced along its southern side. Operational, storage and hygiene facilities were situated in the eastern section of the camp. Remains of several buildings were detected by geophysical survey in this area which were verified by excavations. Interventions uncovered massive foundations and fragments of floors of the washroom/laundry building, stable and delousing station (Figs 3, 6). The waste drainage system left significant traces in this area, including a cesspit equipped with a stone revetment (3.95 × 2.95 m, depth 2.15 m). The fill of the cesspit included the liquidation phase of the camp but also wet sediments from the period of the camp's existence (Fig. 7). An edge of the lowered terrain for the construction of three north-eastern halls for pigs was identified. Further east behind this edge, original archaeological situations were completely destroyed as demonstrated by test-pitting in this area (Fig. 1B). Thus, the south-eastern part of the camp, where the remains of another large prisoners' barracks, latrine and one small building could be assumed to have stood, has been bulldozed away. Excavations showed that the camp was liquidated by burning, leaving significant burnt debris and the site spread with chlorine lime.

More than 7,100 items were found during excavations of the Lety camp in 2019, and the processing and conservation of these finds are still in progress. The vast majority of artefacts is constituted of unburnt components of camp buildings and their equipment – building iron and window glass, for instance – however, some can be linked to the prisoners as well as to their captors. Excavations of the cesspit have yielded an exceptional find complex providing a detailed insight into everyday

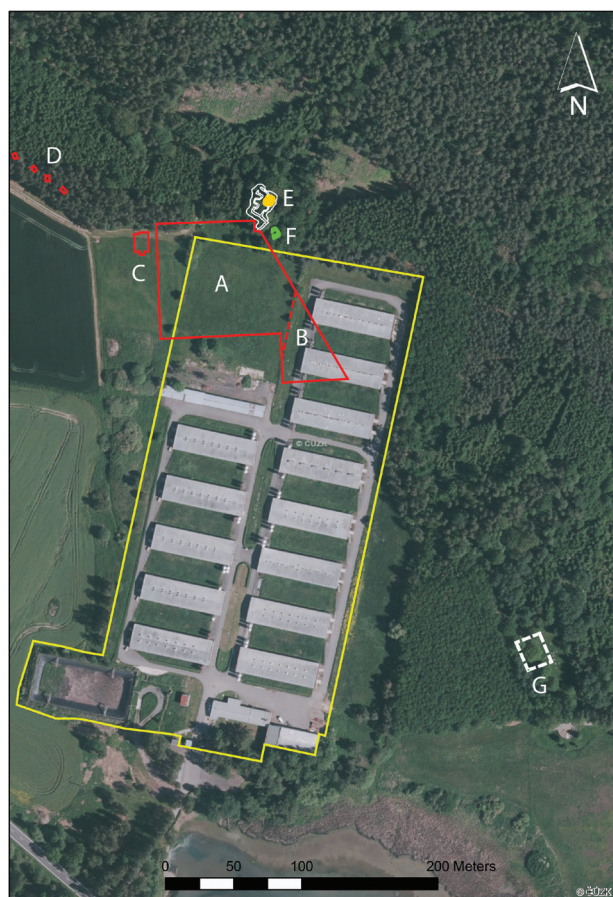


Figure 2. Localization of the Roma detention camp and the camp cemetery. Red line – camp area (A. Archaeologically preserved camp area; B. Part of the camp area destroyed during construction of the pig farm; C. Headquarters/administrative building; D. location of the camp guards' barracks; E. Anti-air-raid trenches; F. Surface remains of camp cellar; G. Camp cemetery (localization based on archival evidence and archaeological research), yellow – industrial pig farm area (map by P. Vařeka, orthophoto map by ArcGIS on ags.cuzk.cz).

life and living conditions in the camp. The set of findings seems also to comprise confiscated and discarded belongings brought to the camp by the inmates which uniquely reflect the material culture of the Roma and Sinti of the period. Due to the specific soil conditions (wet sediments without air access), artefacts from organic material have also been uniquely preserved, such as fragments of wooden constructions, textile and leather clothing and footwear. Evidence of shaving and cutting prisoners' hair, which includes hair and even an entire plait, provides a stark testimony to the forced transformation of human beings into prisoners (Figs 8–10). Analysis of fragments of animal bones and macro-botanic remains from the camp shed a new light on the prisoners' diet and document desperate attempts – probably undertaken during periods of forced labor outside the camp – to get anything to eat, such as wild berries, wild fruits and small animals (Kočár and Kočárová 2020; Sůvová 2020). The only surface remains of the camp were identified in the woods close to the northern edge of the pig farm. A combination of archaeological research

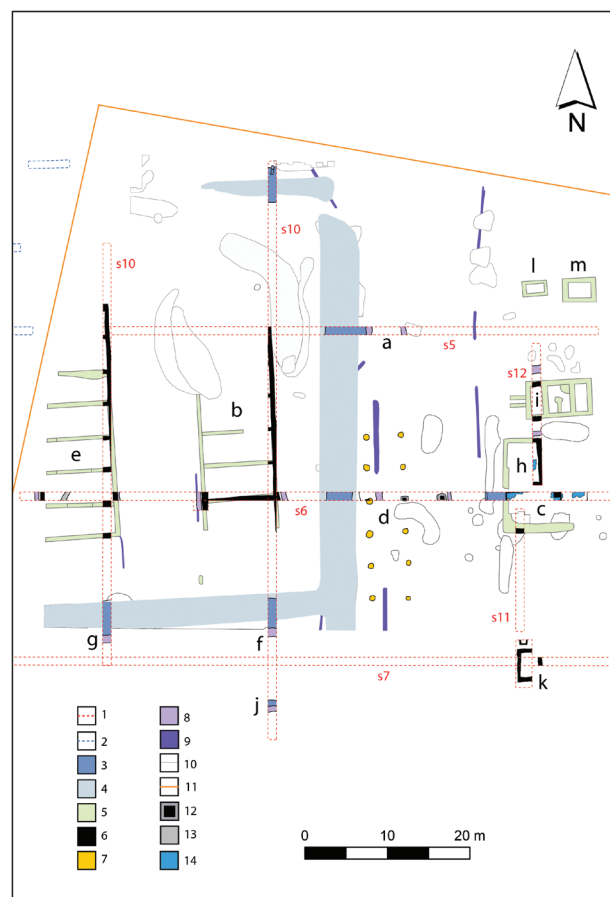


Figure 3. Lety camp, area within the industrial pig farm – archaeological research results. a, g, f. Remains of small prisoners' barracks; c. Washroom/laundry; d. Large prisoners' barracks with post-construction; e, b. Large prisoners' barracks with stone foundations; j. Fencing of the camp; k. Cesspit; h. Stable; i. Delousing station; l, m. Store and disinfection building; 1. interventions 2019, 2. interventions 2017, 3. footpath with reinforced surface revealed by excavations, 4. footpath with reinforced surface detected by GPR survey, 5. masonry foundations detected by GPR survey, 6. masonry foundations revealed by excavations, 7. remains of post-built construction detected by the GPR survey, 8. excavated drainage ditches, 9. drainage ditches detected by GPR survey, 10. unspecified features detected by GPR survey, 11. pig farm fence, 12. excavated footings of post-construction, 13. underdrain, 14. preserved floors, s5–s12 – intervention numbers (plan by P. Vařeka).

and documentary evidence analysis showed that the zigzag trenches which were previously associated with the end of the war or post-war period (Vařeka and Vařeková 2017: 26) can be linked to the camp air-raid shelter (Fig. 1E). A relief formation with a half-circle plan and concave-shaped central section, which is situated only a few meters east of the trenches, can be identified as a remainder of the camp's cellar that was placed outside the fenced camp area (Fig. 1F). Cemetery of the victims In January 1943, a provisional camp cemetery was established – previously, deceased prisoners had been buried in the Mirovice parish cemetery, over 5 kilometers east of the camp. The cemetery was established south-east of the camp, a location which is not accurately reflected in



Figure 4. Presentation of the research results to the camp victims' ancestors and representatives of the Museum of Romani culture (Photo by Z. Vařeková).



Figure 5. Intervention 10. View from the north to the uncovered north-eastern corner and the eastern part of the large prisoners' barracks (9 × 28 m; photo by P. Vařeka).



Figure 6. Intervention 6 and 12. Remains of the washroom/laundry (A), stable (B) and delousing station (C; photo by P. Vařeka).



Figure 7. Intervention 7, sector D, extension. Cesspit lined with granite blocks; northern part excavated to the bottom; two different parts of the fill can be seen on the profile – the upper dry part was deposited after the camp's liquidation and the lower wet one from the period of the camp's existence (view from the west, photo by P. Vařeka).



Figure 8. Enamel dishes for babies (cesspit fill; photo by I. Ibrahimovič).



Figure 9. Earrings, hair clips, beads and other components of necklaces (gold, silver and glass; cesspit fill; photo by I. Ibrahimovič).

the archival evidence. A total of 120 camp victims were inhumed here, including 77 children, between January 16 and April 23 1943 (Nečas 1999: 63). The exact location of the burial ground vanished in the post-war period. The memorial to the victims of the Roma internment camp in Lety was established in 1995 on the site which, as it was believed, more or less corresponded to the location of the cemetery. Archaeological research comprised topographic survey, aerial photographs from a drone, geophysical survey and trial excavations. Geomagnetic, electric-resistance and ground penetration radar survey did not produce any convincing evidence regarding grave-pits due to extensive ground disturbance around the memorial by service trenches and pipes from the watering system (Křivánek 2016; Mitchell and Colls 2019, 34–38; Vágner 2019). However, relevant results were gained by archaeological intervention located 8 meters west from the memorial. Excavations over an area of 38 m² revealed the south-west section of the camp cemetery, indicated by margins of eight grave-pits formed in rows of various sizes. This suggested that there was an age difference between buried individuals very likely in-



Figure 10. Shaving bowl, razor and combs (plastic and iron; cesspit fill; photo by I. Ibrahimovič).

cluding adults, adolescents (grave I, II, IV, VI, VII, VIII) and small children (grave III, V).

A hypothetical reconstruction of the whole area of the camp's cemetery was enabled by using the results of archaeological research and archival evidence – this area overlaps with the eastern section of the granite



Figure 11. Camp cemetery. Memorial act organized by the Museum of Romani Culture on 11th September, which was attended by the relatives and descendants of the victims (photo by P. Vařeka).

monument by academic sculptor and painter Zdenek Hůla but is mostly situated in its north-western vicinity. Outcomes of the research will be used in the planned adaptation of the cemetery. In accordance with the requirements of the survivors' relatives and the Museum of Romani Culture representatives, two graves were excavated in order to ascertain preservation of human remains and the form of burial. Human remains were not exhumed and anthropological analysis was carried in situ (Kwiatkowska 2019) and samples for subsequent genetic analysis were also taken (Molak 2020). Grave I contained a young woman who died before the age of 40 and was buried in the wooden coffin in a crouching position. Fragments of the wooden coffin were found without any preserved human remains in Grave III, a very small and shallow grave where it is likely that a baby under one year of age was buried (Kwiatkowska 2019). The poor conditions for the preservation of the skeletal remains of small children are caused by soil conditions but also the fact that the graves were sprinkled with quicklime. Relatives and descendants of the victims were present during excavations and a memorial service was organized on the site by the Museum of Romani Culture on September 11, 2019 (Fig. 11).

Conclusions

Archaeological research in Let carried out within the framework of the Accessing Campscapes project has revealed the location, and preserved material traces, of the Roma detention camp from the period of the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia, the area of which was partly destroyed and superseded by the industrial pig farm in the 1970s. The investigations have not only produced tangible evidence regarding the camp operation, structure, buildings and living conditions of the inmates but have also provided a means for the Roma to reclaim their neglected heritage. The planned Memorial to the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti in Bohemia will take account of the results of the archaeological project and transform the site into a Romani memorialscape. Personal items of prisoners, most of whom did not survive the Holocaust, and other artefacts from the camp, will be presented to the public in the exhibition hall that will form one section of the Memorial. Archaeological methods also exactly located the cemetery of victims where the contemporary Roma families can commemorate their ancestors who lost their lives in the camp.

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Beyond mass graves: exhuming Francoist concentration camps

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Abstract

As several historical investigations have revealed, between 130,000 and 150,000 Republicans were executed during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and Franco's dictatorship (1939–1977). The Francoist repressive strategy – unleashed after the coup d'état of 17 July 1936 – developed complex mechanisms of physical and psychological punishment. The continuing subjugation of those still living was enacted through concentration camps, prisons and forced labour. During the War and Franco's dictatorship, there were nearly three hundred concentration camps, and between 367,000 and 500,000 prisoners went through those camps. During the transition to democracy, neither the State nor the judiciary investigated mass crimes connected to the repression and execution of left-wing Republicans. After Franco's death, some family groups recovered some of these bodies buried in unmarked mass graves without scientific involvement. In the year 2000, the first scientific exhumations took place, and since then, more than 400 mass graves have been opened, and up to 9,000 bodies have been recovered.

The memory of the victims of Franco's violence has been mainly centralised on mass graves. The opening of mass graves has positioned the Spanish Civil War case within the international sphere of human rights violations and has also opened a new window of opportunity for the analysis of Francoist concentration camps. In this article, I provide a holistic study of mass graves that combines archaeology and forensic anthropology with historical and ethnographic research in order to examine, in detail, both the burials and the broader landscape of the repression. In this contribution, I focus on the Concentration Camp of Castuera, in southwestern Spain, a forgotten campscape, and show how mass graves, which have become widely known as sites of research and commemoration in Spain, were closely related to the camps' complex repressive system. My results have allowed me to conduct an integrated analysis of this context of political violence. I conclude that archaeology and forensic anthropology have played a crucial role in elucidating the functioning and social reality of Spanish camps, whilst enabling new narratives about past Francoist repression.

Key Words

contemporary conflict archaeology, forensic anthropology, material culture, Spanish Civil War, Franco's dictatorship

Introduction

In contrast to Nazi-occupied Europe, where the commemoration of the victims of fascism and the Holocaust has for a long time been focused on the repressive role of the camps, the memory of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and Franco's dictatorship (1939–1977) has been mainly centralised on mass graves. Yet in Spain during the late 1930s and early 1940s there were nearly three hundred concentration camps (Hernández 2019).

Between 367,000 and 500,000 prisoners went through those camps, from the coup d'état in July 1936 until January 1947, when the last camp, the camp of Miranda de Ebro, ceased to operate (Rodrigo 2005).

The 'rhetorical' end of the civil war in April 1939 resulted in tens of thousands of prisoners being (re)integrated into the social fabric of "New Spain" (Rodrigo 2005). From then on, thousands of inmates embarked on a journey which, in the best-case scenario, would take them to concentration camps, prisons, or forced labour camps.

The defeat of Barcelona in January 1939 acted as an incentive for almost a million Spaniards to flee to France as a Republican exodus to escape from Franco's repression in what became known as *La Retirada*. Around 220,000 fled into exile, most of them never to return to Spain (Alted 2005). Yet many of the 'red' exiles were as 'undesirable refugees' also confined in barbed wired concentration camps in the South of France. Under the regime of French guards around 14,000 of those escapees died due to the extreme conditions, whereas more than 9,000 prisoners were sent to the Nazi concentration camps across Europe, from which 5,500 Spaniards never returned (Bermejo and Checa 2006).

The lack of public awareness of Franco's complex repressive system in modern Spain has been analysed by academics as a result of the 'transitional process' towards democracy in Spain, the Amnesty Law approved in 1977, and the Pact of Forgetting, forged during the early 1980s (Aguilar 2000). Besides the camps, the recognition of the victims of Franco's repression and the exhumation of the mass graves have been the main unresolved issues of contemporary Spain's traumatic past (Ferrándiz 2014). As several historical investigations have revealed, between 130,000 (Preston 2012) and 150,000 (Espinosa 2010) Republicans were executed during the Spanish Civil War and the dictatorship. Additionally, between 49,000 (Ledesma 2010) and 55,000 (Rodrigo 2008) people were killed as a result of the violence perpetrated by Republicans during the war. After the conflict, victims were mainly exhumed from the mass graves caused by Republican repression as a result of a specific procedure, the so-called *Causa General* (General Cause), in order to identify and dignify them personally and collectively – a part of them transferred to the Valley of the Fallen (Ferrándiz 2014). The victims of Francoist repression – whether dead or alive – received very different treatment, as the dictatorship imposed absolute silence upon their suffering (Preston 2012).

After the death of the dictator in 1975, the first exhumations of unmarked Republican graves were initiated by the relatives of the victims, and were carried out without scientific control (Fig. 1). It would not be until 2000 that scientific investigations began in Spain. Seven years later, the first law concerning the recognition of victims of Francoist repression was approved. In 2011, the Spanish protocol specific to the exhumation of mass graves was published by the government.¹ This law delegates the responsibility for searching and exhuming the graves of the Spanish Civil War and postwar oppression of Franco's regime to victims' associations, which are expected to promote excavation projects and hire scientific teams. In Spain, exhumations have become rich and varied processes, in which archaeological and forensic investigations, taking place outside



Figure 1. Exhumations of the mass graves located next to the temporary camp of Las Boticarias (Casas de Don Pedro, Spain). After Franco's death, during the transition to democracy, some family groups recovered some of the bodies buried in unmarked mass graves without scientific involvement. That is the case with the mass graves of the victims executed in the temporary camp of Las Boticarias (Casas de Don Pedro, Spain), exhumed in 1978.

of juridical frameworks, help people to make sense of past crimes. Searches for the missing, identification of the corpses and their return to relatives have been essential for the reparation for the victims in Spain. Nonetheless, many activists have widely critiqued the role of post-Francoist democratic governments as a bystander, as the State has never directly assumed responsibility for the search, identification and dignification of the victims (Aragüete-Toribio 2017). Between 2000 and 2019, 740 mass graves have been unearthed, and the bodies of around 9,000 victims have been recovered (Etxeberria and Solé 2019). The opening of mass graves has positioned the Spanish Civil War case within the international sphere of human rights violations, and has also opened a new window of opportunity for the analysis of the Francoist concentration camps.

Over the past decade, conflict archaeology has played a new role in the investigation of the Francoist punitive system. Concentration camps, prisons and labour camps have been archaeologically investigated, producing new narratives surrounding contemporary Spanish history (González-Ruibal 2020). A step further in the research has been taken through the analysis of the mass graves within the landscape of the conflict in Spain (Muñoz-Encinar 2016). I have developed this approach with my PhD research, and it has witnessed a profound progression for my postdoctoral research project (FOCUS) implemented in a comparative framework inside the iC-ACCESS² project. My research has successfully combined archaeology and

¹ In the Presidential Order number *PRE/2568/2011*, passed on September 26, 2011, the Agreement of the Council of Ministers from September 23, 2011 was published. This agreement demanded that the *Boletín Oficial del Estado* publish a protocol regarding the carrying out of exhumations of mass graves containing victims of the Spanish Civil War and the dictatorship. BOE 232 of September 27, 2011.

² Accessing Campscapes: Inclusive Strategies for Using European Conflicted Heritage" (iC-ACCESS) is a three year Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA) funded project (2016–2019). IC-ACCESS considers the genealogies, representations and interpretations of campscapes, as topical for Europe's political and cultural histories of the last century. iC-ACCESS investigates the cultural, political, and material dynamics

forensic anthropology with historical and ethnographic research in order to examine, in detail, both the burials and the wider landscape of the repression. This approach has allowed me to conduct integrated analyses of the contexts of political violence under study. One of the main cases I have been investigating is that of the Castuera Concentration Camp, established in Extremadura, in southwestern Spain, already at the end of the Spanish Civil war. In this contribution, I will focus on this ‘forgotten’ campscape and show how the more widely known mass graves – these being Spain’s main sites of research and commemoration – were closely related to the camps’ complex repressive system.

The Francoist concentration camps

The camps were conceptualised as a technology of punishment – in fascist narrative – ‘to create authentic Spaniards’ for the “New Spain”. Their main function was the classification of enemies of the “New State”. Those considered ‘irrecoverable’ were directly subjected to execution, and all traces of them were lost once they entered the concentration camp system. These included, amongst others, political leaders, left-wing trade union leaders, public officials of the Republican councils, as well as army officers or members of guerrilla groups. Those who were allowed to survive the camps were court martialed and imprisoned – most for terms of between 20 and 30 years – or executed in accordance with the death penalty decreed. In the early 1940s, around 370,000 political prisoners were in Franco’s jails. In 1942, this encouraged the regime to create a system of ‘remission of penalties through work’ – based on the Catholic concept of ‘expiration of duties through work’ (Gómez 2006). From a theoretical point of view, the crime was considered as sin and guilt was substituted by expiration as a form of prisoner’s conversion (Rodríguez 2016). Its main purpose was to expedite the movement of inmates by sending them to labour camps, and to generate a cheap labour force to be used by the “New State”. Also, private businesses benefited from it (González-Ruibal 2020).

The Castuera concentration camp

The concentration camp of Castuera in the region of Badajoz was in operation for one year – between March 1939 and 1940. According to recent studies, the number of inmates ranged from around 4,000 at its lowest to 8,000 and 9,000 at its peak (López 2009). It has been estimated that between 15,000 to 20,000 prisoners went

through the camp, including civilians and military from different regions in the country. The camp’s main functions were the detention, classification and elimination of people considered as enemies by the supporters of the rebellion against the Republic (Muñoz-Encinar et al. 2013).

One of the main obstacles for researchers studying the camp is the lack of official documentation created by the perpetrators. Until now, no documentation relating to the camp’s internal activity – such as lists of detainees and prisoners that could shed light on their whereabouts – has been found. In relation to this, as in the case of other camps, oral history constitutes a main source of knowledge, thus the task of recovering life stories of prisoners and the accounts of the repression and endured suffering was of central importance.³ An increasing role in reconstructing the mechanism of violence and punishment through which the camp was operated is also played by archaeology. Several archaeological interventions were carried out inside the former camp. They have shed new light on elements of its physical structure, the daily life at the detention site, and the repressive measures to which prisoners were subjected (González-Ruibal 2020).

Since 2011, the archaeological research developed at the camp has been extended into the adjacent areas. Under my leadership, a project was carried out at the municipal cemetery of Castuera, with the objective of locating and investigating graves originating from various phases of Franco’s repression during the operational period of the camp.⁴ We succeeded in locating nine deposits from different stages of Francoist oppression. Two of them were exhumed. The first mass grave contained a group of concentration camp prisoners. The second, pertinent to the fight against armed guerrillas during the dictatorship, contained the bodies of three victims. In 2012, a third mass grave linked to the camp was exhumed at the cemetery, where the camp’s victims had been buried.⁵ The two mass graves for concentration camp prisoners contained skeletal remains of twenty-two and eleven men, respectively. These included young and adult members of the military, and civilians, who were selected to be extrajudicially executed outside the camp (Muñoz-Encinar et al. 2013).

Material traces of repression and resistance

Inside the camp, a number of violent methods were used for the humiliation and disarticulation of *the enemy*. Survivors of the camp have reported extreme physical violence

of former camps in Europe, drawing from interdisciplinary research perspectives in historical, heritage and memory studies, forensics, archaeology and material culture studies, and digital humanities.

3 Part of the original testimonies can be consulted in The Documentary Centre of La Serena. (<https://centrodedocumentacion.laserena.org/>).

4 This project was promoted by the Association for the Memory of Castuera Concentration Camp (AMECADEC) funded by the Ministry of the Presidency (PRE/786/2010; Project Number: 189.1), with the collaboration of the Project for the Recovery of Historical Memory (PREMHEX) and the Council of Castuera.

5 This project was led by Alfredo González-Ruibal and his team from CSIC-Incipit.

and psychological mistreatment. A further form of violence was the permanent lack of food and water for prisoners as a daily punishment. Widespread famine was one of the main characteristics of the Francoist camps. Along with the problem of food, or lack of thereof, poor hygiene was another significant issue within the concentration camp, as well as the proliferation of lice, parasites and rats that contributed to the increase of numerous infectious diseases.

The harsh living conditions in concentration camps have been considered an additional form of punishment as prisoners were deprived of their liberty. These repressive centres utilised a *technology of pain* to achieve their aims of humiliation and punishment (Rodrigo 2008). In Castuera, archaeological research has shown various procedures established for the psychological degradation of prisoners, most clearly represented in the humiliating design of the latrines. The latrines were designed to make inmates defecate publicly, in an open space, in groups, and with a disregard for gastrointestinal problems – this was another way to degrade and humiliate prisoners (González-Ruibal 2020). The Francoist punitive system aimed to re-educate prisoners in the Catholic faith and eradicate 'Marxist ideals'. It was for this purpose that a large cross was placed in a prominent position in the square of the camp dedicated to public events and re-education activities, such as prayers, mass or the singing of the Francoist Hymn.

The strategies for elimination inside the concentration camp represented the first step in the Francoist repressive proceedings, in which victims with a clear political, military or trade union affiliation were selected to be executed without any judicial process. Those sentenced to disappearance were transported in trucks by soldiers and were executed in various places outside the confines of the camp during the night. Burials of bodies from extrajudicial executions occurred in mass graves near the camp or in the rear part of the municipal cemetery; sometimes their bodies were simply thrown into the surrounding mines (López 2009). Paramilitary groups (Falange), responsible for numerous executions, played a very important

role in the extrajudicial repression conducted at the site, entering the camp with specific lists of prisoners to be executed. Evidence for this procedure was found in Mass Grave 1 at Castuera. This grave contained the bodies of twenty-two men that were immobilised, tied up in pairs at the wrist and elbow, two of them tied together at the neck. At least six short weapons were used for the executions. A wine bottle was also found thrown on top of the bodies in the mass grave. This extraordinary piece of evidence indicates that perpetrators, in this case, paramilitaries, may have been drunk during the executions – a common feature confirmed by multiple testimonies (Muñoz-Encinar et al. 2013).

A second mass grave was found close to the previous one and contained the bodies of eleven prisoners, both military and civilian. In this case, the inmates were not tied up, and the bodies were thrown into the grave in no particular order. Rifles and shotguns were used for these executions. The available evidence indicates that the executions documented in this mass grave had probably been carried out by the military authorities of the camp, most likely during the later stage of the camp's operations when court martials constituted the main agents of repression (Muñoz-Encinar et al. 2013). Apart from that, we must also note the arbitrary executions carried out inside the camp and the poor living conditions that caused numerous deaths from starvation and disease.

Detainees elected to be executed were usually misled into thinking that they were to be transferred to another location. This was to avoid any possible resistance from prisoners at the moment of their execution. In Castuera, prisoners documented in the mass graves carried all their personal belongings with them, so it is possible they thought that they were going to be moved to another prison. Knowing that they would almost certainly be killed might have motivated detainees to leave the more useful of items (spoons, can openers, sanitary items, canteens, coins, etc.) to other prisoners who remained in the camp (Fig. 2). Personal belongings registered in the mass graves also in-



Figure 2. Objects related to the food documented associated with the bodies exhumed in Castuera. In mass grave 1 of Castuera we documented several objects related to the daily life of prisoners inside the camp. In Figure 2 there are two different typologies of can openers and two spoons.

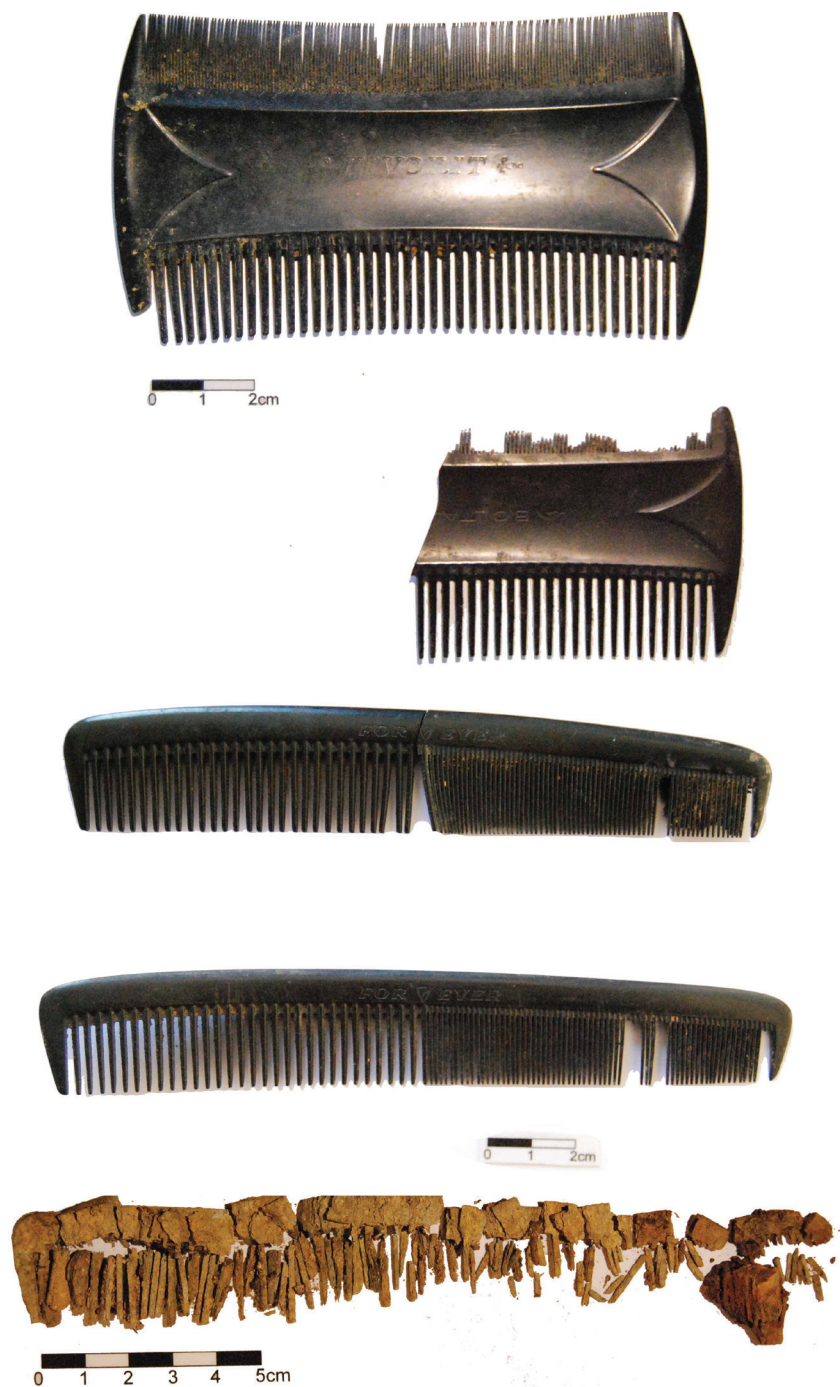


Figure 3. Objects related to hygiene and personal care associated with the bodies exhumed in Castuera. Personal belongings registered in the mass graves also included items related to hygiene and personal care. In Figure 3 we can see different types of combs documented in the mass grave 1 of Castuera. These items could be considered symbols of preserving physical and psychological integrity, used to eliminate lice. Such objects could be also considered as a means of manifesting resistance to the process of neutralisation and dehumanisation of prisoners.

cluded items related to hygiene and personal care, manual or leisure activities, games, material evidence of reading and writing, and items related to the professional identity of the victims, among others (Fig. 3). These items could be considered symbols, preserving the psychological integrity, and reaffirming the identity of the prisoners, helping them to maintain links with their lives before captivity (Bergqvist 2018). While objects such as these were very scarce

in the excavations carried out in the concentration camp of Castuera, they were widely documented in connection with the individuals found in the graves (Muñoz-Encinar 2021). The practice of keeping such objects could be considered as a means of manifesting resistance to the process of neutralisation and dehumanisation of prisoners (Bergqvist 2018; González-Ruibal 2020), and understood as a method of confronting the totalitarian nature of the system.



Figure 4. Virtual reconstruction of Castuera Concentration Camp. As part of the research project – in 2019 – we did field work in the Castuera Concentration Camp. We scanned the area and started to create a virtual model of Castuera Concentration Camp. We interrelated historical and ethnographic research with archaeological and forensic data using 3D reconstructions together with virtual and augmented reality to reconstruct the Castuera Concentration Camp.

Beyond mass graves: unearthing the role of camps

The bodies exhumed in the mass graves of Castuera remain unidentified to this day. The identification process is made more difficult by the complex context to which they belong, together with other factors such as the high number of missing persons, the poor preservation of the bones, and the lack of sources related to the executions. Following the Spanish exhumation protocol, after being exhumed and analysed, the human remains were buried individually and assigned a case-study number in accordance with the scientific reports produced, with the prospect of a possible identification in the future. The remains were inhumed in a memorial constructed at the Castuera municipal cemetery and inaugurated in a commemorative service in 2017. This memorial comprises five large slabs listing the names of 250 victims of Franco's repression. The list includes the names of the victims executed after the occupation of the town, inmates of the concentration camp and of the local prison. Even so, this number is far lower than the total number of victims who lost their lives in Castuera. The research process on 2011 is still ongoing. The memorial was constructed, not only to bury the corpses of the unknown victims, but to also to have the names of the missing persons carved upon, to create a common space for commemoration, and to symbolically mourn all the victims of Franco's repression in the area.

In 2009 the Castuera Concentration Camp received the most important heritage protection classification in Spain as a Site of Cultural Interest (*Bien de Interés Cultural*).⁶ Yet the area still remains as private property, and – in contrast to the mass grave at the cemetery – there is as yet no memorial to be found at the former campscape. Hence, the place remains invisible, unfathomed in the collective memory of local, regional and national society. The camp of Castuera, as is true for all of Franco's concentration camps, still awaits the creation of a Memorial Centre, an institution where the history and memory of the repression exerted inside and outside its fences can be interpreted and disseminated.

In that regard, new methodologies and advanced technologies have been developed to examine the 20th century's traumatic past, and implement inclusive strategies in order to use European Conflicted Heritage. In this context, archaeology and forensic anthropology have played a crucial role in opening new narratives about the past conflict, and in allowing us to visualise the camps, as in the Spanish case in question. In the framework of my current research project (FOCUS) – developed within the iC-ACCESS project and SPECS-Lab Group – in 2019, we started to create a virtual model of Castuera Concentration Camp. As has been previously done with other concentration camps, we interrelated historical and ethnographic research with archaeological and forensic data using 3D reconstructions together with virtual and augmented reality to reconstruct the Castuera Concentration Camp (Fig. 4). Our results will

⁶ Decree 97/2009, from April 30th, by which the Castuera concentration camp was declared as *Bien de Interés Cultural*, with the category of Historic Site. Published in the *Boletín Oficial de Extremadura* on May 13th of 2009.

allow us to create a virtual model of the camp in order to access the site itself, to develop an educational tool to counter atrocity denialism and to promote a critical rejection of this kind of violence in modern society.

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Ponar and the will to remember: Holocaust commemorations in Soviet Lithuania

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Abstract

This article explores the post-war history of the largest mass murder site in Lithuania, Ponar, and attempts by Jewish survivors to commemorate Holocaust victims during the period of Soviet occupation (1944–1990). The research shows that in spite of the ruling authorities creating significant obstacles for the small Jewish population to hold commemorations and over the course of the various physical transformations of Ponar, the site remained one of the most significant and most symbolic for Jewish identity and Jewish resistance to state policies.

Key Words

Jews, memory, post-war period, Vilnius

Approximately 208,000 Jews lived in Lithuania at the beginning of 1941. On June 22, 1941, Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union and Lithuania was completely occupied within a week. The mass murder of Jews began within days of the invasion. Lithuanian Jews were shot and their bodies left in more than 200 pits near their homes, in forests, at Jewish cemeteries and in fields. Very few Jews from the once populous Lithuanian Jewish communities survived the war and the Holocaust. After the war, survivors immediately began to congregate and organize themselves. Many of the attempts to commemorate the extermination of the Jews centered of Ponar (Ponary/Paneriai), located in the vicinity of Vilnius, where from 1941 to 1944 around 80,000 people were systematically exterminated by the Nazis and their Lithuanian auxiliaries, making it one of the largest mass murder sites in Lithuania. The vast majority of victims were civilians, most of them Jews, with smaller numbers of Russian, Polish, Roma and Lithuanian victims (Record 1944: 211).

In the aftermath of the war, survivors took differing approaches to remembering and commemorating the ex-

periences of their family members and other representatives of the Jewish community during the Holocaust. Usually, though, these efforts took the form of work to protect and mark the mass murder sites. As soon as Vilnius was liberated from the Nazis, various experiences of Jewish survival came to light – from those who survived through evacuation to the Soviet Union or service in the Red Army, to those who survived the ghettos in Lithuania. For the latter, the situation was clear: they knew that none of their relatives had survived. This is true, for instance, in the case of Vitka Kempner (quoted in Porat 2009: 178), who said: “I didn’t go find out whether anyone in my family was still alive. I knew there was nothing to look for.” Those who spent the war as evacuees did not have the experience of living in the ghetto and thus could not easily discern what had happened to their loved ones, so they looked for acquaintances who could tell them of their fate. The Jewish Religious Community in Vilnius was established in October 1944 while the Jewish Museum opened its doors in July 1944. Both organizations focused on the preservation of Ponar as a mass murder site and burial ground.

The Stalinist authorities made a department at the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults, established at the Council of Ministers of the USSR, responsible for Jewish religious life. Council officials equated Jewish “religiousness” with “nationalism”, believing that Judaism represented bourgeois nationalist elements who wanted to enter synagogues and transform them into centers of Jewish communal life. For this reason, the council found it unacceptable that the community should speak in the name of the entire people. All welfare activities, contacts with foreign organizations and initiatives to raise funds were considered undesirable, as were initiatives to erect monuments to victims of the Holocaust and attempts to publicize the general idea that the extermination of Jews was unique among Nazi crimes (Laukaitytė 2012: 295–308). Against the background of this policy was the will to remember and honor the dead drove Jewish communities to initiate commemorative practices. Mass murder sites were visited and attempts were made to unveil memorials, with the efforts relating to Ponar epitomizing this process.

The first commemorative gathering at the site took place in August 1944, shortly after the liberation of Vilnius from the Nazis and military hostilities continued in Lithuania. With the permission of the local Soviet government, the representatives of the Vilnius society staged an event at Ponar, attended by a large assembly of mourners. Kaddish and prayers were performed and heartbreaking testimonies were shared. Those who gathered at Ponar that year sought not only to commemorate the dead, but also more information about the fate of their own family members. In advance of the ceremony, Mikhail Sobol (Sobolis 1994: 180) wrote: “I will go to Ponar today. There will be a meeting there. Pits have been exhumed containing 12,000 and 10,000 people, and many recognize [the corpses of] their family members.” Between 15 and 26 August 1944 the Special Commission for Investigating Nazi Crimes was active at Ponar, determining the location of mass graves and performing exhumations. Survivors hoped to be able to identify exhumed corpses and several of the bodies unearthed by the Commission were indeed identified by relatives (Potanin 1944: 93–95). Nonetheless, one aspect of the memorial service angered many survivors, namely the fact that representatives of the Lithuanian civil government had given eulogies for the Poles and Russians buried at the site, whereas Jews – who had been the overwhelming majority of those murdered in Ponar – were not mentioned even once during preparations for the commemoration. This expression of state anti-Semitism was for some survivors a reason enough not to attend the event. In his diary, the Jewish partisan Abba Kovner (quoted in Porat 2009: 180) wrote: “We decided together with Sutzkever [poet and Jewish partisan Avraom Sutzkever] not to go to Ponar today.”

The following years also saw commemorations initiated by religious community leaders taking place at Ponar with the permission of officials from Soviet Religious Affairs. Vilnius Jews organized trips to visit the graves in Ponar in summer during the Tisha B’Av Jewish holiday.¹ On that day, community members would travel from the synagogue to pray in Ponar. The authorities granted permission to hold such an assembly for the final time in 1947 (Complaints 1946, 1947). That year marked a turning point between tolerant support of Jewish identity and the emerging systemic and openly anti-Semitic attitude of the government.

As early as 1945, the Jewish religious community attempted to establish Ponar as a special location worthy of commemoration. In October that year representatives of the community contacted the first secretary of the Lithuanian Communist Party Antanas Sniečkus, requesting his help in preserving and memorializing the site of mass murder at Ponar along with other sites in Lithuania. The issue seemed particularly urgent because the sites had been gradually built over by roads and used as pastures for livestock, rendering them undistinguishable as locations for mass murder and mass graves (Complaints 1945: 121). However, officials rejected a request to preserve Ponar as a site of Jewish death. The following explanation was given, clearly expressing doubt in Jewish sovereignty over the site (Complaints 1945: 125–127): “The locations where the Germans carried out mass murders are not limited to what are described as cemeteries. These are locations with political significance, guarding against the successors to German fascism on the international level as well as against gangs of Nazi Lithuanians in our land. Therefore, the preservation of sites such as Ponar and others is not exclusively a matter of religious affiliation, but the duty of local executive organs.” Local and national government authorities, however, made no efforts to preserve the graves at Ponar. This is evidenced by persistent requests put forward by the executive board of the Vilnius Jewish community to allow them to protect the graves and erect a monument at Ponar and other sites (Letters: 106–108; Complaints 1948: 77).

Employees of the postwar Jewish Museum in Vilnius also petitioned the Council of Ministers (Letters: 106–108; Complaints 1948: 77): “to erect a memorial plaque at the gate leading to the mass execution site, and to erect a commemorative monument to honor the victims’ memory both ideologically and artistically.” They proposed a state-funded competition for a memorial design. Anticipating a negative answer from government officials, museum staff also suggested that the memorial could be financed by donations from the members of the Jewish community. Ultimately, the latter option was implemented (Finding 1949: 221).

1 Tisha B’Av is an annual day of fasting in Judaism, commemorating the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem. Tisha B’Av, the ninth day of the month of Av on the Jewish calendar, falls in July or August. This specific day to commemorate the Holocaust was chosen only by Lithuanian Jews and demonstrates a local Litvak type of consciousness and behavior based on local rules for commemorating the dead. (see Zeltser 2018: 60).

The monument was erected in May 1948 and was to be officially unveiled on Tisha B'Av, August 15, the same year. Its design immediately drew criticism from the authorities because it was considered too religious in both its symbolism and the inscriptions framing the monument. It featured a biblical verse and a Russian text establishing Jews as the main victims of Ponar (Report 1949: 10–11). The reluctance of representatives of the Jewish community to acquiesce to official demands to change the inscription on the monument to a purely secular one led the authorities to take the matter into their own hands. The monument was ultimately taken down,² with a new obelisk, decorated with a five-pointed star and the standard inscription in Lithuanian and Russian, “to the victims of fascist terror, 1941–1944”, erected on the plinth of the former statue in the early 1960s.

The “overly religious” message and symbolism of the 1948 monument was not the only reason for it never being officially unveiled. 1948 was the year in which Stalin’s anti-Semitic campaign got underway, compelling many Jews to leave the country. Between 1948 and 1956, numerous Jewish survivors reclaimed their prewar Polish citizenship, giving them the right to repatriate to Poland. Those who stayed hid their Jewish identity. As a result, the Jewish community in Lithuania and, more specifically, in Vilnius, significantly dwindled in numbers and their religious and communal activities were performed in secret. This does not mean, however, that commemorations at, and visits to, Ponar stopped, but they did become less organized and took on a lower profile as they were performed individually or by small groups. Such activities continued to take place throughout the 1950s and 1960s, usually on May 9, the official Liberation Day holiday, during the latter decade. Žana Ranaitė-Čarnienė (Ranaitė-Čarnienė 1994: 171) writes: “I used to remember my dear parents, brother, relatives and acquaintances outside of the synagogue. Often I travelled alone to Ponar. The tall old pine trees, the witnesses to the terrible massacres there, rustled in the wind as if they were moaning in agony over the innocent victims.”

It was only in the 1970s that Ponar once again became a symbol of Jewish resistance to official state policies and the politics of memory surrounding the Holocaust. Following the large-scale commemorations that took place at Babi Yar in Ukraine, Rumbula in Latvia and Vilnius in Lithuania in 1971, which coincided with the struggle for the right of Jews to leave the Soviet Union, a similar event occurred at Ponar in 1972. Eitanas Finkelšteinas, a participant at that event and later an active member of the Helsinki Group (the Lithuanian dissident organization), together with several friends, organized

a commemoration at Ponar on Tisha B'Av. The group read a prayer, laid down a large six-pointed star made of yellow flowers and sang a few songs. The claim to sovereignty over Ponar as a site of Jewish suffering and death met with a decisive response from the authorities. The leaders of the event were arrested and their cameras confiscated. Thereafter, all Jewish commemorations at the site took place under the banner of services intended to honor victims of the Great Patriotic War, the Soviet name for World War II.

A new wave of commemorations at Ponar began when the Lithuanian independence movement Sąjūdis was established in the 1980s. Sąjūdis, literally ‘Movement’, was the political organization that led the struggle for Lithuanian independence in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It was then that two important Jewish organizations were established: Tkuma and the Lithuanian Cultural Foundation’s Jewish Culture Association, the latter forming the basis for the Lithuanian Jewish Community. Although they were based on different administrative structures and pursued divergent agendas, both organizations took the initiative in maintaining the sites of mass murder in Lithuania, including Ponar. The main difference in the policies of these organizations lay in their conformity to state policy. The Association continued to organize events in May when victims of fascism killed in the Great Patriotic War were commemorated in Lithuania and the Soviet Union, while Tkuma would hold their annual March of the Living in the autumn, in remembrance of the liquidation of the Vilnius ghetto.³ At their first meeting, held in 1988, the organization openly displayed Jewish symbols, with the participants carrying a Star of David that they then placed at the edge of burial pits.

Following the wave of *aliyah*, the emigration to Israel in 1990, the already small Jewish population of Lithuania dwindled further. It was in this context that a member of Tkuma, Hirsh Belitsky, came up with the idea that those leaving could leave a symbolic mark at the graves of their relatives by way of a farewell. He suggested that the families emigrating to Israel should plant an oak at the site. The initiative was publicized in the newspaper *Etzleinu*⁴, striking a chord with many readers. In an acknowledgement letter one family wrote (Simovich 1990: 19): “We were preparing to leave but felt some sort of dissatisfaction, and then, all of a sudden, we read in *Etzleinu* about planting a small oak tree in remembrance. This was when we realized what the feeling of dissatisfaction was all about. After all, until then, everything we had done had been for ourselves: we studied the language, we bought things for the trip. But to plant a tree means to leave something behind after you’re gone. To

² Some survivors say the monument was destroyed or even blown up.

³ September 23 was the day of the liquidation of the Vilnius ghetto. The Day of Remembrance of the Lithuanian Jewish Victims of Genocide was listed on the official list of state holidays by order of the Presidium of the Supreme Council (Reconstituent Seimas 1990–1992) of Lithuania on October 31, 1990. Since 1994 it has been commemorated annually.

⁴ *Etzleinu* was the newspaper published by the Tkuma Jewish national revival educational association.

plant a small oak at Ponar, where our departed brothers and sisters rest, means to be together invisibly, wherever we might be..." This act made it possible to establish and maintain a connection between the dead and the living, even in the absence of the latter.

Commemorations organized by Jews took place at Ponar throughout the entire period from 1944 until the 1990s, despite the ruling authorities discouraging such acts and creating significant barriers. Throughout the various physical transformations of Ponar, the site remained one of the most significant and most symbolic for Jews, both for preserving the memory of those murdered and for freely expressing one's values, identities and resistance to state policies.

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Holocaust symbolism in the Belarusian memory of Maly Trostenets

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Abstract

This article analyzes the memorial complex that was built in 2015 at the site of the former Nazi camp Maly Trostenets. Although the complex has incorporated symbolism connected to how the Holocaust is remembered in Western Europe, it does not overcome some of the aspects of the old Soviet narrative of the Great Patriotic War.

Key Words

Belarus, Holocaust memory, Maly Trostenets, memory culture, monuments

In June 2015, the Trostenets memorial complex was unveiled just outside the Belarusian capital Minsk.¹ It is dedicated to the victims of the Nazi forced labor camp Maly Trostenets and its extermination sites in two nearby forests. The last state-sanctioned monument was erected at the site during the Soviet era in 1963, to commemorate the Soviet citizens who were murdered there. That many of these Soviet civilians were killed because they were Jewish was not reflected in the monument, nor was the fact that many victims were deported Jews from Western European countries. Despite the large number of victims coming from various European countries, the site remained unknown for a long time. It garnered more interest in the 1990s after the fall of the Soviet Union. However, Maly Trostenets still remains almost absent from the memory of the Holocaust in the rest of Europe today. This analysis of the Trostenets memorial complex, which consists of a number

of monuments, shows how the fact that Maly Trostenets fell into oblivion provides space for a specific Belarusian interpretation of the Holocaust in Europe.

In early 1942, the SS in Minsk created a camp on the site of the former Karl Marx kolkhoz in the village of Maly Trostenets on the outskirts of Minsk. It was used as a forced labor camp for Soviet Prisoners of War (POWs), Jewish and non-Jewish Belarusians, and Western European Jews. Some three kilometers from the camp lies Blagovshina forest which had been used as a killing site by the NKVD to eliminate prisoners held in Minsk prison in the days prior to the German occupation.² From early 1942 onwards, the forest once again served as one of the main execution sites. At first, Belarusian Jews from the Minsk ghetto were executed there, while from May 1942 onwards Western European Jews deported from cities located in present-day Germany, Austria and the Czech

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2 Today in Belarus there is still not much attention to the victims of the NKVD, after this history was almost completely silenced during the Soviet era. The victims of the NKVD at Blagovshina remain therefore a difficult topic to address, in particular because of the lack of sources on this topic. However, there are some advocates—such as Belarusian historian Igor Kuznetsov—for this memory, who have attempted to include the Stalinist victims in the new memorial site at Blagovshina forest as well (Borel 2014; Korsak 2014).



Figure 1. Gates of Memory.

Republic met the same fate there. Between October and December 1943, Sonderkommando 1005-Centre was deployed in Blagovshina forest with the aim of removing all traces of the massacres, including the destruction of mass graves by digging up and burning the remains. In early 1944, another killing site, located in Shashkova forest just southeast of the Maly Trostenets camp, was used to burn the corpses of people who had been killed in gas trucks. Many of these victims came from the Minsk region and were killed in anti-partisan actions. The use of Shashkova forest and the site of Maly Trostenets as killing sites continued until early July 1944. After the liberation of Minsk, the Extraordinary State Commission, established by the Soviet authorities to investigate mass graves, estimated that approximately 206,500 people had been killed at all three sites in and around Maly Trostenets.³

Despite the relatively high number of Western European victims, Maly Trostenets remained unknown in the West until the 1990s and early 2000s. Around this time, interest in this killing site increased, both abroad and inside the new Belarusian Republic. As the old Soviet monument erected at the site in the 1960s only mentions a very specific group of victims, the “Soviet citizens who were tortured and burned by the German-fascist invaders in June 1944”, local memory entrepreneurs and foreign NGOs began to lobby for a monument to honor all

victims at Maly Trostenets. These efforts eventually led to the creation of the memorial complex. In June 2015, the first part of the complex was unveiled at the former camp. Belarusian president, Aleksandr Lukashenko, gave an address at the main monument, the *Gates of Memory*, to a crowd of veterans, survivors and other interested people (Fig. 1). In his speech, he referred to other countries which “share the pain of Trostenets” with the Belarusians; at the same time, he lauded the wartime accomplishments of the Red Army and the “greatness of the Soviet people whose descendants we are” (The Official Internet Portal of the President of the Republic of Belarus 2015). The shared pain of Trostenets refers here to the idea of European countries having a shared past in which the Holocaust is a key feature, while the reference to the greatness of the Soviet people relates directly to the narrative of the Great Patriotic War, which was the master narrative in the Soviet Union regarding the period of 1941 to 1944. This acknowledgement of both sides – the Soviet inheritance and the shared European past – has also been reflected in the design and narrative of the new memorial site. While particular choices reflect attempts to place the history of Maly Trostenets more thoroughly within the framework of the European memory of the Holocaust, the overall design of the memorial complex and the narratives conveyed in plaques still demonstrates a strong connection to the narrative of the Great Patriotic War and a building style common to Soviet war monuments.

The memorial complex is situated on the outskirts of Minsk, on the boundary with the small village of Maly Trostenets, standing in stark contrast to its surroundings. Against the background of tall apartment buildings and a supermarket across the street, a sign directs visitors towards the different elements of the complex: ‘the road of death’, the ‘ruins of the death camp’ and the ‘site where 6500 prisoners were burned’ (Fig. 2). The apartments overlook the main monument, the *Gates of Memory*, and the *Road of Memory* that leads to it. Large stone blocks with commemoration plaques listing all sites where the Nazis committed crimes in Belarus are located on both sides of the road. The road culminates at a ten-meter high bronze sculpture depicting a group of human figures emerging from two very high gated doors. The figures are only half-dressed, most of them in rags or in striped outfits and there is a look of despair on their faces. The bronze doors imitate a wooden camp gate and appear to be wrapped in barbed wire. One of the gated doors has a sign on it stating “Kl. Trostenets”.

In the Soviet Union and in the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR), there was little or no room to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust as Jewish victims were simply seen as Soviet civilians. This was not just the case for those people who were Jewish, but also for those who were targeted as Soviet POW, partisan

³ According to the Extraordinary Soviet State Commission to Investigate German-Fascist Crimes, 150,000 people were killed in Blagovshina forest, 50,000 in Shashkova forest and another 6,000 in the camp at Maly Trostenets. This number seems to be on the high side as scholars have estimated that approximately 60,000 people were killed at these killing sites (Gerlach 1999: 770).



Figure 2. Indication sign Trostenets memorial complex.

or part of another minority group. Although the idea of viewing everyone as Soviet civilians also enabled commemorations of different groups under the same heading, it mostly translated into rendering the Holocaust invisible and resulted in indifference towards the fate of people persecuted for the fact that they were Jewish. In post-1991 Belarus, there is still not much space for the memory of specific groups of victims, although this situation has begun to change and the country has slowly started to embrace its Jewish past (Waligórska 2018: 334–335). Most of the victims of Maly Trostenets were either West-

ern European or Belarusian Jews, and this fact seems to be underlined in the symbolism employed at the memorial site. Several aspects of the memorial complex draw connections to Holocaust icons embedded in European memory of the Holocaust. The striped pyjamas worn by the figures depicted in the monument remind the visitor of the striped pyjamas that prisoners in concentration camps had to wear. The sign “Kl. Trostenets” evokes the abbreviation KL, *Konzentrationslager*, placed in front of the names of the concentration camps such as KL Dachau, KL Buchenwald or KL Auschwitz.

Although monuments are never a literal representation of the past, in his speech at the unveiling of the monument, president Lukashenko stressed that the architects had a difficult task in “preserving the historical truth and giving a complete picture of people’s suffering” (The Official Internet Portal of the President of the Republic of Belarus 2015). The project director and leading architect of the memorial complex, Anna Aksënova, likewise emphasized that this was the ambition of the design team, stating that “the memorial complex is being created with the goal of remembering the victims of the National Socialist regime and to safeguard the historical authenticity of the site” (Aksënova 2013: 46). Viewing the monument in light of these comments, an issue arises with the ‘authenticity’ of the ‘historical truth’ that is being represented. In his study on Holocaust icons, Oren Baruch Stier reminds us that “Holocaust symbols must convey a degree of historical authenticity if they are to be used to communicate the truth of the events they are intended to represent” (Stier 2015: 5). In the case of the memorial *Gates of Memory* and the Trostenets memorial complex, the ‘historical truth’ is not being reflected in its entirety.

The main problem lies in establishing whether Maly Trostenets was a concentration camp or a death camp. Although many people were murdered in and around the camp complex and camp prisoners faced the constant threat of being beaten, shot or hanged by the SS and other guarding personnel, the main function of the camp was to provide and supervise forced labor. The camp was created in 1942 by Eduard Strauch, commander of the Sicherheitspolizei in Minsk (KdS Minsk) (Gerlach 1999: 708). It was primarily used as an agricultural center for the KdS in Minsk and comprised a number of barracks, workshops for labor, and a manor house (Urteil in der Strafsache gegen Georg Heuser 1963). The majority of people who were killed at Maly Trostenets, were killed at one of the execution sites in the nearby forests directly after their deportation and never set foot on the camp premises. Although there are some similarities between Maly Trostenets and other entities in the Nazi camp system, in contrast to the majority of the concentration camps (KLs) in the Reich and occupied territories it was not under the authority of the *Inspektor der Konzentrationslager* (IKL). Instead, it was run by the SS Minsk. The inscription on the monument, “Kl. Trostenets”, does not refer, in this case, to the camp itself, but to a sign that hung near the entrance of the village Maly Trostenets during the war, bearing the German name of the village, *Klein* (small) *Trostenets*. Neither are the uniforms of the people depicted on the monument backed by historical reality: the inmates of Trostenets did not wear the striped pyjamas worn by concentration camp prisoners. For a monument that was created “to preserve the historical truth”, it seems somewhat problematic that these historical elements are not authentic.

When putting the topic of authenticity aside, the two references to concentration camps do draw a direct line to the symbolism of the commemoration of the Holo-

caust. Why is it, then, that this type of Holocaust symbolism has been employed at the memorial site? Where does this idea come from and what is the function of this specific symbolism at the former camp? The symbolism of the memorial site, constructing Maly Trostenets as a concentration or extermination camp, articulates, on the one hand, a legacy of the Soviet framing of all Nazi camps as *lager smerti* (death camp). It was not only camps under the authority of the SS that were regarded as death camps but also camps under the control of the Wehrmacht where many people died. Consequently, the fate of people persecuted as Jews was not differentiated from the fate of other persecuted groups. On the other hand, the misconceptions of the function of Maly Trostenets seem to result from the different understandings of the Holocaust pertaining in Eastern and in Western Europe. The French Catholic priest, Father Patrick Desbois, begins his *Holocaust by Bullets* with a quote from a Red Army nurse: “Where we come from, the Nazis machine-gun the Jews but in the west they kill them in camps (Desbois 2008: xv).”

Indeed, while the vast majority of Western European Jews were deported to concentration and extermination camps in occupied Eastern Europe (such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, Sobibor, Treblinka, and Majdanek), many Eastern European Jews were shot by Einsatzgruppen or other Nazi killing units in forests, dunes, or in fields close to where they had lived. This is what Desbois frames as “the Holocaust by bullets”, supplementing the traditional (Western) association of the Holocaust with concentration and/or extermination camps. Maly Trostenets was a place where these two dimensions of the Holocaust crossed paths: both Belarusian Jews and deported Western European Jews were killed in the Holocaust by bullets in the forests around Minsk in the vicinity of Maly Trostenets. But, as Mary Fulbrook rightly states, “the enormity of the Holocaust is often summarized in one word: ‘Auschwitz’” (Fulbrook 2018: vii). This understanding of the Holocaust as the mass murder of Jews in camps like Auschwitz-Birkenau has accordingly been applied to Maly Trostenets.

There is, however, another dimension to Maly Trostenets being framed as a death camp, even though it did not serve such a function. In his speech at the opening of the new memorial complex, President Lukashenko spoke of the countries who share the pain that the Belarusians feel about Maly Trostenets. In 2013, the project director of the memorial also claimed that the memorial site is a “part of a shared European memory culture and it remembers the National Socialist genocidal policies towards the civilian population of Europe” (Aksënova 2013: 46). The idea of Maly Trostenets being a key site in the European memory of the Holocaust is important for Belarus, which is the most isolated country in Europe and has been ruled by Lukashenko since 1994. Owing to sanctions imposed by the European Union, whose primary aim is to bring about the abolition of the death penalty and to change the undemocratic climate in the country, Belarus is heavily reliant on Russia. However, since the occupation of Crimea

in 2014, this political direction has changed. President Lukashenko has started speaking in Belarusian in public – previously, he would only speak Russian – and has acted as a negotiator in the conflict between Ukraine and Russia by hosting two summits in 2014 and 2015. With this move towards Europe, there is a need to become part of a European history as well. As James E. Young writes in *Textures of Memory*, “By creating common spaces for memory, monuments propagate the illusion of common memory. [...] By creating a sense of a shared past, such institutions as national memorial days, for example, foster the sense of a common present and even a sense of shared national destiny” (Young 1993: 6). This sense of a shared future, achieved through the praxis of commemoration and a shared space of remembrance, is also at stake in Maly Trostenets.

Despite the willingness to bring the memory of the Great Patriotic War and a shared European memory of the Holocaust together, there are still some significant contradictions left to overcome. The Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Minsk, renovated and reopened in 2014, did incorporate the history of the Holocaust and the fate of the Belarusian Jews into the main exhibition whereas previously the topic was almost absent from the museum. However, the part of the exhibition dedicated to Maly Trostenets does not mention the fact that the majority of its victims were Jewish. The sign on the entrance to the new memorial complex reproduces this logic too by failing to address the identity of the victims of the Holocaust (Fig. 3). It says: “The Trascianec camp is a Nazi center for the extermination of Minsk residents and residents of other Belarusian towns and villages, members of anti-fascist underground struggle, the partisan movement, the Red Army prisoners of war, civilians deported from Europe.”⁴ Another memorial site, which became part of the Trostenets memorial park in 2018, shows a small shift in this discourse. The memorial in Blagovshina forest – the former execution site – was established by the executive committee of the city of Minsk, in close cooperation with German NGO’s. At the monument it is stated that “In 1941–1943 the Nazis exterminated massively population of Belarus, members of the anti-fascist underground struggle and partisan movement, the Red Army prisoners of war, prisoners of the Minsk ghetto, and the Jewish population deported from Austria, Germany, Czech Republic, Poland and other European countries in Blahaŭščyna Forest.” Indeed, the new monument hereby acknowledges the fact that the Western European deportees were Jewish. However, the Belarusian Jews, who are here described in a cumbersome and ambiguous way as the ‘prisoners of the Minsk ghetto’, are still not openly recognized.

Although the memorial at Maly Trostenets tries to incorporate the history of this site into the European history



Figure 3. Entrance sign at the Trostenets memorial complex.

of the Holocaust, some aspects remain unacknowledged. In particular, the use of Holocaust symbolism and the framing of the main monument as an attempt at an authentic representation of the past give rise to expectations that all victim groups killed at the site will be represented; but this is not the case. Regardless of the strong focus on the shared European past and, thus, on the Holocaust, the main reason why the majority of people were killed at Maly Trostenets – simply for being Jewish – remains absent. Even though contemporary Belarus allows more space than there was in the Soviet Union to commemorate Jewish victims, it seems the new memorial complex at Maly Trostenets does not yet fully overcome the Soviet legacy of camouflaging the Holocaust.

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Re-emerging memories: humanitarianism and sovereignty in the Târgu Jiu Camp

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Abstract

This article briefly charts the debates surrounding the afterlife of a heritage space of political violence, the Târgu Jiu camp in Western Romania, and locates the ensuing narratives in the current contestations of the liberal democratic consensus in Central and Eastern Europe. The camp was an important Holocaust site and an equally relevant space for the early communist movement. Contrary to similar sites where competing interpretations of these histories are at play, this camp has been largely absent from debates on public memory of past political violence nationally. The significance of this space for local political history has been silenced. This article concerns itself with the long dynamic of silencing difficult heritage, its causes and implications and the selective perspectives on certain histories it entails. Târgu Jiu is a microcosm of this entanglement. Emerging in Romanian media and public debate at the time of the 2014 “refugee” reception crisis, this newly retrieved collecting memory of the camp capitalized on a history of past internal European displacement, Romanian victimhood and a sense of persecuted national sovereignty. Silencing made room for newer selective histories of this heritage space. Specifically, the complex history of the camp was appropriated into a type of politics of memory that reconfigures narratives about “liberal” values in the region. This article discusses the processes through which liberal, “European” values are appropriated and instrumentalized for the very opposite principles.

Key Words

Europe, heritage, liberal democracy, victimhood

Introduction

Since 2014, the prospect of refugees seeking protection in Europe has encouraged the decade’s fiercest debates about the “European way of life” (De Genova 2017; Stone 2018a). The politics of reinforcing EU borders accelerated the rise of radical conservative political actors and discourses that challenge principles of liberal norms and human rights. The same debate also produced a sharp polarization between those allegedly protecting a “common” European ethos against “others” and those showing the evident injustices embedded in this very narrative (Newman 2017). This divide has continued to increase, and has also affected notions of “European” heritage and collective memory (Delanty 2017; Chiara De Cesari et al. 2019). Europe’s internal history of migration and refugees generated interest, while it also legitimized opposition to this diversification of “European” heritage (Hennig and

Hidalgo 2021). Since the “reception” crisis, heritage spaces that remind us of past political violence, war, genocide, and authoritarianism and how these difficult histories were seemingly overcome in the past, have also illustrated the fragility of principles grounding the liberal European sphere. The “common” heritage that was meant to “thicken” a unique form of Europeanism by rebutting past violence, and education, about it (Müller 2010), now plays a part in the appropriations of these narratives of Europeanism into a complex defence of authoritarian thought.

It was not the first such debate putting heritage and collective memory at the core of the politics of the EU and Europe. Previously, the juxtaposition of victims of the National Socialist regime with those of state socialism triggered fierce disputes on who gets to have their past history of victimhood represented in the European space (Laarse 2013; Ghodsee 2014). However, those disagreements underpinning the “totalitarian” paradigm of remembering

the victims of two past ideologies did not lead to contestations of the fact that difficult heritage can instil values of European liberal democracy, and liberal narratives of rights and citizenship (Probst 2003). Indeed, it was assumed that more “common” heritage will also strengthen a form of liberal, European conduct. Since the concerns of 2014, the opposite has become increasingly more visible and histories of Europeanism and liberal norms have often been weaponized against this very purpose.

Although Central and Eastern Europe is by no means the only political space where this happens, since the new mainstream right-wing in European politics elsewhere has dwelt on unresolved histories, the “illiberal” politics in the region has specifically operated with a sense of injustice and stoked feelings of victimization (Reynié 2016; Verovšek 2020). A new interest in past histories of violence and internal displacements (for instance, the Soviet invasion of 1956 in Hungary, 1968 across Eastern Europe) emerged primarily as a counter-narrative to the humanitarian liberal consensus defining the European space (Harms 2017; Ost 2019). These events are often of use in political narratives stressing a form of exceptionalism, superiority of purpose and of rights. Oppositional in nature, the interpretation of these histories emphasizes sufferance which has still not been fully unacknowledged within Europe, returns to the grievances of a lost sovereignty and freedom and consequently contests the European liberal consensus. The debate often focuses on certain groups, to show how some have had more rights than others and have been more often acknowledged in the cosmopolitan European ecosystem.

The process of reaching a consensus around liberal norms and ideas about a common sense of Europeanism had been grounded in politics of memory, and specifically in histories of political violence. Yet, museums and other sites have more recently led to a new affirmation of the “us” versus “them” perspective. From spaces of cultivating, even if only performatively, some of the guilt, regret and awareness of the past, engagements with history have transformed (perhaps again, but in a different key) into spaces professing sovereignty (Radonić 2020). Zooming in closer on local debates in Central and Eastern Europe showcases the long life of this dynamic, how the seeds of these narratives have been there since the early 1990s and how “European” heritage and collective memory have always been instrumental in their consolidation.

Illiberalism has posed a challenge to the debates about political narratives and norms of liberal democracy, and so have other movements of the radical-right (Mudde 2019). Scholars have nuanced the view that such iterations represent sudden reactionary bursts of authoritarianism in recent European politics and have shown that these are rooted in processes of liberal democracy of the 1990s (Krastev and Holmes 2020). Older roots of interpretations of democracy in the interwar period also played a part, for instance as civic society and ideas about solidarity were often intertwined with those of the far-right (Riley 2018). Also, authoritarian discourses were closely entwined with those of liberalism, in the economic and cultural spheres. (Wilkinson 2019). There is something to be said about the narratives that have

driven this process. These are no longer about a sovereignty destroyed by others (“occupation”) but affirm a type of different path to liberalism, and consequently finding an alternative to the global liberal democratic narratives (Brubaker 2017). Historical narratives are being revised, in a way that professes liberal values, humanitarianism and community.

Retrieving a lost memory

At the time of the crisis of the “reception” of refugees in Europe, Romanian public debates somewhat unexpectedly recovered the history of Târgu Jiu, a former camp situated in an isolated mining area in the Carpathians. The facility had been built in 1939 as a refuge for 6,000 Polish officers, as the regime of King Carol II granted temporary residence rights to approximately 100,000 Polish citizens fleeing deportations and murder in Poland (Michelbacher 2020). The Polish officers were effectively handed over to the Wehrmacht in 1941 as the subsequent regime of Marshal Ion Antonescu pursued its own territorial and racial politics in the region (Solonari 2019). An “internment camp for political opponents”, including persecuted Jews, began operating at the site (Poliec 2019). It was also the internment space where the regime sent the communist opposition after 1941, during the Second World War, when the country was an ally of the Axis powers (Ionescu 2015). Since many of the camp’s prisoners later became prominent members of the Communist Party, including both leaders of the country, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej and Nicolae Ceaușescu, the site enjoyed a privileged status as state propaganda heritage. It illustrated the origins of the Left in the pre-war and the wartime political opposition. The nearby museum, built in the late 1960s, saw generations of schoolchildren learning about the “illegal” political phase of those who had passed through the camp.

Its memorial presence today does not do justice to its complex history. Remains of the camp were destroyed in the late 1960s, with some relevant artefacts moved to the nearby local museum. Only the monumental clock built by departing Polish officers in 1941 testifies today to the existence of the camp. Such absence is symptomatic of the specificity of the Romanian landscape, where as a space of heritage, the camp had elicited no real interest in a fierce and polarized climate of memory after the 1990s. In general, the fact that it has been attributed to “communism” made this camp, and the majority of other such spaces, into “non-sites” of memory, and also led them to being neglected and undeserving of any codification (Sendyka 2016). The intention was to erase anything that had to do with the previous regime. After 1989, silencing the political heritage of state socialism has been part of a legal-moralizing discourse that engaged with leftist authoritarianism only insofar as to show the “success” of breaking with it (Iacob 2019; Neumayer 2019). It was a symbol of the complete change of the political sphere that liberal democracy had permitted, but also in a spirit of fear of the past and an attention to freedom still indebted to Cold War liberalism (Muller 2006). Such a perspective lumped many histories

together. This “criminalizing” memory perspective provided a trope for a nationalist viewpoint praising the newly acquired sovereignty from a foreign political system (Kopeček 2012). It also blurred lines between left and right which led to a general de-politicization of the debate on authoritarianism and a wary relation to political history. All these provided a fertile terrain of misinterpretations.

After this long period of neglect which relegated all socialist heritage to a painful but primarily uncomfortable legacy, in 2014, newspapers and other public outlets retrieved the history of Târgu Jiu. Generally, commentators lamented its invisibility and argued such heritage should be retrieved and repurposed. But, as the government (and much of public opinion) was orienting against accepting refugees on Romanian territory, it was a lost history of Central and Eastern European solidarity and displacement that triggered interest in this silence heritage space. An article in the *Adevărul* daily suggested that this space should be reclaimed as an essential history of past solidarity during the internal European displacement before the Second World War (Ion 2016). The history of Polish refugees on Romanian territory during the war showed an alternate history of solidarity at the time of the (former) East-West rivalry concerning refugee quotas, at a time of fierce debates on the roots of intolerance in the area (Stone 2018b) and a general revival of “whiteness” relation to European identity (Ammaturo 2019). Retrieving the history that this camp stood for presented a positive and more palatable alternative about “humanitarianism” and international solidarity amidst the international outcry against the reluctant and sometimes violent politics of border control in Central and Eastern Europe (Krastev 2017).

This revisitation of Târgu Jiu as a symbol of past “humanitarianism” poses interesting questions about the complicated canvas of silences, polarization and repoliticization in memory politics of past political violence that have shaped the prospects of liberal democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. The rediscovered roots and the heritage of humanitarianism became instrumental in locating and nostalgically emphasizing a long tradition of a liberal-oriented mindset during the interwar period. The refugee narrative was folded into a transnational dynamic of histories of past authoritarianism that encourages a linear framing of collective memory around ideals of human rights (Moses 2012; Moyn 2012). Arguably, these selective interpretations were only bolstered by a lack of a substantial debate about the meaning and legacy of the dominance of anti-communist opposition as a memorial focus, and an absence of reflection on past right-wing authoritarianism and the Holocaust in Romanian debates (Cârstocea 2021). Those pursuing the debate were now retrieving the camp as a usable heritage site in efforts to construct a past liberal democracy, by investigating this refugee history as an opportunity to expand on the government’s rightful actions during the Second World War.

Sovereignty

It was not the war, but the post-war usage of the camp, synonymous with the political beginnings of the state socialist

regime, which had triggered its erasure from public narratives. Around 2014, however, this long silencing of the Târgu Jiu camp was replaced by a more “useful” approach to the past in the regional recalibration of the politics of memory around the topic. An exhibition organized by the Polish government in early 2018 in the nearby museum stoked the memory of past state tragedies to an equal degree for both sides: for the Polish government, the camp signified the exodus caused by the Soviet invasion, while for Romanian authorities, it emphasized commendable past responses to other refugee situations. It mainly referred to the so-called Polish-Romanian Alliance of 1921, a defence pact between the two countries, that permitted the evacuation of the Polish Army through the port of Constanța and military support in case of invasion (Steiner 2005: 931). This anti-communist perspective emphasized state sovereignty and autonomy, two instrumental narratives in the current illiberal turn (Walker 2021). “Sovereignty” has been de-politicized and linked to a “rebirth” of democracy, into which was inserted the cultural and political narratives about the triumph of the political transformation to liberal democracy in the early 1990s. However, the sovereignty of national territory has long been one of the most valuable tropes in defending past right-wing authoritarianism in Romania (Endresen 2011; Cârstocea 2019; Zavatti 2021).

Târgu Jiu was built at the height of a political conflict triggered by the affinity of the Romanian Kingdom for Nazi Germany. Society was generally divided in relation to the prospect of war, but the Antonescu government played on nationalist sentiments by arguing that war was unavoidable due to the necessity of retrieving the territories of Bessarabia and Bukovina, lost to the advancing Soviet Army (Solonari 2009, 2019). Officials defended the potential for war in distinctly territorial terms, especially after the dismembering of Czechoslovakia in 1938; war was inevitable and even necessary in order to preserve state sovereignty. Poland, whose alliance with Romania against the USSR dating from 1921 had formed part of both interwar governments’ nationalist discourse, shared the same basis of foreign policy at the time, namely that its independence and territorial integrity were “threatened” (Steiner 2005). Territorial integrity was an argument that proved as significant for the xenophobic discourse of the Iron Guard as it was for successive nationalist governments since the end of the 1920s (Clark 2015). The silencing of the memory of the camp, combined with the depoliticization of the debate about its politics led to situations like those of 2014, when these past usages of sovereignty could be forcefully ignored.

Wrapped together with this sovereignty narrative were pragmatic mechanisms of exclusion, and the history of Târgu Jiu speaks about this tension. “Refugees” were useful to fulfil humanitarian obligations as a neutral state but also a means of prolonging the formal collaboration with France and the United Kingdom, who had pledged to guarantee the independence of the Kingdom of Romania (Hehn 2002: 327–330). Furthermore, records of the Romanian Gendarmerie and the police, in fact, suggest that Antonescu feared the general opposition that the arrival

of refugees might instigate in the country. ("Information note", Presidency of the Council of Ministers, 372, 23.04.1940, NAR). The presence of Polish refugees in Romania was perceived as a liability for Antonescu's pragmatic political narrative that sovereignty was frail and that anything might prompt actions from Nazi Germany. Hosting Polish refugees could have incited retaliation from the Iron Guard who opposed helping a group already seen as political competitors. There were, for instance, attempts to curtail potential dissent in the camp, evident in the decisions of the Cabinet of Ministers in 1941 ("Decision of Marshal Ion Antonescu", 23.03.1940, NAR) to appoint a "praetor" whose role was to respond to the potential complaints of the local population, including those related to the camp (22-66/1942, National Archives of Romania).

Given the anti-royalist dissatisfaction expressed by workers in the area, there were also explicit attempts to discourage contact with the world outside the camp. The actions taken by the police show that they closely observed those living in the villages around the camp ("Information Note", IGJ, 9501983/1940, NAR). This politics also applied to momentary spats regarding economic exchanges between officers in the camp and locals or the Polish officers' "clandestine" political activities in 1939. The local police monitored the officers closely, while the Gendarmerie kept political organizations emerging in the camp under surveillance. For instance, the disappearance of Marshal Edward Rydz-Śmigły (Commander in Chief of the Polish Forces) made authorities wary of the emigration of Polish officers from the camp, with transit visas to the Black Sea issued in the camp ("Information note from Târgu Jiu", IGJ, 18/1940). The camp therefore speaks less of a history of "humanitarianism", and more of a pragmatic politics of compromise.

Authoritarianism and opposition

The first prisoners in Târgu Jiu were those opposing the corporatist royal regime and then the Antonescu regime. Târgu Jiu had been an important space of repression during the Antonescu regime: the Jewish community, communists and socialists, anti-war proponents and anti-fascists were detained next to members of the far-right Iron Guard movement after the organization fell out with the Antonescu regime in January 1941. But this working-class dynamic had been an aspect generally overlooked in 2014, in articles discussing the relevance of Târgu Jiu. The debate left little room to present the interior opposition against war-time politics (notably coming from the communist circles), despite the fact that records from the camp show the intense anti-fascist political activity of inmates, as well as the outreach of manifestos leaving the camp ("Manifest pacifist", Acțiunile deținuților politici comuniști și antifasciști din închisori și lagăre, 1115 /1943, NAR). Those in the camp were an important voice for the opposition operating at national level and the network of opponents active in large cities. This dynamic erased the opposition and the polarizing climate against the corpo-

rate authoritarianism of the interwar period, which overlapped with the massive class disenchantment against the political establishment and the early roots of socialism. The authoritarian streak of the regime was, in fact, minimized and explained as a general consequence of the conditions of war, as the recovered heritage debate on Târgu Jiu avoided addressing the strong opposition against the growing authoritarianism of the monarchy at that time.

It was evidently the selective silences of the 1990s framed by the legacies of Cold War "totalitarianism" and the continuous reluctance in collective memory debate to engage with the heritage of the left that had contributed to these overlaps. This type of discourse perpetuated, in reality, the minimal interest in the origins of the ideology of the interwar national working-class movement and the opposition to authoritarianism (Totok 2010). This is all the more paradoxical since the entire region of Târgu Jiu was known as the site of the first widespread protests against the communist regime in 1979. But given the focus on the "state" as a liberal, renewed construction after 1989, both such histories seemed to lessen the triumphal narrative of the (neo) liberal transformation. The situation was further complicated by the fact that in the early 1990s, thousands of workers from this mining area participated in street protests orchestrated to support the newly appointed provisional Romanian government. The violent street clashes in Bucharest in June 1990 discredited any working-class political resistance angle. The area, in itself, otherwise a potent space of heritage of the workers' movement, was effectively limited to a debate about the "winners" and the "losers" of 1989.

This situation and dynamic more broadly led to a normalization of the local far-right and made the history of the Iron Guard, the nationalist far-right movement, more acceptable (Zavatti 2021). This was evident during the 2014 debate when the history of the Iron Guard's role in the camp was effectively silenced. Members of the far-right Iron Guard, communist and Jewish inmates cohabitated in the camp after the Iron Guard rebellion of January 1941 (16, 14/1942, IPJ, RNA) and caused tensions for other categories of inmates. Furthermore, in August 1941, many Iron Guard members were released from the camp after the facility scrutinized authorities for preferential access and treatment. For instance, an inmate who paid to be allowed to stay in the camp (which shows it offered a better chance of survival) spoke about the free movement of certain prisoners in the camp ("Information note from Târgu Jiu", IGJ, 12, 14/1942, NAR). The interventions at the time continued to be explained by the regime as resulting from the general chaos caused by the war rather than from the politics of the era and tends to absolve the actions of the Iron Guard organization. These explanations refrain from using labels such as fascist or extreme right and depoliticize the ideological roots of the movement.

The Holocaust

Equally, and perhaps most strikingly, the history of ethnic exclusion was erased from the debate in 2014, when

advocates of retrieving this heritage focused on an alleged element of humanitarianism of the Romanian government at the beginning of the Second World War. Its later history, which testifies to the racialized politics of Romanianization, and which saw the Jewish community increasingly ousted and later deported to Transnistria, was silenced (Ionescu 2015). Indeed, in 1940, under the National Legionary State, the Iron Guard became a legal political entity led by Horia Sima and shared the leadership with Antonescu, the de-facto head of state (Cârstocea 2019). In the winter of 1941, disputes over the spoils of Jewish property resulted in open street clashes, widespread arrests and imprisonment of the Iron Guard “brotherhood”, and pogroms against the Jewish community. The policy towards the Jewish community was part of the source of long-standing tensions between the leader of the Iron Guard, Horia Sima, and the Antonescu government (Solonari 2009). There were structural variations in the way Antonescu framed these persecutions: on the one hand, part of a national war effort and on the other, these persecutions and requisitions were only the result of the personal interests of Horia Sima and were consequently detrimental to the Romanian economy. It was another way in which far-right and right-wing authoritarianism are often easily absorbed into contemporary liberal narratives. Evidently, the way the remembrance of refugees in Târgu Jiu came about in public debate reproduced a perspective which has constantly “normalized” Antonescu’s far-right policies (Cârstocea 2021).

The Jewish history of Târgu Jiu and its history as a station for the deportations to Transnistria has been ignored, despite the fact that in June 1941, an order issued by the Antonescu government which stated that all members of the Jewish community aged between 18 and 60 in the villages between Siret and Prut were to be “evacuated”, also changed the life in the camp. Most deportees arrived at Târgu Jiu (Solonari 2009) and from there Jews and “communists” alike were further deported to the camps in Transnistria. There are also testimonies of individuals who, after they were allowed to return from Transnistria in early 1944, were again imprisoned in Târgu Jiu (Megargee and White 2018). The widespread circulation of testimonies of those deported to Transnistria during the 1946 trial of war criminals nurtured Jewish memory temporarily. Yet, as communist historiography did little to emphasize the ethnicity of the activists before the political takeover in 1948, the importance of Târgu Jiu in the persecution of the Jewish community was effaced at a time when the history of the camp was of interest (Cârstocea 2014). These broader memorial dynamics around the far-right thus enabled the humanitarian perspective expressed around 2014 to reiterate the silence of the 1990s regarding the involvement of the Romanian authorities in the Holocaust. The way this old narrative of sovereignty was pocketed into the discourse around the refugee debate in 2014 demonstrates how the history of the Shoah and that of the far-right are conditioned by the anti-communist perspective of the 1990s. Furthermore, this perspective perpetuates narratives about territorial integrity and state sovereignty which can be easily instrumentalized.

Interestingly, the memory of the war as a collaboration forced by compromise and dictated by necessity perpetuated a relatively benign perspective on the authoritarian far-right. It had been a long process. In the 1970s, driven by the increasingly nationalist tinge of the Ceaușescu regime, the regime of Marshal Ion Antonescu was retrieved as an icon of sovereign territoriality and an “essence” of the Romanian spirit (Shafir 2014; Cazan 2018). This did not mean, however, that exiled members of the Iron Guard, who at the time of the Cold War were strident “anticommunist” voices against the regime, were eyed any less suspiciously by the state apparatus. Given this somewhat paradoxical overlap, the “anti-fascist” narrative of the new communist ideology found legitimacy in the idea of the myth of national integrity rather than in a past common (fascist) enemy (García et al. 2016). Furthermore, members of the Iron Guard who did not flee to the West or Latin America, carefully monitored by the communist state apparatus, were rather quietly integrated into the working class (CNSAS, 562/1973).

Heritage and silence

There is something to be said about this re-adaptation of politics of heritage, through the ebbs and flows of the European narrative of two totalitarianism. As much as this perspective has been grounding much of the remembrance of political violence, the ambition to represent past difficult histories as an opposite image of contemporary liberal democracy has had its shortcomings. With the increasing disputations of inequality, injustices integral to the global liberal, more nuanced understandings of how the history of this consensus forms narratives is important. Renewed debates about sovereignty, for instance, have long relied on an anti-communist vision that equates the history of state socialism with “occupation” and tends to reinstate a sense of persecution and of victimhood (Ghodsee 2014). But, as legacies pointing to the triumph of the 1989 are being increasingly challenged in recent contestations of the liberal democracy consensus, the silencing of the histories of this type of heritage, touching on both narratives of the right and of the left, lends itself primarily to appropriations of the right. It is not incidental that anticommunism is today one of the new tropes of repoliticization of authoritarianism as alternative, rather than “opposite”. The defensive type of vision of democracy it encourages, that often looks back to conservative idealizations of the past, emerged early in the 1990s, with a heritage of political violence as the main space to perform and re-enact these.

The story of Târgu Jiu emerged at a time when the crucial narrative about liberalism and triumph of liberal democracy in Central and Eastern Europe was being challenged, from the inside. It was, at the same time, a currency in international debates about the political right. These political storylines blend well with ideas about national character, of a civic opposition and solidarity and perpetuated by a selective, cautious and essentialist idea about authoritarianism and the far-right. Because the authoritarian and far-right narratives are masked behind more appealing themes, important

constituent political discourses like ethno-nationalism or anti-Semitism are lost. Furthermore, they come to be identified with a form of local democratic conjecture that makes it even more difficult to disentangle political sides or agents from a general conservative politics (Riley 2010).

But the manner in which the “silence” on Târgu Jiu was broken suggests that the long afterlife of the narrative about sovereignty led to a rose-tinted perspective on the roots of inter-war liberalism and an exculpatory narrative of authoritarianism, one that disregards strong authoritarian nationalism as a central element fuelling right-wing politics in the 1930s. While it perpetuates a memorial narrative about earnest attempts to maintain state sovereignty, it effectively does away with the size and scope of the crisis of democracy in the inter-war period.

Conclusion

In this sense, the 2014 debate retrieving the history of Târgu Jiu shows a different trajectory of the heritage of political violence in Europe, which is no longer about upholding European liberal values, but can be appropriated to perpetuate biased political narratives while aiming to convey a story about a successful liberal and sovereign statehood. Authoritarian histories are now being revisited to “perform” rather than simply explain a history of humanitarianism. The debate about Târgu Jiu suggests that the collective memory politics weaved around ideas of liberal democracy can be weaponized and used to adapt or depoliticize narratives of the far-right and right-wing authoritarianism. Ideas of sovereignty and autonomy against authoritarianism can lend themselves to praise for this very same politics.

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Exhibiting Jasenovac: Controversies, manipulations and politics of memory

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Abstract

The Jasenovac Concentration Camp prevails as one of the most potent symbols that continues to fuel ideological and ethno-national divisions in Croatia and neighboring Yugoslav successor states. We argue that mnemonic actors who distort the history, memory, and representations of Jasenovac through commemorative speeches, exhibitions, and political discourse are by no means new. The misuses of the Jasenovac tragedy, vividly present during socialist Yugoslavia, continue to the present day. Drawing upon the history of mediating Jasenovac as well as recent examples of commemorative speeches and problematic exhibitions, this article highlights some of the present-day struggles surrounding this former campspace.

Key Words

campspaces, Croatia, former Yugoslavia, Jasenovac, memory politics, World War Two

In April 2019, as in the previous three years, Jewish, Serb, and antifascist organizations in Croatia boycotted the official annual commemoration for the victims of the Jasenovac concentration camp.¹ While the Croatian government commemorated the final breakout of the Jasenovac prisoners on 14 April, the informal commemoration of Jewish, Serb and antifascist organizations took place two days earlier. The organizations boycotting the official commemoration stated that they were not satisfied with the government's inaction regarding historical revisionism and Holocaust denial that they believed were in-

creasing in Croatian society.² Ongoing debates about the Second World War in Croatia include the rehabilitation of the Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska* – NDH),³ disputes about communist repression, the role of religious communities during the war, and above all, competing victimization narratives between Serbs and Croats. Many of these discussions, which play a key role in shaping collective memories in Croatia, are centered on Jasenovac. Jasenovac prevails as one of the most potent symbols that continues to fuel ideological and ethno-national divisions. As we argue below, mnemonic actors

1 The Ustaša regime established the Jasenovac concentration camp system in 1941 and attempted to destroy the evidence of its existence in the spring of 1945, immediately prior to the victory of the communist-led Partisan forces. The annual commemoration takes place on the closest viable date to 22 April, the day in 1945 when the remaining prisoners attempted a final breakout.

2 Slobodna Dalmacija 2019 (12 April 2019): <https://www.slobodnadalmacija.hr/novosti/hrvatska/clanak/id/598497/dramaticni-govor-ognjena-krausa-u-jasenovcu-zasto-nitko-nije-reagirao-na-ustaski-dernek-u-splitu-do-kad-ministre-policije-i-premijeru-neka-se-kazne-oni-koji-negiraju-zrtve-ndh> (accessed on 1 July 2019).

3 The Ustaša (plural: Ustaše) movement, after the Croatian word for “insurgent”, declared the NDH fascist puppet state on 10 April 1941 after the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was invaded and occupied by the Axis powers. This radical Croatian separatist movement was dedicated to the violent destruction of the Yugoslav state and was alternatively supported and suppressed by Mussolini's Italy before being brought to power by Nazi Germany. For overviews in English see Ramet (2007) and Yeomans (2013).

who distort the history, memory, and representations of Jasenovac through commemorative speeches, exhibitions, and political discourse are by no means new. The misuses of the Jasenovac tragedy, vividly present during socialist Yugoslavia, continue to the present day. Drawing upon the history of mediating Jasenovac as well as recent examples of commemorative speeches and problematic exhibitions, this article highlights some of the present-day struggles surrounding this former campspace.

Jasenovac is a site of memory where the dominant narrative is not easily converted into political memory by the state, but rather is frequently contested by multiple actors. At the heart of these contestations are rival interpretations of the nation- and state-building processes invariably linked with the wars of the last century, and the problematic categorization (and mediation) of victims and perpetrators from these conflicts. Since Croatia's entry into the European Union in 2013, various Croatian governments shifted the emphasis of their commemorative speeches from being part of the European Holocaust remembrance paradigm to allowing space for revisionist interpretations and even silencing of the commemoration (Pavlaković 2019). In 2014, right-wing Croatian nationalists established the Society for Research of the Triple Camp Jasenovac (*Društvo za istraživanje trostrukog logora Jasenovac*) to challenge the official statistics of the Jasenovac Memorial Site. These revisionists have sought to minimize the numbers of victims and the nature of the Jasenovac camp, alleging it was only a labor camp during the NDH and that the majority of victims were Croats killed by the communist authorities at the site after 1945 (Ivezić 2014; Razum and Vukić 2015; Vukić 2018; Pilić and Matković 2021). Historian Slavko Goldstein (2016) published a scathing reaction to these false allegations that showed how the revisionist circles in Croatia distorted the truth about Jasenovac in order to rehabilitate the Ustaša regime.

While the cultural memory of Jasenovac has sparked numerous polemics within Croatia, politicians in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Serbia have used it as part of their diplomatic arsenal. Historical revisionism regarding the Jasenovac camp has continued for over 75 years, with rival ethno-nationalist interpretations feeding off each other. With the endless discussion centered around the number of victims, Croatian nationalists and revisionists continue to thoroughly minimize the number of camp fatalities, while Serbian nationalists and revisionists continue to excessively exaggerate that number (Geiger 2013, 2020; Geiger and Grahek Ravančić 2018;

Goldstein 2018; Cvetković 2019). Despite all the evidence proving that the excessive figure of 700,000 victims propagated in socialist Yugoslavia simply cannot be scientifically confirmed, officials in Serbia and the Republika Srpska (RS) entity in BiH continue to insist on the debunked and exaggerated figure. Historians in both Croatia and Serbia have compiled lists of individuals killed in the concentration camp, which contain from 84,000 (Jasenovac) to 89,000 (Belgrade) victims listed by name and surname.⁴ The work of the Jasenovac Memorial Site and other scientific institutions, such as the US Holocaust Memorial Museum,⁵ estimate 80,000 to 100,000 total victims in the camp, although the number of Serbs, Jews, and others murdered by the Ustaše in the NDH are of course much higher. Yet, the debate over the number of victims is not the biggest problem, but rather that Jasenovac is being used to drive nationalist agendas as it had been done in the years prior to the wars of the 1990s. Namely, the Bosnian Serb political leadership has increasingly used the cultural memory of Jasenovac to perpetuate ethnic distance from Croats and Bosniaks. In the narrative reproduced in the RS, Serbs are the only true anti-fascists and victims, while Croats and Bosniaks are exclusively associated with the Ustaše, even though both Croats and Bosniaks significantly contributed to the Partisan movement and were likewise victims of Ustaša concentration camps.

On 5 May 2019, the highest government officials from Serbia and the RS (member of the BiH presidency Milorad Dodik, President of the RS Željka Cvijanović, and Prime Minister of Serbia Ana Brnabić) attended the commemoration for Jasenovac victims in Donja Gradina, the biggest mass killing field of the concentration camp located across the Sava River on the territory of RS.⁶ The commemoration included a speech by Gideon Greif, an Israeli historian and the commemoration's special international guest, best known for his research on Auschwitz-Birkenau and the *Sonderkommando*. In 2018, Greif published a book on Jasenovac, using the sensationalist title *Jasenovac: Auschwitz of the Balkans*. Greif's book relies on cataloguing the various horrors and atrocities that the Ustaše committed, even though he does not speak or read Serbian and has previously not worked on NDH camps. For example, he lists fifty-seven types of killing the Ustaše "invented", concluding that Jasenovac was more brutal than Auschwitz, the archetype of Nazi genocide.⁷ Moreover, at the commemoration in 2019, Greif stated that "in the system of Jasenovac camps, 500,000 Serbs, 80,000 Roma, 32,000 Jews, and tens of thousands of antifascists

4 Individual List of Victims of Jasenovac Camp conducted by Jasenovac Memorial Site, Croatia, <http://www.jusp-jasenovac.hr/Default.aspx?sid=6711> (accessed on 23 July 2019); Individual List of Victims conducted by Museum of Victims of Genocide, Belgrade, <https://www.muzejgenocida.rs/> (accessed on 23 July 2019).

5 The US Holocaust Memorial Museum (2019) estimates between 56,000 and 97,000 victims, online at <https://web.archive.org/web/20090916030858/http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005449> (accessed on 2 July 2019).

6 A memorial site at Donja Gradina was established in 1975 as part of the Jasenovac Memorial Site (Croatia), but after the 1990s wars in Yugoslavia, Jasenovac Memorial Site in Croatia and Donja Gradina Memorial Site in the RS were spatially and administratively divided into two independent institutions.

7 Ekspres, 7 February 2019, <https://www.ekspres.net/politika/hrvatska-ima-genocidnu-proslost> (accessed on 9 July 2019).

of different nationalities lost their lives.”⁸ Patriarch Irinej of the Serbian Orthodox Church went even further in his speech, suggesting that “the most objective researchers consider that this number has crossed 1 million.”⁹ Supported by speeches of Greif and Patriarch Irinej, the political leaders of Serbia and the RS not only perpetuated the almost mythical number of victims (which moreover visually dominates big panels exhibited at Donja Gradina Memorial Site), but they also announced the construction of a new memorial complex at Donja Gradina that will inevitably continue the international conflicts over the past rather than contributing to a common understanding that will prevent future wars.¹⁰

The manipulations and misuses of Jasenovac’s tragic past originated at the end of the Second World War and permeated socialist Yugoslavia. However, the distortions reached a new level in the second half of 1980s. A delegation of the Serbian Academy of Science and Art (SANU) visited the Jasenovac Memorial Site on 11 and 12 October 1985 in order to examine the permanent exhibition, which had been created in 1968. The delegation consisted of two academy members, Vladimir Dedijer and Miloš Macura, Colonel General Đuro Meštrović, historian Milan Bulajić, and Colonel Antun Miletić (Miletić 1987). During that visit, Dedijer expressed dissatisfaction with the permanent exhibition, concluding that the documents displayed at that exhibition did not reflect the extent of suffering and mass crime committed in Jasenovac. As a result, in 1988, the second permanent exhibition of the Jasenovac Memorial Site was presented, centering around a frieze with large photographs depicting the crimes perpetrated at the camp and photographs of murdered and massacred dead bodies.¹¹ As observed by former director of Jasenovac Memorial Site Nataša Jovičić, the film “The Gospel of Evil,” which had also been shown in the first permanent exhibition, was screened in the movie hall of the museum, confronting every visitor with the footage as they passed through. By today’s standards, this cannot be considered to be appropriate educational-museological material for understanding the topic of genocide and mass violence, but rather a propaganda film (Jovičić 2006, 295–296). Additionally, a travelling exhibition from the Jasenovac Memorial Site entitled “The dead open the eyes of the living” was shown in the late 1980s to Yugoslav People’s Army (JNA) soldiers, many of whom would fight in the wars accompanying Yugoslavia’s disintegration (van der Laarse 2013). This travelling exhibition included graphic images of Ustaša atrocities and child victims.¹² According to Jovičić, “the photographs of the travelling exhibition

were conceptualized with the clear goal of connecting the Second World War crimes with actual political tendencies of ‘separatism’ in the Socialist Republic of Croatia in the 1990s” (Jovičić, undated, 15). The overemphasized and accentuated atrocities and crimes of Jasenovac camp were also described in the military weeklies *Borba* and *Narodna Armija* published during the late 1980s.

Both exhibitions, the second permanent exhibition and its travelling exhibition, are examples of how Serb nationalists instrumentalized and misused the cultural memory of the Jasenovac concentration camp, playing upon the traumas of the Croatian Serb population as justification for rejecting Croatian independence during the political crisis that engulfed Yugoslavia. The activities of the Jasenovac Memorial Site, including its problematic permanent exhibition, were also used for the abovementioned aims on behalf of SANU, the Serbian Orthodox Church, and other nationalist groups in Serbia as evidence of the collective guilt of Croats for the crimes of the Ustaše. After 1990, the traumas and myths of Jasenovac were mediated and reproduced in numerous newspapers, articles, and television programs that sought to conflate the new democratically elected government of the first Croatian president Franjo Tuđman with the NDH. In May 1991, Serbian Patriarch Pavle opened the Church *Sabor* (Assembly) not in Belgrade, but in Jasenovac, where he celebrated a holy liturgy on the fiftieth anniversary of the suffering of the Serb people in that camp (Ramet 2006, 349). Not only was the Second World War past blurred with the present, but Jasenovac was used to highlight the religious differences between Serbs and Croats and served as a warning that the two peoples could never live together again. Patriarch Pavle’s liturgy at Jasenovac followed numerous reburials of Ustaša victims in 1990 and 1991 who were removed from sealed mass graves under the watchful eye of television cameras (Pavlaković 2013). By late 1991, Croatian Serb rebels backed by the JNA were engaged in a war against the nascent Croatian state, undoubtedly at least partially fueled by the fear and hatred stirred up by propagandistic representations of the Second World War traumas epitomized by, and exhibited in, Jasenovac.

Moreover, the historiography dealing with the issue of Jasenovac underwent a number of different phases, beginning with the state-controlled historical discourse during socialist Yugoslavia. At the end of the 1980s and the early 1990s, historians in both Croatia and Serbia engaged in new, independent research, but the interpretations were strongly influenced by the predominant na-

8 See RTS (2019) – Dan sećanja na žrtve ustaškog zločina u Donjoj Gradini, 5 May 2019, <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/11/region/3510496/dan-secanja-na-zrtve-ustaskog-zlocina-u-donjoj-gradini-.html> (accessed on 9 July 2019).

9 See RTS coverage of the 2019 Donja Gradina commemoration at <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/11/region/3510496/dan-secanja-na-zrtve-ustaskog-zlocina-u-donjoj-gradini-.html> (accessed on 2 July 2019).

10 Glas Srpske, 22 December 2018, https://www.glassrpske.com/lat/novosti/vijesti_dana/Dodik-Vucic-Podrska-izgradnji-novog-memorijalnog-kompleksa-u-Donjoj-Gradini/275711 (accessed on 2 July 2019).

11 JUSP Jasenovac archive; Zbirka fotografija – friz muzejskog postava, inv. broj 82–100, stara signatura.

12 JUSP Jasenovac archive, Predmet: Dragoje Lukić i Antun Miletić, Tematsko kompozicioni plan sa materijalizacijom stalne postavke memorijalnog muzeja “Koncentracioni logor Jasenovac 1941.–1945.”, Zapisnici, sekundarna grada, nesređeno.

tionalist atmosphere. Although in the early 2000s historical research included comparative studies that drew upon a body of international Holocaust and genocide studies scholarship, in the past decade there has been a new wave of reactionary revisionism. Since there was virtually no independent historical research on Jasenovac that could yield a broader consensus among researchers until after 2000, perhaps a better term for the 1945–2000 period would be *historical manipulations*, as epitomized by the abovementioned exhibitions. In contrast, a new wave of drastic 're-interpretation' of Jasenovac's history appeared in the last decade, which can be described as genuine historical revisionism, since it challenges facts around which there is already overwhelming consensus among experts (Odak, Benčić Kužnar and Lucić in press).

A good example of the latter was the recent exhibition "Jasenovac – The Right Not to Forget", which was organized by the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and shown at the headquarters of the United Nations in New York on 25 January 2018. The main author and lead curator of the exhibition "Jasenovac – The Right Not to Forget" was Greif, the Israeli historian who spoke at the Donja Gradina commemoration in 2019. The exhibition embodied a series of historiographical mistakes, without using the archival sources from the Jasenovac Memorial Site – the biggest collection related to the Jasenovac concentration camp with more than 10,000 documents, objects, photos, and testimonies. In fact, the Jasenovac Memorial Site, which has been doing scientific research for over fifty years, was not even contacted by Greif and his team. The texts in the exhibition panels were framed in such a way to directly compare Jasenovac to the most infamous Nazi extermination camps. For example, one of the introductory panels was titled "Jasenovac – the most brutal and most notorious out of the total of eight extermination camps," implying that Jasenovac was worse or more systematic than Auschwitz, Chelmno, or Majdanek, although gas chambers were never used in Jasenovac. An analysis of the photos presented on that panel shows that the photo of a naked man does not represent a prisoner from Jasenovac, but rather a prisoner from Majdanek during the liberation. A smaller photo on the same panel shows the barbed wire from Auschwitz, and not from Jasenovac.¹³ On the panel "Jasenovac magnum crimen," the exhibited photo did not depict events from Jasenovac, but rather German crimes committed against Partisans in Istria.¹⁴ The same photo was also exhibited in the described second permanent museum exhibition in the Jasenovac Memorial Site in 1988, although already 30 years ago the authors knew that the photo did not refer to crimes committed in Jasenovac (Mataušić 2008).

In addition to the other factual and interpretative errors, one of the most problematic aspects of the exhibition, which led to a diplomatic scandal between Serbia and Croatia, was the panel that emphasized the figure of 700,000 victims. When the Croatian Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs condemned the attempt of "misusing the United Nations for manipulation and the placement of false data" according to which organizers were forced to remove "the crudest forgeries," including the panel with the exaggerated number of victims, the United Nations disassociated itself from the exhibition.¹⁵ Among the "crudest forgeries" was a photo of the Archbishop of Zagreb, Alojzije Stepinac, which the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs agreed to remove from the exhibition. Archbishop Stepinac's role during the NDH remains contested to this day, since he publicly supported the Ustaša regime while at the same time saving many people whose lives were threatened by that same regime. The photo of Stepinac had been added to the exhibition even though the mixed Serbian-Croatian commission on Stepinac's beatification (consisting of scholars from both countries) was still meeting, inappropriately suggesting that he was unequivocally a perpetrator before the commission had issued its report.

Although there is no doubt that the tragedy of Jasenovac needs to be remembered and researched scientifically, this particular exhibition, which legitimately proved as propagandistic and reflective of significant lack of knowledge, intended to provoke greater division among the Yugoslav successor states rather than foster reconciliation. The nationalist rhetoric at the Donja Gradina commemoration and the production of exhibitions that distort historical facts are themselves problematic, but the most troubling are similarities with the propagandistic second permanent museum exhibition at the Jasenovac Memorial Site. It is difficult not to notice parallels with the memory politics of Slobodan Milošević's Serbia that ultimately led to the tragic wars in Croatia and BiH in the 1990s.

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13 Nataša Mataušić, Internal Report on UN exhibition sent to Croatian Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs in February 2018, within the Croatian delegation of IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance).

14 Nataša Mataušić, *ibid*.

15 Dnevnik.hr, Dačić se oglasio o izložbi o Jasenovcu: "Ona je uperena protiv zločinaca i onih koji žele da se to zaboravi i izbriše", 26 January 2018, <https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/svijet/ivica-dacic-se-oglasio-o-izlozbi-jasenovac-pravo-na-nezaborav---504467.html> (accessed on 9 July 2019).

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“Jungle law reigned among the prisoners”: the meaning of cannibalism in the testimonies of Nazi concentration camps’ survivors¹

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Abstract

What do Holocaust survivors do when they refer to cannibalism in their testimonies? This piece argues that they do not merely describe what they have witnessed or heard of, but also ponder the boundaries of humanity. For centuries, Europeans have made references to cannibalism in various depictions for drawing the line between “civilized” and “uncivilized.” In accordance with studies that examine cannibalism in other historical contexts, I argue that in attempting to express a sense of the radical dehumanization in the Nazi camps and convey its horror, some survivors’ accounts reconstruct the appalling reality of the camps as parallels to familiar, older stories of cannibalism that take place in remote, brutal places deprived of civilization.

Key Words

Cannibalism, Civilization, Concentration Camps, Holocaust, Meaning

On March 31, 2016, the British press reported the discovery of “shocking new records” in the National Archives. A letter written by the “only British survivor of Belsen,” stated that “Nazi victims were reduced to ‘rampant cannibalism’” during the concentration camp’s final days.² The sense of revelation in these newspaper articles, however, cannot be explained by historical ignorance regarding cannibalism in Nazi camps. British and American newspapers had already reported in the immediate postwar years on such cases in Bergen-Belsen and other camps³ while liberating troops mentioned it in interviews and written accounts of their experiences (Abzug 1985: 83; Flanagan and Bloxham 2005; Celinscak 2015: 60, 67). Moreover,

the existence of cannibalism across various fronts of the war is well-known to historians and has been documented specifically in relation to the Leningrad siege and the Nazi brutality toward Soviet Prisoners of War (Beevor 2012; Bidlack and Lomagin 2012: 314–323; Linne 2010). And yet, the journalists’ sense of discovery is not entirely unjustified, as no scholarly or popular work has so far examined in depth cannibalism during the Holocaust.

Rather than delving into the existing evidence on cannibalism during the Holocaust, scholars address it as an uncomfortable revelation. Some completely ignore the issue, question its very existence among Holocaust victims, or stress that it was an absolute rarity (e.g.,

¹ I would like to thank Zuzanna Dziuban for her helpful comments on earlier drafts of this piece.

² The letter was sent in the 1960s as part of a request for compensation. The headline of James Cox’s *The Sun* article was: Nazi Victims Were Reduced to ‘Rampant Cannibalism’ in Belsen Concentration Camp, Shocking New Records Reveal, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/archives/news/1107727/nazi-victims-were-reduced-to-rampant-cannibalism-in-belsen-concentration-camp-shocking-new-records-reveal/> (14 March 2018).

³ See, for instance Cannibalism in Prison Camp: British Medical Officer Visit to ‘Most Horrible Place’, in: *The Guardian*, 19 April 1945, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/1945/apr/19/secondworldwar.fromthearchive> (14 March 2018); Cannibalism Cases in Belsen Related: Dresden Physician, a Prisoner and First German Witness, Tells of Slashed Bodies, in: *New York Times*, 29 September 1945, 9.

Sofsky 1997: 162; Dobosiewicz 2007: 239–240; Stone 2015: 4, 103). More often, scholars who encounter evidence for cannibalism during the Holocaust, give only a very brief reference to this phenomenon when describing the dreadful conditions in the camps and ghettos. Such references usually take the form of a single sentence, stating that “some inmates became so desperate they resorted to cannibalism” (Wachsmann 2015: 282) or “there were even cases of cannibalism” (Kogon 2006 [1946]): 116). Formulations of this kind are rarely followed by either detailed descriptions or analysis. Therefore, by stopping after the mention of cannibalism, these scholars mark it as a limit phenomenon, a border that one does not cross.

Likewise, when cannibalism is mentioned in survivors’ testimonies, it is often used to indicate the most extreme expression of the Holocaust and simultaneously to articulate the impossibility of speech. Even though diaries written during the Holocaust and testimonies given after the event express their authors’ wish to record the horrific details of their persecution, they also include certain silences, especially in relation to the repellent living conditions and aspects of one’s behavior that may appear morally problematic or “distasteful” (Pentlin 1999; Lang 2004; Brown 2010). Michael Nutkiewicz (2003: 21) recorded such a moment in an interview he made with a Holocaust survivor:

MN: Isn’t testimony done to let the world know the full horror of what was done to people?

SB: I don’t know. If I had been involved in cannibalism (which I did witness) I would not have talked about it on tape.

MN: Why not?

SB: It’s inhuman. It’s way beyond...

Again, the survivor describes cannibalism as the most extreme occasion and as the point in which he must stop her narrative. Yet this brief reference also gives a clue as to the essence of this boundary. It views cannibalism as a fundamental transgression of what it means to be human.

A similar insight into this boundary also emerges when survivors express an interest in delving into their experiences of cannibalism but their audience proves incapable of hearing about it. Lawrence Langer (1991) introduces the case of a survivor who addressed cannibalism while recalling being in severe hunger, looking for “anything to eat.” Following an Allied bombing in the area of Mauthausen concentration camp, a bomb fell on the camp itself. As can be reconstructed from other testimonies, too, the explosion led to the scattering of human body parts, which caused some of the starved inmates to feed upon them.⁴

MOSES S.: So we got up, and we found a hand from the bombing. [...] A human hand.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, a human hand.

MOSES S.: Five of us. Divided. And we were eating it. [...]

MOSES S.’S WIFE: Excuse me, I think we have to finish. Too much already.

MOSES S.: Human flesh.

Langer writes of the “general disquietude and consternation among the members of Moses S.’s audience” and calls this part of the testimony “a monologue that invites no dialogue” (Langer 1991: 117). In an attempt to explain the listeners’ inability to engage with this information, Langer adds: “We lack terms of discourse for such human situations, preferring to call them inhuman and banish them from civilized consciousness” (Langer 1991: 118).

Existing evidence points to the occurrence of cases of cannibalism in ghettos, various Nazi camps, as well as on death marches and transports.⁵ While it appears that many survivors did not witness cannibalism during the Holocaust, those who refer to it in their testimonies, do not merely describe what they have seen or heard of, but also ponder the boundaries of civilization and humanity. Such reflection is not restricted to the Holocaust. For centuries, Europeans have made references to cannibalism as narrative instruments for drawing the line between “civilized” and “uncivilized,” and demonizing the Other (Arens 1979; King 2000). In so doing, they also produced an aesthetic of horror (Moser 2005: 35). The very mentioning of cannibalism awakens images and tales that arouse both disgust and fear – two elements that define what we call horror (Carroll 1990). I therefore argue that in attempting to express a sense of the radical dehumanization in the Nazi camps and convey its horror to their audience, some survivors’ accounts reconstruct the appalling reality of the camps as parallels to familiar stories set in remote, barbaric places fraught with atrocity and devoid of civilization.

“Jungle law reigned among the prisoners; at night you killed or were killed; by day cannibalism was rampant.” It was this quote from the letter of a Bergen-Belsen survivor that stirred the British press, as outlined in this article’s opening paragraph. Notably, the terror in this description is not associated with the cruelty of the SS and the author does not project the inhumanity on to the Nazi perpetrators. Moreover, this account does not describe starving inmates resorting to eating the flesh of the many corpses, who were strewn throughout the camp. Rather, it expresses grave fear of being attacked and killed to be eaten by one’s fellow-prisoners. A similar fear was recorded during the

4 See, for instance Archiv der KZ-Gedenkstätte Mauthausen (AMM), Mauthausen Survivors Documentation Project (MSDP), OH/ZP1/52, Interview with Mordechai Eldar. Interviewer: Keren Harazi (23 April 2002). For the particularly severe conditions in the Mauthausen concentration camp during the war’s final months, see Eckstein (1984: 255–261).

5 See, in addition to the above-mentioned evidence, also Kassow (2007: 213); Hansen, Kabalek (forthcoming).

Leningrad siege (1941–1943), as rumors that gangs of cannibals were roaming the city aroused widespread panic. Leningraders dreaded to leave their children unattended or walk alone in dark alleys, although NKVD reports indicate that only one such case took place (Kirschenbaum 2006: 238–242; Reid 2012: 280–292). It seems, therefore, that the origin of this terror lies less in the actual prevalence of cases of cannibalistic murder and more in experiencing a state of utter chaos, when humans abandon social rules and values and instead follow primal, animalistic instincts.

A sense of chaos is apparent, especially in the testimonies of survivors who spent the war's final months in the camps that were liberated last. With the advance of the Red Army in late 1944 and the evacuation of the Auschwitz complex in January 1945, countless inmates were sent on death marches, trucks, or trains, to overcrowded concentration camps such as Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald, Dachau and Mauthausen, or to provisional camps that were constructed in a hurry (Blatman 2011; Hördler 2015). Numerous inmates died on the way, while those who reached their unknown destinations faced a reality that many describe as significantly more severe than the one they had known before. Although people nowadays have become accustomed to considering Auschwitz as the most dreadful place imaginable, many survivors – and especially those who had some privileged status that allowed them to maintain the hope of making it to the end of the war – depict leaving Auschwitz as a turn for the worse.⁶ This is evident, for instance, in an interview with Richard van Dam, a Dutch Jew, which was summarized as follows:

At the beginning of 1945 Mr. van Dam and a lot of co-prisoners were put aboard a ship (barge) and transported via the Donau [Danube] from Melk to Ebensee. This was the worst camp he had come to. Here chaos was complete. The prisoners [received] hardly any food at all. There was cannibalism.⁷

Cannibalism is thus used here to articulate and demonstrate the absolute anarchy in the camp and the worst conceivable conditions. In an interview given decades later, Jacob Maestro, a Jew from Salonika, described the deteriorating situation after leaving Auschwitz in a similar fashion:

We were transported from [Auschwitz to Mauthausen and then to Melk and from] Melk to Wels. In Wels there were hardly any barracks. It was in a forest. We walked freely [in the camp], without food, without anything. And there I heard that Ebensee is even worse. Ebensee is eating corpses. [long pause]⁸

These accounts describe the incremental increases in distance to what their authors seem to conceive as civilization. This remoteness is expressed in terms of spatiality, as each subsequent camp is worse than the previous one and the distance from human settlements grows (“It was in a forest”), but also in relation to the lack of minimal conditions and provisions (no food rations, hardly any barracks). Here, even the routine that characterized the camps one knew before, which included roll-calls, harsh discipline, and slave labor, is missing (“We walked freely”). The occurrences of cannibalism in these places thus mark the greatest detachment from “civilization” and familiar social order. This depiction corresponds with an ancient view of cannibalism, which locates it, both geographically and symbolically, at the farthest point from civilized humanity, at the peripheries of the world (Moser 2005: 7–10). There, governed by a state of complete anarchy, where nature is untamed, the cannibal is prominent (Avramescu 2009: 8–14).

Cannibalism played a figurative role in many depictions that emerged during the Second World War. Writing in the Warsaw Ghetto, Emanuel Ringelblum (1974: 15) defined regimes that rule by force and anarchy, for instance Hitlerism, as constituting “modern cannibalism” while Soviet propaganda frequently labelled the Nazis as cannibals (Berkhoff 2012: 127, 155, 175, 181). These images were embedded in a broader wartime discourse that presented the Second World War as a moral struggle that would decide the future of humanity. Thus, the Allies’ propaganda expressed a deep “fear that civilisation was now confronted by barbarism, order by chaos, good by evil” (Overy 1997: 357) and the same fear also appears in Jews’ ghetto diaries (Garbarini 2006: 26–57). Cases of cannibalism were not very common and did not characterize the Nazi camps throughout the war years. But when cannibalism did transpire, it confronted inmates with a metaphor that became reality and thus with the absolute, most terrifying, proof that they had left human civilized society and truly sank to barbarism.

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6 See, for example, Stroumsa (1996). On the references to this period as “the worst” see Kabalek (2015).

7 Richard van Dam, *As Medical Orderly in Auschwitz* (received in January 1958). Yad Vashem Archive, Wiener Library Collection, O.2. File 637.

8 AMM MSDP OH/ZP1/299, Interview with Jacob Maestro. Interviewer: Keren Harazi (2002/2003).

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Campscapes in and through testimonies: New approaches to researching and representing oral history interviews in memorial museums¹

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Abstract

This paper discusses the role of audio and visual testimonies in safeguarding, understanding, presenting, validating and decentering the history and memory campscapes, be it, for researchers, practitioners, memory activists, or museum visitors. Its primary objective is to present and contextualize two research tools developed within the framework of the project *Accessing Campscapes: Strategies for Using European Conflicted Heritage*: the Campscapes Testimony Catalogue, a new directory of oral history interviews devoted to selected camps covered within the scope of the project; and the online environment Remembering Westerbork: Learning with Interviews – a prototype of an online display environment presenting survivors’ experiences to today’s visitors in an exemplary memorial that opens up, expands and complexifies the paradigmatic narrative offered by the campscape at the on-site exhibition.

Key Words

oral history, video testimonies, campscapes, museums

Introduction

In the digital age, audio and audiovisual testimonies are not only important sources for historical research on various instances of political violence, but also integral to the visitor experience in contemporary memorial museums (Williams 2007). Often, when featuring in the exhibition displays, they are perceived “as a key aspect of the museum’s pedagogic function” (Cooke and Frieze 2017: 75; de Jong 2018). Facilitating affective attentiveness and empathy towards victims and deeper, personalized insight into the events, they play crucial roles for both the reception of museum narratives and for dominant constructions of the past validated by the

‘authority’ of experience (Scott 1991; Michaelis 2011) and, in the case of on-site museums, the ‘authenticity’ of place. By choosing to represent manifold and complex histories through specific individual testimonies and individual narrations, curators have a major influence on those aspects of history that are highlighted and which are, in turn, backgrounded or foreclosed. Yet, oral history interviews, precisely because of their idiosyncratic and personal character (although always positioned and culturally framed), can also support differentiated understandings of memories of conflict in the twentieth century. In fact, some would argue that “the inclusion of personal stories results in the democratization of the museum spaces, through decentring

¹ The research leading to this paper was conducted within the HERA Uses of the Past project *Accessing Campscapes. Inclusive Strategies for Using European Conflicted Heritage* (2016–2019), led by Rob van der Laarse, (<https://www.campscapes.org/>). The project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under grant agreement No 649307. The paper was further researched and written within the framework of the project *Globalized Memorial Museums*, which has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (GMM—grant agreement No 816784). We would like to thank Kobi Kabalek, Daniel Schuch and Ljiljana Radonić for their thorough readings and helpful comments.

of the museum's authority" (Cooke and Frieze 2017: 77) – similar to the way in which it has transformed the practices of history writing decentring the authoritative voice of a historian based on documentary archival sources, mostly those created by the perpetrators (Bloxxham and Kushner 2004; Wieviorka 2006: 56–95). Providing accounts of previously uncharted local and microhistories, and multi-perspectival representations of victimhood, agency, or responsibility, personal testimonies open new spaces for reflection and narrative experimentation.

In this paper, we dwell on the possibilities created by this tension between authoritative museal and political narratives about the past and the transformative potential of the (always selectively used) personal accounts of victims, focusing on several European campscapes. Based on research carried out at the Freie Universität Berlin (FUB) within the framework of the HERA-funded project *Accessing Campscapes: Inclusive Strategies for Using European Conflicted Heritage*, this paper offers a glimpse into a systematic analysis of the ways in which audio and video survivors' testimonies are being employed in historical research, memory studies, private and public institutions, complemented by the critical examination of the historical, social and political contexts of their collection, archiving, research and display. Exploring the complex political, cultural and material dynamics of former concentration, extermination and forced labor camps in Europe, both as a means of (genocidal) violence and locations of collective remembrance, knowledge production and musealization, we inquire into the specific roles of personal testimonies within the conflicting interpretations and the contested narratives of these campscapes.

This paper discusses the role of audio and visual testimonies in safeguarding, understanding, presenting, validating and decentring the history and memory campscapes, be it, for researchers, practitioners, memory activists, or museum visitors. But its primary objective is to present and contextualize two research tools developed within the framework of the project: the *Campscapes Testimony Catalogue*, a new directory of oral history interviews devoted to selected camps covered within the scope of the project; and the online environment *Remembering Westerbork: Learning with Interviews* – a prototype of an online display environment presenting survivors' experiences to today's visitors in an exemplary memorial that opens up, expands and complexifies the paradigmatic narrative offered by the campscape at the on-site exhibition.

Testimonies in oral history

Unlike the disciplinary fields of anthropology or sociology, which traditionally work with information retrieved from direct and indirect witnesses of events, much historical research has long discarded personal testimonies as unreliable, both due to temporal distance between

analyzed events and narration, and to the inherent subjectivity, fragmentarity and malleability of memory of those who could testify to them – and resorted, instead, to documentary sources because of their ostensible and, nowadays, contested 'objectivity' (Thompson 2000; Bloxxham and Kushner 2004). This disciplinary orthodoxy began to shift in the mid-20th century, especially with the growing attention to Social History. In the wake of the Second World War, various scholars began to incorporate oral and written accounts of survivors and witnesses to historical events, both mundane and exceptional, such as political violence and war. The first Oral History Research Office was created in 1948 by Allan Nevins at Columbia University. While in his practice Nevins turned to influential intellectual and political figures, by the 1960s oral history interviews were increasingly often conducted also with a much more diversified group of social actors, leading to the development of an interdisciplinary field of oral history (Thompson 2000; Sheftel and Zembrzycki 2013; Boyd and Larson 2014). Based on an exchange of expertise between history, sociology, anthropology, literary studies and culture studies, it facilitated new, critical methodologies of conducting, collecting, validating and interpreting interviews. Nowadays, interviews are considered an extremely useful resource for multidisciplinary research in many fields within the social sciences and humanities.

Among the main impulses behind the growth of the field, and its many and varied methodologies – such as the development of new technologies allowing us to record and store oral testimonies (Pagenstecher 2018), and the shrinking time span between historical research and the events it scrutinizes – was the emancipatory and political potential of bottom up accounts, their ability to challenge dominant narratives of the past (and present). This was, for instance, the main rationale behind the research practice of Marxist historiography in the United Kingdom already in the 1940s and 1950s, carried out by the Communist Party Historians Group, gathering historians such as Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill or Rodney Hilton (Schwarz 1982), and by cultural studies scholars working in the 1970s and 1980s in the Popular Memory Group at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham (Popular Memory Group 1982). In both cases, history writing was constructed as a critical practice orientated towards two basic principles – the need to expose the ideological underpinnings of traditional, national(ist) historiography, and to re-evaluate and foreground vernacular memories and bottom up experiences and perspectives of categories of subjects usually excluded from historical narratives: minorities, members of the working class, women, and queer people. Constantly revisited and improved, this outlook on oral history still informs a large section of research carried out in the Anglo-Saxon world, in Latin America and other places (Sarkar and Walker 2010; High 2015; Carey 2017).²

2 Constrained by the economy of the text and the thematic focus of the issue on the European campscapes dating back to the Second World War in Europe, we will not address in this paper the large corpus of personal eyewitness accounts created, for instance, by human rights activism around the world or by the many and varied Truth and Reconciliation Commissions.

In German-speaking academia and beyond, mostly as a sub-discipline of historiography, oral history developed since the late 1970s as a qualitative-hermeneutical approach inspired by qualitative social research (Niethammer 1995; Rosenthal 1995; Wierling 2003), in opposition to the structural and quantifying paradigm of social history dominant at the time. Case studies based on small groups of individual interviews looked for aspects of cultural meaning, dominant tropes and narrative structures, and for intimate accounts and personal agency in the narratives, often focusing on underrepresented groups like women, migrants, or victims of racial and political persecution (Portelli 2003; Andresen et al. 2015; Leh 2015). Of unquestionable importance in this context has been research devoted to National Socialism and the Holocaust, which effectuated a crucial shift in the epistemic and epistemological position of the witness testimony. Its revalorization as a valuable and ethically potent historical source, underway in public and political consciousness since the 1961 Eichmann Trial, the release of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), the establishment of major oral history collections (more on this later on), or the 2000 debate about forced labor compensation (2000) – which were widely received in media, culture and politics (Wieviorka 2006; Sabrow and Frei 2012) – finally found its way also into academia both in history departments and into the by now well-established field of memory studies.

Since the 1970s, life-story interviews have become central in research about the Second World War and the Holocaust (Langer 1991; Hartman 2006), Nazi forced labor (Plato et al. 2010), but also about other instances of political violence (Obertreis and Stephan 2009; Gheith and Jolluck 2010; Dimou et al. 2014). While written historical documents about deportation, exploitation, and extermination often either reflect the perpetrators' perspective or are missing altogether – and by no means exhaust the complexity of the events – survivors' accounts convey the victims' manifold *Erfahrungsgeschichte* [experiential history] (Broda 2004; Niethammer and Leh 2007), and form the basis for a comprehensive, dialogical, integrated history of the Holocaust and the camps (Kabalek 2021).³ But they also offer insights into the ways in which variously positioned subjects experienced and handled historical events and structures, allowing for a deeper understanding of the aftermath of atrocities in individual biographies and post-war societies (Young 1988).

The acknowledgment of the dynamic but inescapable exchange between personal and biographical memories and collective constructions of the past made it critically important “to examine the historical agency in these eye-witnesses' narratives [...], making historical inquiry the combined study of both what happened and how it is passed down to us” (Young 1997: 56; Eusterschulte,

Knopp and Schulze 2016). Some focus in oral history and associated fields is placed, therefore, on the cultural frames of the personal accounts both constraining and enabling them, on cultural frameworks that offer them scripts and give form to them, on the performative dimension of the audiovisual testimonies, and on the ways in which they enter and transform the public realm feeding into, fostering or challenging institutionalized patterns of commemoration (Passerini 2009). This, again, reinstated a central position to the question about the tension – at times productive, at times violent and exclusionary – between the dominant narratives of the past and personal accounts and testimonies. In the processes of knowledge production by public and private institutions, in shared memories and public discourses of the past, and in museums established at the former camps (and the historical narratives they construct, foster and perpetuate), certain experiences and narratives will be rendered audible, while others will remain inaudible or marginalized and silenced – silencing, too, the tensions and contestations around the camps. But, again, the sheer presence, retrievability and/or re-emergence of the oral history accounts will remain invested with the ability to unsettle, expand and complexify.

The dynamics and politics of collecting

Nowadays, the corpus of audiovisual testimonies of Holocaust survivors and other victims of the mass violence in the Second World War is primarily associated with extensive collections housed by the Yad Vashem memorial, in Israel, which started accumulating survivors' accounts as soon as the 1950s (Cohen 2008), but also, or maybe first and foremost, with major online interview portals created and constantly developed since the late 1970s and the 1990s in the US such as the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies and the Visual History Archive of the USC Shoah Foundation (Apostolopoulos and Pagenstecher 2013; Keilbach 2013; Bothe 2019). The former, created in 1979, institutionalized in 1981 as a part of the Yale University Library, and in 1982 made available to researchers, educators, memory makers and the general public, hosts more than 4,400 testimonies of social actors with various wartime experiences – both with survivors of the Holocaust and with members of local non-Jewish populations, resistance fighters, and liberators (Hartman 1995). The collection of the Visual History Archive, created in the 1990s, contains more than 55,000 video interviews with survivors of the Holocaust and other genocides and instances of political violence. The establishment of these online interview portals – and many others of a similar nature – established video testimony as

³ With this focus on subjective experiences, individual memories, biographical meaning, and cultural context, oral historians usually have analyzed individual interviews, often conducted by themselves. Rarely, however, have they embarked on larger, comparative studies. For important exceptions, see Browning (2010), Plato et al. (2010), Thonfeld (2014). On the analysis of how the exclusion of testimonies of certain categories of subjects – in this case precisely the Jewish victims of the Holocaust and its aftermath in Poland – can foster nationalist history writing and memory, see Gross (2001), Tokarska-Bakir (2018), Janicka and Żukowski (2019).

a genre in itself, based as they are in an urgency to capture the immediate, personal experience of the survivors of the Holocaust (Hartman 2006; Hogervorst 2019; Greenspan et al. 2021; Schuch 2021: 228–256). This has been extended further by digital interview collections *Forced Labor 1939–1945* and *Memories of the Occupation in Greece*, housed at Freie Universität Berlin, the British-Jewish collection *Refuge Voices*, or Dutch *Eyewitness Stories*, and many others (Bothe 2012; Hogervorst 2020).⁴

By now, there is an extensive corpus of academic literature on the poetics and politics of audiovideo interviews and their transformative dynamics. The interviews collected in the 1950s by Yad Vashem were considered mainly as a means of acquiring missing historical evidence, the interviewers being seen to “privilege number over quality” (Bloxxham and Kushner: 36–37); the interviews conducted since the 1970s in the US, however, with an orientation towards the complex life stories of survivors, have been characterized by an often highly emotionally charged exchange between the interviewed and the interviewer, riddled with incoherencies, silences, sighs, outbursts of laughter or tears (Langer 1991; Hartman 1996; Greenspan 2014). With time, many interviews become more coherent, structured and professionalized, based on the repeated experience of providing the account in multiple settings – at public ceremonies, in museums, at campscapes, in schools, and for other digital archives – and in response to the political positionality of the interviewees, the expectations of the listeners and the genre of video testimony itself (Greenspan 2010; Schuch 2022).

But they changed also in response to shifting cultural and political sensitivities, and the attentiveness of both the interviewers and the audiences to previously excluded or taboo topics around war and camps experience such as class, gender-based violence, and, finally, homophobia (Ostrowska 2018, 2021; Hájková 2020, 2021). The extent to which the dominant cultural and epistemological frames continue to instil invisibilities and silences in audiovisual archives of the camps is shown in Kobi Kabalek’s contribution to this issue: examining the accounts of cannibalism in the testimonies of camp survivors, he critically investigates the affective and representational politics behind their muting in oral history and historical research (Kabalek 2023). In short, the uneven distribution of audibility and inaudibility is, more often than not, inherent to the very process of interviewing and differs across institutions that carry out or commission it. But it is, too, further perpetuated by the positioned, selective, often exclusionary, politics of collecting, preservation, research and (selection for) display of recorded personal testimonies.

It is against this background that, within the framework of *Accessing Campscapes*, we investigated the diachronic and synchronic dynamics of audiovisual

testimonies revolving and evolving around the former camps the project comprehensively analysed. These included the extermination camp at Treblinka (Poland), the refugee and transit camp Westerbork (the Netherlands), the concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen (Germany), the prison camp at Falstad (Norway), the Ustaša camp at Jasenovac (Croatia), the Roma camp in Lety (Czech Republic), and the prison camp Jachymov operational in the early post-war years in state socialist Czechoslovakia. All camps were considered in the project through the prism of the dense memory politics around them but also through their institutional transformations, dating back either to the pre-war period when they fulfilled different functions – as, for instance, a refugee camp (Westerbork) or a school for ‘delinquent’ youth (Falstad) – or to the post-war years, before the camps were transformed into memorial sites and served, amongst others, as a DP camp, a refugee camp, and military barracks (Bergen-Belsen), punishment camps for Nazi collaborators (Westerbork and Falstad), refugee settlement for (formerly) colonial subjects (Westerbork), or an industrial pig farm (Lety). The articulations of those phases and transformations in audio and audiovisual testimonies also found their way into the project.⁵

In our research, we expanded the synchronic frame beyond both the establishment and institutionalization of oral history as a scholarly discipline, especially in relation to the Holocaust, the Second World War, and other instances of political violence covered by the project, and the institutionalization of major online interview portals mentioned above. This was in line with the recently acknowledged necessity to reconfigure the history of collecting and to consider the earlier, often dispersed and localized, practices of gathering survivor accounts either in written or in oral form – that unsettle the notion that the voices of survivors were completely silenced or ignored in the post-war period (Cesarani and Sundquist 2012; Gallas and Jockusch 2020). Amongst those most prominent figure the extensive archives of the Jewish Historical Institute, which had already started gathering accounts from Jewish survivors of the Holocaust in 1944 (Jockusch 2012; Beer et al. 2014; Aleksion 2020; Jockusch 2022), or the long forgotten collection, rediscovered in the 1990s, of audio recordings of survivors conducted in 1946 by David P. Boder with the victims of Nazi prosecution in DPs Camps (Niewyk 1998; Rosen 2010; Schuch 2020). It was these collections that, for some survivors, offered the first opportunity to narrate their experiences, that constituted the first attempts at making testimonies historically, ethically and politically expressive, and formed an important prehistory to later audiovisual collections, bringing to the forefront the need to always historically and geographically situate interview practices

4 To access the interview collections, visit: Fortunoff Archive, <https://fortunoff.library.yale.edu/>, Visual History Archive <https://sfi.usc.edu/vha/> access Interview, *Archive Forced Labor 1939–1945*, <http://www.zwangsarbeit-archiv.de/en>, *Memories of the Occupation in Greece*, <http://www.occupation-memories.org/en>, *Refugee Voices*, <https://www.ajrrefugeevoices.org.uk/refugee-voices>.

5 While in the paper we will not address all camps and their dense histories, they are reflected in many contributions in this issue.

and the politics behind them (including the availability of recording technologies at a given time). But even more central for us was the synchronic decentralization of the main collections pertaining to the camps we investigated. Our aim was to account for the multitude of temporally and geographically dispersed, and variously politically positioned actors, institutions and projects engaged in gathering audiovisual accounts, and, whenever possible, their comparative analysis.

Campscares testimony catalogue

This was facilitated by the creation of the *Campscares Testimonies Catalogue*, an online database of metadata of testimonies pertaining to the camps researched in the project.⁶ It was envisioned as a cross-collection catalogue of audio- or video-recorded testimonies from major digital archives, museums established at the former camps, and smaller online projects. The *Catalogue* was developed at the Centre for Digital Systems (CeDiS) of the Freie Universität Berlin. The location of the *Catalogue* at the Department for Digital Interview Collections provided us with access to several collections, which the Centre hosts and to which it serves as the full-access site: the USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, the archive *Forced Labour 1939–1945*, the Fortunoff Video Archive and the British *Refugee Voices* (Pagenstecher 2018). These digital research environments are accessible online, and are provisioned with a time-coded alignment of transcriptions, media files, and metadata, and allow for thematically focused searches and annotations throughout the audio- or video-recordings. In the *Campscares Testimonies Catalogue* we linked those otherwise separate collections through a meta-catalogue. Then we began to successively add data from other collections – some were obtained from the institutions' websites, others were requested and shared with us by archivists or curators, manually processed and absorbed into the catalogue.

At this point, the *Catalogue* enables tracing of more than 7700 audio and video interviews available at 23 institutions worldwide. Using various filters, the user can search through metadata of the interviews, access the interview online (with or without registration) or, as is often the case, learn that the recording can be watched exclusively at the site. Thus, it is possible to explore the frequency with which some survivors gave their testimony in one or across collections, when and how specific projects interviewed different survivor groups and other actors at different times, and how, in fact, many of

the archives and digital collections are still inaccessible. Sadly, this was one of the most important and most research-constraining discoveries of the project.

What the *Catalogue* and the research leading to it offers is, indeed, a highly decentralized view on audiovisual collections pertaining to the researched campscares, many of them created by and housed at the museums established at the former campscares and accessible only during on-site (archival) visits for authorized audiences, and often conspicuously under-researched.⁷ Those collections, created after museums were established, were often instrumental towards the development of new exhibitions or museums acquiring an educational or research function. This was the case, for instance, in Bergen-Belsen – a large scale interview project was launched at the memorial before the opening of the new permanent exhibition in 2007. Today it hosts a collection of more than 600 interviews, the metadata of which could, nevertheless, not be included in the *Campscares Testimonies Catalogue* due to privacy concerns. Owing to the close cooperation with memorials acting as associated partners in the project, the *Catalogue* lists, amongst others, 495 interviews from the archive of the Camp Westerbork Memorial Center, 162 recorded at the Falstad Center and Museum, and 90 conducted and stored at the Jasenovac Memorial Site. Many of those interviews are, however, still insufficiently catalogued, lacking metadata, transcripts or translations.

Yet, some recordings could not be included in the *Catalogue* not so much because of administrative and/or juridical constraints but due to ongoing political controversies surrounding the camp, its wartime history and post-war memory, as was the case with Jasenovac – described in detail in Vjeran Pavlaković's and Andriana Benčić Kužnar's (2023) contribution to this issue. Although in possession of video recorded testimonies and, at first, willing to share the data for the catalogue, the staff of the Donja Gradina Memorial in Republika Srpska cut out contact with our team. Most probably this memorial site – situated on the opposite side of the Sava River from Jasenovac, right at the border between Bosnia and Croatia, and a location of mass graves of the victims of the camp – had to avoid being seen as cooperating too closely with the staff of Jasenovac Memorial Site, which was an associate partner in the project. But even setting aside this fascinating, if not symptomatic, politics of (in)accessibility, Jasenovac offers a compelling case study for the analysis of the dynamics and politics of collecting surrounding the former camps. Also, in this case, the gathering of testimonies of its survivors started already during the war.⁸ They were collected, first, by the commission established

6 Campscapes Testimonies Catalogue, <http://testimonies.campscares.org/en>, was compiled between 2017 and 2019 as part of the Accessing Campscapes project by Verena Buser, Zuzanna Dziuban, Cord Pagenstecher and Niels Pohl, with support from Boris Behnen and Šárka Jarská, using software developed by Rico Simke and Christian Gregor.

7 As an important exception one can quote the Mauthausen Survivors Documentation Project, which resulted in a series of analytical academic publications: Botz et al. (2021), Prenninger et al. (2021).

8 The Research on Jasenovac testimonies was carried out within *Accessing Campscapes* with the support of Boris Behnen. The following draws from the results presented in his unpublished manuscript (Behnen, unpublished manuscript).

by the Antifascist Council of People's Liberation of Yugoslavia and, after the war, by associations of resistance fighters. These testimonies formed, in fact, the basis for the fractographical knowledge about the camp but also for the dominant narrative of "Brotherhood and Unity", which effectively blurred ethnic distinctions between the major victim groups – Serbs, Jews and Roma (Pavlaković and Benčić Kužnar 2023). This changed decisively in the 1980s when various ethnic groups reclaimed the memory of the camp while, at the same time, its history became the subject of revisionist claims.

It was also in the 1980s and the 1990s that Jasenovac survivors were approached by major oral history institutions such as the Fortunoff Archive, USHMM and Shoah Foundation, with the help of local interviewers. The Fortunoff Archive and the USHMM are in possession of more than 100 recordings, whereas the Shoah Foundation has around 350. The specificity of the interviews conducted in the 1980s in Yugoslavia vis-à-vis those recorded in survivors living in the US was analyzed in detail by Jovan Byford (2014). Unlike the deeply personalized and intimate life stories described above, the personal accounts from (former) Yugoslavia centered heavily on factual reconstruction, validation of 'truth claims', and articulation of collectivized identities, reflecting the local take on wartime history, on the traditions of interviewing not yet shaped by the advent of the 'era of the witness' but, too, testifying to the political crisis looming large over the region. What this testifies to, moreover, is the fact that the very form and content of the recorded narratives is always a result of a directed and highly politicized practice of interviewing, however transparent it frames itself to be.

There are, nevertheless, also more recent and still largely under-researched oral history projects pertaining to Jasenovac that we came across while researching collections of the former camp. Between 2010 and 2013 around 200 interviews were conducted within the project *Jasenovac Memorial*, initiated and commissioned by a private person, a US citizen – they can be accessed online on the website titled, tellingly, serbianholocaust.org. While Jasenovac figures prominently in the project's title, perhaps primarily as a means of its legitimization, it is orientated towards experiences of various victim groups and, according to Boris Behnen, constitutes an example of a consistent trend to "equate the extermination of Jews in the region with the genocide inflicted on Serbs, creating the impression of the collective martyrdom of the Yugoslavian people" (Behnen unpublished manuscript). Yet another project, *Zaveštanje* [Legacy] carried out between 2012 and 2015 by an NGO *Center for Fostering Memory Culture of Remembrance*, albeit different from *Jasenovac Memorial* in its focus on the child survivors of the camps of Stara Gradiška (a subcamp of Jasenovac) and the camps of Sisak and Jastrebarsko, diverts from

the representational politics adopted by the redesigned Jasenovac memorial with its focus on individual victims and forefronting of the Holocaust. The 450 hours of interviews with more than 100 witnesses translated in this case into a documentary directed by Ivan Jovič and released in 2016. Here, too, it is not the individual story that comes to the fore, but the very graphically described atrocities committed in the camps, testifying to the persistence of narrative patterns but also to the lingering need to ascertain the 'truth' of the events in view of the ongoing and unresolved contestations around the history of the camp (Byford 2020).

While the pilot character of the *Campscapes Testimony Catalogue* and the limited timeframe of the project meant that those interviews could not be included in the database, they provide an important backdrop against which to analyze existing collections pertaining to Jasenovac (and the other way around). But their inclusion here is meant, too, to indicate the open-ended and inescapably incomplete character of the tool – relying, as it does, on cooperation with and politics of access adopted by various institutions and actors, and in need of further development. Its creation, nevertheless, directed us towards lesser known or entirely obscured collections. This was not only the case with Jasenovac. Within the framework of the project we focused, too, on an exceptionally early oral history project centered on the wartime experience of Sinti and Roma, framed through the life story of one individual who survived the internment camp of Lety. In 1960s, Czech military historian Jan Tesař devoted 18 sessions, each several hours long, to record the testimony of Josef Serinek, a Roma who escaped from Lety camp and became a partisan.⁹

The political turmoil of the time forced Tesař to suspend the work on the biography of the 'Černý Partyzán', the Black Partisan, as Serinek was nicknamed by his comrades. He was to remain forgotten during – and after – the state socialist period. But Tesař returned to his work on Serinek several decades later. In 2016, a three-volume book *Česká cikánská rapsodie* [Bohemian Gipsy Rhapsody], centred on Serinek's life and partisan activities, was published. Perhaps the first and the most in-depth exploration of Sinti and Roma wartime experience and resistance during the Second World War, the book inspired Roma commemorative initiatives developed around the memory of the 'Romani hero'. And yet, it went largely unnoticed among Czech and foreign historians and did not, as it could have done, reinscribe Serinek and the Sinti and Roma experience of the war into the Czech and European mnemonic landscape, testifying to the legacies of exclusion and discrimination that perpetuate deeply up to the present day. But perhaps this will change when the museum planned for the Lety camp is established at the site, filling the space with the recorded voices of

9 While the tapes were lost, the transcripts of the interview are still available. In this context we benefited greatly from the research commissioned to, and conducted, by Markus Pape. On the history, memory and contestations around the Sinti and Roma camp in Lety see Pavel Vareka's (2023) contribution to this issue.

survivors, amongst them of Josef Serinek, and filling in the gaps left by historical research.

Here we move on to focus on the second question framing our research on European campsites and their afterlives in oral history. As indicated in the introduction, this evolves and revolves around the always selective and fragmentary use of audiovisual testimonies in the museums established at the sites, their role in creating and perpetuating the narratives about the camps, and the means through which those can also be complexified and decentralized through other uses of oral history accounts.

Testimonies at museums

The re-evaluation of oral testimony in historical research and through the major online interview portals paved the way for the inclusion of audiovisual testimonies in museums, alongside other personal objects conventionally on display such as photographs, letters, diaries, personal items supplemented with biographical information on their previous owners. In fact, and perhaps unsurprisingly, museums devoted to the Holocaust and the Second World War, and the concentration camp memorials, were among the first to embrace this new curatorial practice (Shenker 2010; Ziębińska-Witek 2011; de Jong 2018: 6). Underway since the 1970s and 1980s, it gained pertinence in the 1990s as anxieties mounted with the anticipated gradual passing of the survivor generation (Cooke and Frieze 2017; Mandelli 2019: 95). Before (and, in some cases, still), the accounts of bodily present survivors constituted an important and integral part of the life of the museums, either by employing them as guides or by regularly inviting them to recount their stories for museum visitors. In many cases, this involved not only accounting for their pre-war, wartime and post-war experiences but also for their engagement in the creation of the very museum and the struggles to have their specific narratives heard and included in its narrative, often against the authorities, curators or other victim groups (Eschebach 1999; Berman 2001; KZ-Gedenkstätte Flossenbürg 2011). The practice of collecting video recordings by museums and memorial sites, paired with the development of new digital technologies (Thomas 2008), translated into the recordings of their voices and bodies being cast as yet another category of museum objects (de Jong 2018) – videos and extracts from interviews integrated into old, or, more often, redeveloped, permanent exhibitions.

The presence of recorded audio and visual testimonies in museum spaces can take many forms contingent on curatorial decisions dictated by their function in the overall narrative, their relationship to other objects in the museum assemblage, the architecture and the economy of the exhibition space. When included in the exhibitions, they can be presented as a part of larger audio-visual texts, combining recorded interviews with archival footage accompanied (or not) by a voice-over providing textual historical narrative, as a part of films composed exclusively

of a progression of various witness testimonies, or singled out by projection on a separate screen and played on a loop. They can be, then, variously positioned in museal space – alongside other objects on display, such as photos, archival documents, and information boards, or foregrounded through their placement in separate rooms, on blank walls, and/or in audio theatres. Each decision pertaining to placement, length, character, presence (or absence) of accompanying contextualizing information, and the accessibility of the video testimony mediates in the most critical way its sense for the visitor (Mandelli 2019: 87–89) and determines its function on display.

While museum practitioners foreground the evidentiary and didactic role of the testimonies they exhibit, scholars have focused rather on the way they come to authenticate the museum narrative through their mediated but bodily presence and idiosyncratic character of the recorded speech act – and are, in turn, authenticated by their very presence in the museum (Ziębińska-Witek 2011: 252; de Jong 2018: 164). Others have stressed the affective function of testimonies, deployed in museums as a means to invest the abstract historical narrative with the personal and intimate, and, thus, emotionally relatable – testimonies are meant to foster empathy and variously considered identification (Cooke and Frieze 2017; Kobielska 2018; Mandelli 2019). This can pertain as much to the overarching narrative or to specific objects or events thematized on display, which become affectively charged when framed through a personal account. This sense of intimacy and relationality can be fostered by the very exhibition techniques – for instance, in a moment of personalized closeness to the witness established when the visitor separates themselves from the noises and movements of the museum to watch and listen through the headphones. Equally, video testimonies of survivors are an important means to narrate, illustrate, contextualize and complement historical events and their embodied and lived aftereffects, exactly because they come from the position of situated memory.

In her 2018 book *The Witness as Object: Video Testimony in Memorial Museums*, Steffi de Jong argues that the turn towards video testimony in museum exhibitions signalled, on the one hand, that museums as institutions were ready to integrate “the very process of recalling an event and verbalizing it into their representation of history”, that “the very moment of remembrance and narrated memory have become legitimate objects of display” (De Jong 2018: 5). This was, on the other hand, considered by museum practitioners as a move towards multiperspectivity, an opening up of the museum narrative to a plurality of voices and views articulated in its space (De Jong 2018: 18). And yet, de Jong and many other theoreticians of museums, not without reason, remain critical towards the actual outcomes of this move (Kushner 2001; Ziębińska-Witek 2011; Kobielska 2018). For one, the inclusion of video testimony into a museum exhibition and its recasting into a museum object constitutes an incredibly invasive intervention into its original logic

and structure as a recorded and highly personalized life story. In order to find its way into display, the interview is subject to selection, decontextualization, cutting, and only in a fragmentary form allowed to enter the exhibition, as the excerpts sometimes last no more than several dozen seconds: several hours of biographical narration are ‘condensed’ into a one-minute clip. Also, longer excerpts are an effect of targeted editing dictated as much by the directionality of the museum narrative, their place in it as per the requirements and habits of the visitors. The fragmentariness constitutive to video testimonies at museum display, while a prerequisite for their inclusion, can pose a serious ethical challenge. In the words of de Jong, in this process “the agency over the video testimonies is passed from the witness to history to the exhibition makers” (de Jong 2018: 178–179).

This challenge is inscribed, too, into the ways the video testimonies figure on display – whether they speak with full voice and command full attention or can be easily missed and/or ignored; whether they play an elevated, equal or subordinate role to other exhibited objects. Considering the first question, Maria Kobielska (2018: 300–301) posits that “obligatory/optional” character of a given testimony in a museum experience should play a crucial role in the evaluation of its use: ‘obligatory’ means in this context that the visitor will inevitably be exposed to it while roaming through the exhibition; ‘optional’ assumes a choice to press play or pick up the headphones in order to engage with the testimony. While we see this as a means to invest the visitors with more agency in personalizing their museum experience, it is unquestionable that the decisions and museal techniques either foregrounding or backgrounding specific testimonies are, too, an expression of their narrative and performative hierarchization, the voices of some survivors or witnesses will figure as more important than those of others. This hierarchization unfolds also between different categories of objects on display (archival documents, personal objects, photographs, other artifacts), and reflects their curatorially assigned status and value as exhibits. In fact, in the vast majority of the campscapes’ museums we analyzed, the excerpts of video recordings are placed on equal or subordinate footing with other exhibited objects, more often than not the interviews cast in a mere emotionalizing and illustrative function for specific segments of the exhibitions, or as a means to make the exhibition more dynamic and attractive to visitors. In some cases, for instance at the Memorial Site Jasenovac, the specific use and foregrounding of testimonies and personal accounts (exclusively) of the victims has a deeply political meaning as it serves to push into the background the question of perpetratorship – the camp being run not by the Nazis but by their Croatian collaborators (Radonic 2009: 348–364).

As a result, the inclusion of “the very process of recalling” and of a multiperspective plurality of voices, considered a rationale behind the presence of video testimonies

on display, remains limited. More often than not, witnesses come to speak not to the specificity of their experience but to particular aspects of historical events and the presented (chronological) narrative (Shenker 2015). Moreover, even in those cases when the recordings are supplemented with basic information about the interviewee and their position within and towards the historical occurrences, the context of the interview is mostly left unaddressed, decimating its particularity as an individual memory event. This has obvious implications not only for the (limited) ability of displayed interviews to foster empathy (Schulz 2021) but also for the politics of display. As convincingly summarized by Tony Kushner (2001) in relation to the Holocaust exhibition of the Imperial War Museum in London, but can also be extrapolated to other museal settings analyzed in the project: instead of individualizing, the display universalizes exhibited accounts, “the differences are ultimately subsumed in order to achieve a narrative cohesion” – and while they serve to humanize, emotionalize and dynamize the exhibition, they “rarely problematize it” (Kushner 2001: 92). In other words, they are largely instrumentalized in the service of the story designed and exhibited in the museum, leaving little room for differentiated and differentiating perspectives that would unsettle or decentre it.

Remembering westerbork: the digital testimony environment

Acknowledging the problems and limitations associated with display of audio and video testimonies in museums settings, within the framework of the project we therefore proposed to complement the on-site visitors experience at a selected campscape, the Camp Westerbork Memorial Center, with an experience of a prototype digital testimony environment bringing into a virtual dialog sensitively edited and adequately contextualized personal stories, historical place and contested memories that evolve and revolve around it. Titled *Remembering Westerbork: Learning with Interviews*, the online environment was designed to help users to prepare for a visit to the memorial.¹⁰ The platform presents and contextualizes video interviews with two survivors of the camp for an interactive discussion in the classroom. Apart from two 30-minute films, the web-application in three languages (English, Dutch and German), includes photos and documents, short biographies, an interactive editor, a time-line and a glossary. The working assignments focus on issues of contested memory, which are relevant to understanding Westerbork campscape, but not sufficiently included in the exhibition.

Westerbork memorial needs to convey a complex history to its visitors. Established before the German occupation as a central camp for Jewish refugees from Germany, it came to serve later as the main transit camp in the

¹⁰ learning.westerbork-interviews.org.

Netherlands for deportations to the Nazi extermination and concentration camps. After the war, Westerbork acquired yet another set of functions as an internment camp for Nazi collaborators, a refugee settlement for Moluccan families relocated to the Netherlands after the decolonization of the former Dutch East Indies, and, in the 1970s, a memorial. Survivors and their testimonies have been central to the memorial since the museum first opened in 1983, yet certain positionalities and narratives associated with the site have been privileged over others both at the exhibition and the memorial landscape. This pertained not only to the silencing of the site's (post)colonial history. But, for instance, also includes its role in exclusionary politics towards Jewish refugees in the prewar Netherlands, in wartime discrimination against Sinti and Roma, its experiential framing through nationalized tensions between various victim groups and/or their involvement in the operation of the camp and, finally, the postwar anti-Semitism that defined the lives of its survivors.

The online testimony environment *Remembering Westerbork* facilitates an interactive encounter with two Jewish survivors of the camp: Hans Margules and Ronnie Goldstein-van Cleef. Hans Margules was a German Jew who fled to the Netherlands in 1938. In 1940, he was brought to the central refugee camp Westerbork and later joined the Ordnungsdienst (OD), the camp's Jewish supervisory service. Most inmates, especially Dutch Jews interred there after the German occupation of the Netherlands – when Westerbork was transformed into a transit camp –, referred to the members of the OD as the 'Jewish SS', due to their role in securing the deportations to the extermination camps. As a member of the OD closing the door of a cattle train going to Auschwitz-Birkenau, Margules was captured on the Westerbork film, a unique piece of historical footage from the camp commissioned by its commander in 1944, which in 2017 was included in the UNESCO world register for documentary heritage. In the interview, Margules talks about his work, the film and the post-war discussions about the OD. Based on his narration and material providing differing accounts, the contested history of the Jewish Ordnungsdienst can be accessed and discussed within the *Remembering Westerbork* environment.

Ronnie Goldstein-van Cleef was a Dutch citizen. In the wake of the German occupation of the Netherlands, she went into hiding in 1942 and was arrested and brought to Westerbork in 1944. She stayed in the punishment barracks of the transit camp before being deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, then to Liebau, where she was liberated. In a chapter titled *Between Help and Betrayal*, users of the online environment are invited to analyze behaviors and experiences in the occupied Netherlands. They follow the survivor's journey through the universe of Nazi camps, after she spent only a short time in Westerbork transit camp. They are also inspired to discuss her

uneasy return to the Netherlands, where she experienced various forms of discrimination.¹¹

The life-story interviews were edited into two 30-minute biographical interview films, transcribed and translated. Instead of grouping thematic video clips, they focus on witnesses' biographies and contextualize them with background information, photos, documents, and texts. Carefully designed tasks help users deconstruct the conditions of the video setting and actively listen to, analyse, reconstruct the biographical narrations, and reflect on the character of the virtual 'encounter' with the videotaped witness, reinstating video testimony as a historical source and a genre in its own right. *Remembering Westerbork* allows the preparation for a visit to take place in a classroom, a university seminar on-site, but also individual exploration of the site mediated by survivors' accounts. Available in Dutch, English and German, the online environment also addresses the international dimension of Westerbork and makes it accessible to foreign audiences. Based on various learning environments with testimonies from former forced laborers, developed at Freie Universität Berlin to support students in analyzing video interviews as historical sources (Pagenstecher and Wein 2017), *Remembering Westerbork* has been conceptualized and advanced in close collaboration with the staff of the Camp Westerbork Memorial Center, and in dialog with other tools developed within the framework of the *Accessing Campscapes* project (Waagen et al. 2023), and meant to complement but also decenter and complexify the narrative offered at the museum.

While it does not perhaps offer an ideal solution to fragmentary encounters with recorded testimonies in the museums established at the former campscapes or, for that matter, a viable alternative to in-depth interaction with an oral history account or video testimony watched in its entirety, the online testimony environment provides a (pilot) middle ground for museums and memorial sites willing to expand their practice pertaining to those sources and reconsider their role in framing the narrative of the site. Here, the different testimonies are not subsumed under an overarching narrative at the cost of their individuality but foregrounded exactly in their personal specificity, which nevertheless speaks to broader themes associated with the site, and allows its differentiated experience through the lens of both, or a chosen survivor account. The online testimony platform seems, therefore, better suited than an exhibitionary space for negotiating the tensions between authoritative museal and political narratives about the past and the personal accounts of the witnesses. And while it is also based on the process of selecting the 'right' witnesses, and on extensive editorial work on the recordings – and thus does not resolve all ethical issues associated with museal display of testimonies – it gives more justice to the uniqueness of the genre and the dynamics of the personal process of narrating and recalling.

11 The interview with Hans Margules was conducted in 2010 in German and is available at Memorial Centre Camp Westerbork. The interview with Ronnie Goldstein-van Cleef was conducted in 2005 in Dutch and is available in the online archive *Zwangsarbeit 1939–1945*.

Conclusion

Both tools developed within the framework *Accessing Campscapes* and presented in this paper, the *Campscapes Testimony Catalogue*, and the online testimonies environment *Remembering Westerbork* are pilots, which, due to the economy of the project, have a necessarily limited scope. The testimony catalogue can support comparative studies, point researchers to prominent as well as forgotten survivor narratives, and help in researching contested pasts of these places. It is, however, only a momentary scan of some selected institutions. Importantly, conceptually and technologically, it serves as a prototype for a new curation and research environment for oral history collections currently under construction at Freie Universität Berlin: The cross-collection platform *Oral-History.Digital*, which will be available in 2023, and which allows for identification, assessment, categorization, and critical and comparative analysis of a myriad of dispersed oral history collections. The Westerbork environment, too, could be developed further, based on a user evaluation by the memorial on one hand, and by the inclusion of other testimonies and other engaging assignments on the other hand. In its present form, *Remembering Westerbork* privileges the perspective (however differentiated) of two Jewish survivors of the camp and, thus, makes other experience groups disappear. In the future, it could be extended to include voices of other witnesses, including those of the prisoners of the postwar internment camp and Moluccan families that inhabited the site throughout the 1950s and the 1960s, without equating all these completely different experiences, however – something not that easily implementable in the museum space due to ongoing contestations and ownership claims around the campscape, but much less challenging in an online environment.

As we found out in the course of the project, such interviews have, in fact, often been collected and are stored in museum archives yet rarely find their way into exhibitions, arrested by the expectations of survivors, authorities, visitors and dominant sensitivities. For instance, there is virtually no indication at the campscape of Bergen Belsen that in the postwar years, the site also housed Germans, who were forcefully displaced from the territories lost after the Second World to Poland or Czechoslovakia, while interviews covering this aspect of the afterlife of the camp are well present in its archive (Staats 2010). Both Falstad and Westerbork are home to accounts of Nazi collaborators interred at the camps in the early postwar period. In turn, in the archive of Treblinka, one can watch interviews with local Poles who admit to robbing the site, and human remains, during and in the immediate aftermath of the war (Dziuban 2015). While such accounts do not sit nicely in the frame and genre of video testimony developed in dialog with and dedicated mostly to survivors and are still to be subject of extensive academic research, they, nevertheless, also form the corpus of the oral histories of the camps testifying to their complex histories and afterlives. They could, too, in the future, be included in the narratives on campscapes, either in museums or online environments.

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A virtual place of memory: Virtual reality as a method for communicating conflicted heritage at Camp Westerbork

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Abstract

An important goal of the project Accessing Campscapes: inclusive strategies for using European Conflicted Heritage (iC-ACCESS), has been to develop inclusive approaches for the presentation and communication of contending perspectives on Nazi and Stalinist sites (Dolghin et al. 2017). A key objective for treating these ‘heritagescapes’ has been to ‘develop state-of-the-art strategies and implement innovative tools which provide sustainable in-situ and virtual forms of investigation, presentation and representation’ (Van der Laarse 2020). A central issue which is gaining increasing attention in heritage studies and management is the dilemma of preserving and exhibiting material remnants of Wehrmacht and SS-barracks or residencies at Holocaust memorial camps which are generally framed as victimhood sites. The Commander’s house at Herinneringscentrum Westerbork is a case in point and can be placed in different perspectives on the history of the camp terrain and all related sensibilities on its meaning as an object of heritage. In order to realise an application that can accommodate these perspectives, iC-ACCESS project leader Prof. dr. R. van der Laarse contracted two laboratories specialised consecutively in 3D visualisation technologies and spatial information to cooperate on its development, the 4D Research Lab (University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands) and the SPINlab (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam). This paper illustrates the ideas, discussions and choices related to the production of the ‘Campscapes – Westerbork Commander’s House App’, provides a concise technical description of the actual application and presents a short prospection on potential future developments.

Key Words

Commander’s house, conflicted heritage, 4D Research Lab, Herinneringscentrum Westerbork, iC-ACCESS, multivocality, SPINlab, virtual reality

Introduction

An important goal of the project Accessing Campscapes: inclusive strategies for using European Conflicted Heritage (iC-ACCESS, HERA, European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 649307), has been to develop inclusive approaches for the presentation and communication of contending perspectives on Nazi and Stalinist sites (Dolghin et al. 2017). A key objective for treating these ‘heritagescapes’ has been to ‘develop state-of-the-art strategies and implement innovative tools which provide sustainable in-situ and virtual forms of investigation, presentation and representation’ (Van der Laarse

2020). A digital space provides all kinds of possibilities for creating platforms through which complicated and contrasting views on conflicted heritage can be presented and explained. Furthermore, in the field of memory studies, virtual reality or augmented reality are viewed as memory stimulating environments (Kenderdine 2007; Pacheco et al. 2014). As output of the research project, interactive virtual environments were foreseen as principal media to achieve the project goals. Due to their layered and conflicted histories, campscapes have often multiple, contested stories to tell. Various iC-ACCESS teams experimented with developing inclusive strategies for European memorial camps by means of digital mapping and storytelling (accessible both on-site as well as via the



Figure 1. image of the Commander's house at the memorial site (drone photo 2019, Jitte Waagen, 4D Research Lab).

internet). SPECS-Lab (Synthetic, Perceptive, Emotive and Cognitive Systems Lab) at the Institute for Bioengineering of Catalonia, Barcelona focused on cutting-edge visualisations of former wartime camps, whereas this contribution concerns a VR point cloud application of a single building with a highly contested past, developed by two Amsterdam digital labs.

A central issue which is gaining increasing attention in heritage studies and management is the dilemma of preserving and exhibiting material remnants of Wehrmacht and SS-barracks or perpetrators' residences at Holocaust memorial camps which are generally framed as victimhood sites. The Commander's house, strategically located at the entrance to the former Nazi-German Jewish transit camp Westerbork in the current Dutch Municipality Hooghalen, can be regarded as a contentious example of such perpetrator heritage (Van der Laarse 2009, 2010, 2015). Although built as the director's residence of what before the German occupation of The Netherlands was planned as a central German-Jewish refugee camp, after the Nazis took over the camp, the house became the seat of the Commander of the Netherlands's main Jewish transit camp. Between 1942 and 1945, it was the residence of Westerbork's German SS-camp commander Albert Konrad Gemmecker (Van Liempt 2019) and 'the House of Gemmecker' therefore directly links to the Nazi past. However, the history of the camp extends beyond its uses during the

Nazi occupation of The Netherlands. The camp was not only constructed by the Dutch government in 1939 to house Jewish refugees who fled from Nazi Germany and Austria after the exodus of the 1938 *Reichspogromnacht* (also known as *Kristallnacht*), after the war it was consecutively reused for interning Nazi collaborators, then briefly as a military camp, to become a repatriating camp renamed 'Schattenberg', for Dutch-Indonesian survivors of the Japanese camps and between 1951 and 1970 for demobilised South-Moluccan soldiers and their families.¹ From 1949 onwards, Colonel Van der Speck Obreen and his descendants, who also repatriated from the Dutch Indies, occupied the Commander's house, until it was abandoned in 2007 and, in 2010, transferred to the administration of the memorial institute Herinneringscentrum Kamp Westerbork. The Commander's house can, therefore, be placed in different perspectives on the history of the camp terrain and all related sensibilities on its meaning as an object of heritage.

With the intention of preserving the Commander's house from deterioration, it was decided by Herinneringscentrum Kamp Westerbork in 2011 to place a massive glass dome over the structure (Fig. 1). This raised discussion amongst experts, focusing on the perceived musealisation of the structure, the apparent disassociation with the camp terrain itself as well as limitations in access to the house and amongst Jewish memorial communities about the contested musealisation of perpetrator heritage.

¹ This concerned mostly Christian Moluccan Soldiers and their families from the demobilised Koninklijk Nederlandsch-Indisch Leger (KNIL) who were relocated to The Netherlands after the Indonesian National Revolution, when Ambon and other South-Moluccan Islands lost their promised independence within a Dutch Commonwealth to the new Republic of Indonesia.



Figure 2. Image created by ScanLAB Projects.

Given the intentions of the iC-ACCESS project to explore tools for inclusive strategies to present such ‘dark heritage’ as a way to get access through the perpetrator gaze as likewise depicted in the unique “Westerbork film” (1944), containing the only existing footage during the Holocaust of a Nazi-German transport of Jews and Sintti to Bergen-Belsen and Auschwitz; a film made under the command of Gemmeker by the Jewish inmate Rudolf Breslauer. The crucial railway platform from which all Dutch Jews were transported to Eastern concentration and extermination camps, was located right in front of the house on the central axis of the transit camp. This central structure has been an important focal point for developing a digital application to provide a space for contending perspectives on the Commander’s house and related historical narratives. In order to realise such an application, iC-ACCESS project leader Prof. dr. R. van der Laarse contracted two laboratories specialised consecutively in 3D visualisation technologies and spatial information to cooperate on its development, the 4D Research Lab (University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands) and the SPINlab (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam). This paper illustrates the ideas, discussions and choices related to the production of the ‘Campscapes – Westerbork Commander’s House App’, provides a concise technical description of the actual application and presents a short prospection on potential future developments.

A virtual place

In order to achieve public access to the now closed Commander’s house and use it as a framework for perspectives on its history and relation to the camp terrain, the

3D point clouds of the structure by ScanLAB Projects, based in London (UK), provided a suitable digital environment. Such scans are derived through terrestrial laser scanning. This is a technology in which laser beams that deflect on surfaces projected from a stationary scanning device are used to acquire accurate 3D coordinates. A camera can be used to attribute a colour to every individual point. The end-result is a so-called point cloud, which usually comprises millions of points and visualises the surroundings of the scanners’ location in very high detail. By relocating the 3D laser scanner through the Commander’s house, a large series of point clouds has been collected that have subsequently been integrated into a single set of points, envisaging the complete structure (Fig. 2).

As a virtual representation of the Commander’s house, the combined point clouds provided an objective and neutral capture of the historical environment for creating a virtual reality application. It was decided not to further post-process the point cloud into a 3D model. This would require ‘stitching’ together the points in order to create a polygonal mesh, i.e. a connected surface, that can subsequently be coloured, based on the point colours. Whereas that would provide a more familiar and smooth appearance to a viewer, meshes usually require a degree of complementary manual modelling. It was decided on ethical grounds not to do so, because such smoothness would raise questions both on how realistic, detailed and aesthetic the model should be and unavoidably would bring up the discussion of *disneyfication*, i.e. the perception of the derogatory process of violating the authentic character of what could be perceived as a virtual house museum (Bryman 2004).

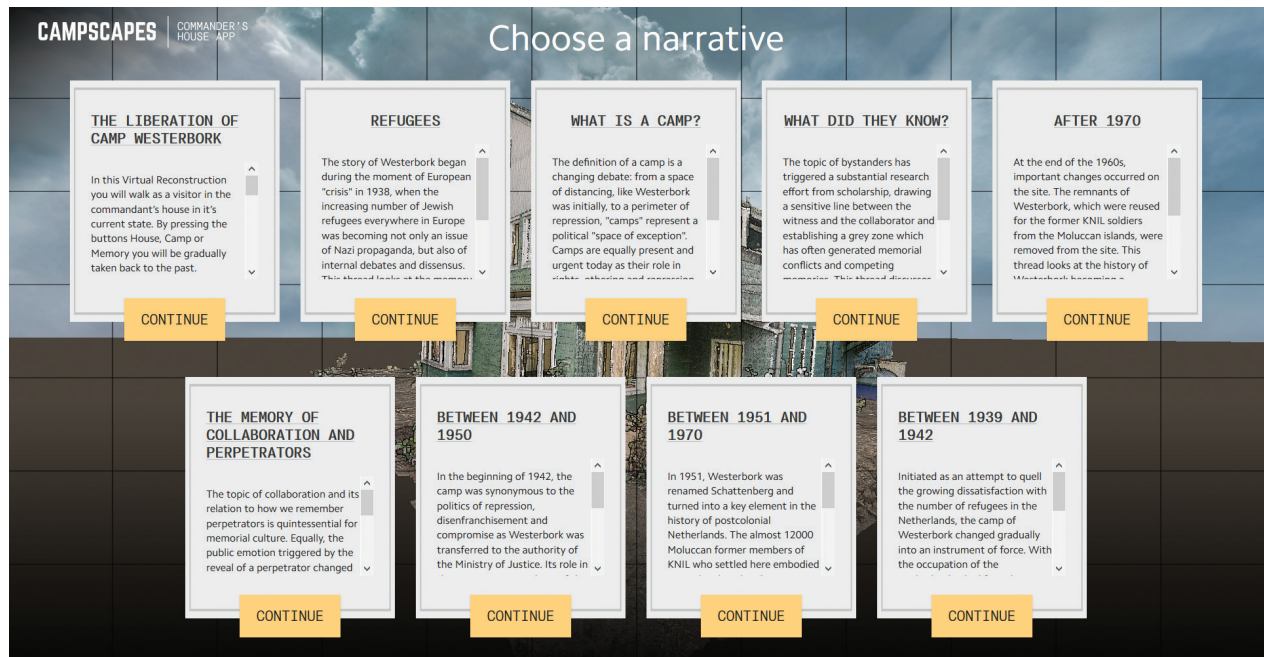


Figure 3. illustration of the narrative choice screen.

Communicating perspectives

The purpose of the Commander's house application has been to provide a frame or viewer box for communicating perspectives on the use and transformation of the place, but also for visualising meaning and memory. The application was intentionally created for a diverse audience, from academics to the regular audience of the Herrinneringscentrum Kamp Westerbork. In practice, the application was developed in partnership with the memorial institute. In order to accommodate the interests of these different stakeholders, the application has been structured with the concept of narratives that offer space for the inherently multivocal perceptions of the Commander's house. Every narrative comprises a guided tour through the spaces of the house, following a linear path in which every part of the structure is visited. Examples of "narratives" are 'Refugees', 'What is a camp?' or 'The Memory of Collaboration and Perpetrators' (Fig. 3).

Each part of the house is used as a stage for presenting pieces of information that communicate historical facts, as well as past and current perceptions and discussions that surround them. This information is not necessarily chronologically structured or immediately related to the spatial context. The guided tours are used, instead, to communicate a set of storylines connected to the various spaces on varying levels of abstraction. As such, the Commander's house is used both as a visualisation of an object of conflicted heritage and as a visual background for the different narratives. Every narrative is layered in its information; there is a layer 'house' and a layer 'camp', both providing a platform for perspectives on different scales, as well as a layer 'memory' for less tangible parts of the narrative. The purpose of the app is to lure the visitors inside by inciting their curiosity to see what is not accessible

physically, but once the visitors are inside, the narratives turn their gaze outwards to the larger historical narratives and debates related to the Westerbork campscape.

Towards a user experience

These two main components, the point cloud visualisation of the Commander's house and the structured narratives, have been integrated creating a Potree WebGL pointcloud visualisation tool (<https://github.com/potree/potree>). It is browser-based technology that renders the application platform-independent, as long as a modern browser is used and the medium has a decent graphics card. To allow for dynamic expansion of the number of narratives, as well as affording realtime updates to their content, the narrative data is drawn from a backend database. For this, Directus has been used, a headless content management system with an intuitive interface (<https://directus.io/>). All developers, iC-ACCESS research, as well as the historians at the Herrinneringscentrum Kamp Westerbork, could comfortably add, remove or update content in this way.

The application starts with a view from above the Westerbork camp terrain, which visualises LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) data, which is the same 3D laser scanning technology as explained above, yet collected by mounting a scanner under an aeroplane (<https://www.ahn.nl/>, see also Martinez-Rubi et al. 2016). The data are, thus, similar in its appearance to a point cloud, though the points are much less dense than the Commander's house point cloud because of the scanning distance. In order to emphasise the relation of the Commander's house to the camp terrain, the application starts by hovering over the camp terrain with an indication of the location of

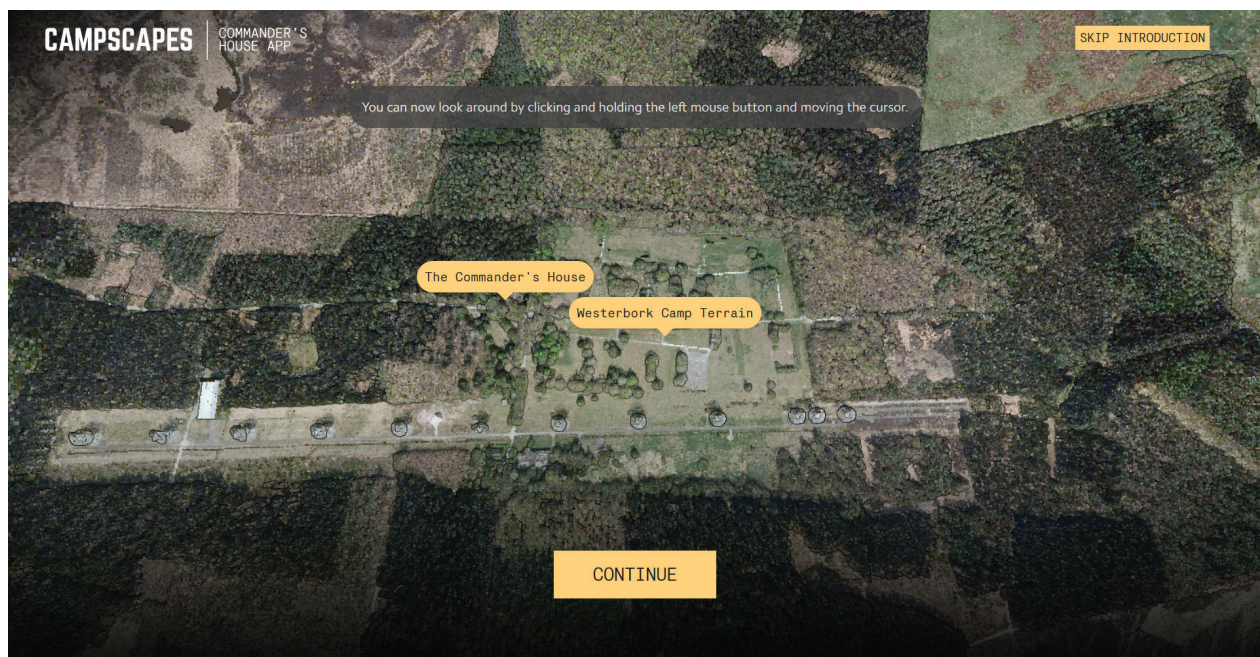


Figure 4. illustration of hover over camp terrain.

the house, during which the user can freely look around (Fig. 4). When continuing, the camera slowly zooms in on the location of the Commander's house and finally at the Commander's house itself, again to evidence the connection with the camp terrain.

Once zoomed in on the house, standing just outside the front door leading to the hallway, the user is offered an explanation of the interface, the house and the laser scans. The latter was specifically added to make the viewer acquainted with the perhaps unfamiliar point cloud visualisation. After this, a choice can be made for either of the nine narratives. Following a narrative can be done in two ways. The first is the linear guided tour mentioned above, which is a path along which the camera or viewer follows a fixed trajectory. On a slider below the main viewport, the user can see the progression through the various parts of the house. The second option is to use this slider to 'jump' to the different parts of the house, which was made available to afford skipping or restarting segments of the narrative. On all positions in the guided tour, it is possible to freely look around from a stationary position in order to give the user the opportunity to absorb the environment (Fig. 5). On the other hand, to avoid disorientation, it was explicitly decided not to enable the user to freely navigate the house.

Upon entry to the separate parts of the house, a panel appears with information contained in the narrative (Fig. 6). These are generally historical sources in varying media, such as newspaper articles, photographs, recorded interviews or videos. The sources are provided with an explanation in the context of the narrative. On the panel, the user can choose between the tabs 'house', 'camp' and 'memory' to access the different layers in the narratives. The panel can be minimised to allow for more viewing space for inspecting the point cloud visualisation. To in-

crease the awareness of the user on where he or she is in the house, a floor plan can be activated that shows the section of the house in which the user is located, as well as the viewing direction.

Although the design of the navigation in the application is mainly accommodating the structure of the narratives, it is also possible to experience a more direct spatial contextual approach, by absorbing all information related to a room before moving to another part of the house. This is made possible by the option of selecting a different narrative using the narrative selection button; remaining in the current location, the user can browse through the narratives one by one and read all content.

Summarising the description above, the end result is a first concept as was viable in the available bandwidth of resources. In terms of theoretical and technical approaches, the application is still in development. As such, the current result is not intended to be a smooth and well-rounded VR experience, but a reflection of a finely balanced academic debate with different stakeholders and about various ideas and approaches and how technology can facilitate this. The first narrative 'The liberation of Camp Westerbork' exposes the different interests shaping this debate, as it refers to the explicit wish of the Herinneringscentrum Kamp Westerbork to incorporate a chronologically orientated narrative with the same theme as the semi-permanent exhibition of the same name. In this way, the application negotiates as an intermediary between the museum world and the academic world and the current solution is not necessarily optimal. As such, the application expresses the current state of the discussion and should be seen as a configuration that should be discussed, adjusted and developed further. Nevertheless, the application is fully functional and accessible and to the creator's contentions effective-



Figure 5. illustration of a 'clean' view of the house interior.

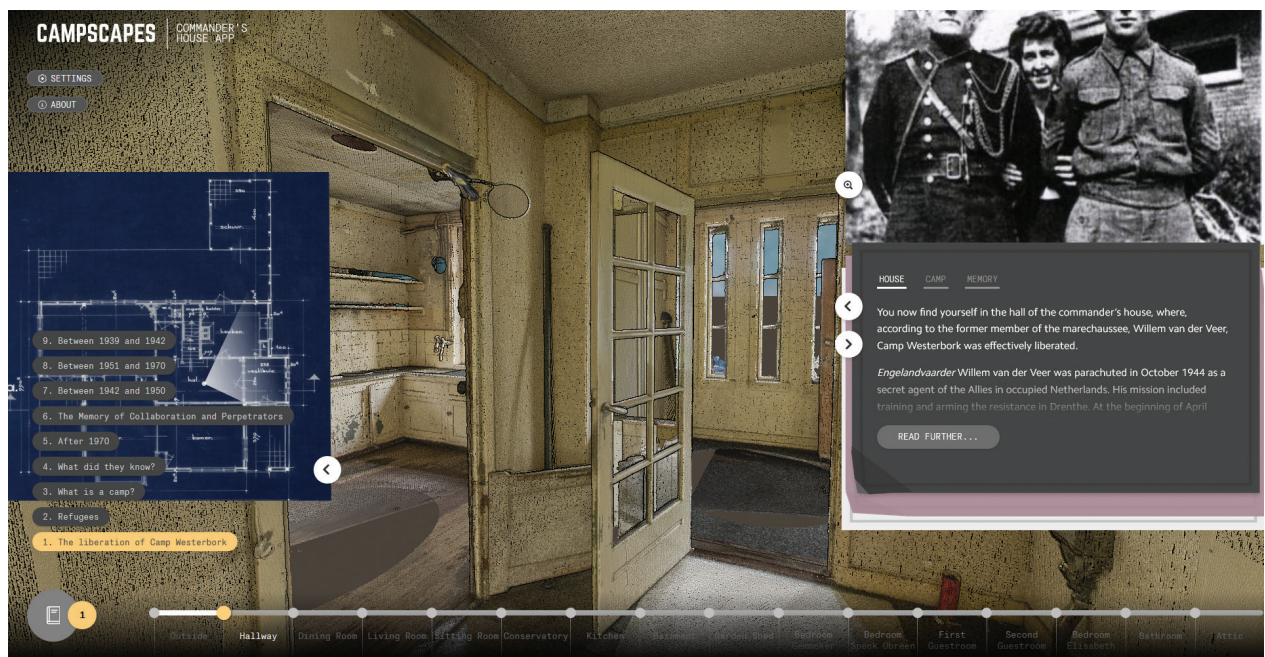


Figure 6. illustration narrative choice, slider, information panel, floor plan.

ly presents the complex multifocal perspectives of the Westerbork Commander's house conflicted heritage: a virtual place of memory.

Are we there yet?

In light of the above account, this question is rather rhetorical: the project has been developed in a limited bandwidth of resources, which practically has restricted the freedom to implement everything that was originally contemplated

to be part of the Commander's house application. It is important to emphasise that the development of applications such as these is often grossly underestimated in terms of organisation, complexity and costs. This relates to person hours of 3D laser scanning, technical development and careful selection and representation of historical sources, time for fabricating a well-considered functional design and the precise planning and mapping storyboards.

An important element that has not been implemented and certainly one to work on in the near future, is the visual connection to the camp terrain from inside the Command-

er's house. The windows provide an excellent opportunity to make the user look out of the house towards the camp or, for example, the Kommandatur, virtually conceptualising the so-called 'perpetrator's narrative' or 'gaze' (Kopperman 2019). The windows would also allow perspectives on other, very important, source material, such as the Westerbork movie to which the campscape owes its European Heritage Label (2013) and which is recently included in the UNESCO Heritage of the World Register (2017). This is because it is the only document showing the Nazi deportation trains to Auschwitz, the script of which was commissioned by the same Commander who could look out from his balcony at the weekly transports.

Another improvement that would increase the awareness of the interconnectedness of the narratives would be to supplement crosslinks between them. It should be made possible to jump between the various sections and layers of the different narratives where their content addresses the same events or concepts. Finally, as mentioned, there is still quite some room for improvement in the interface making for a smoother and more comprehensible user experience. Since the application has been built such that expansion in the near future is straightforward, this is a goal that will be pursued. Moreover, the application has been developed as a free open source software application under a GNU GPLv3 copyleft licence. Therefore, others can freely download and expand on the software as long as they release the source code under the same conditions.

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The Campscapes – Westerbork Commander's House App can be found here: <https://data.campscapes.org/westerbork/>

The source code can be found here: <https://github.com/4DRLgit/westerbork-viewer>

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