

iC-ACCESS Workshop and Archaeological Survey at Treblinka

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Participants in the three days workshop: University of Amsterdam (prof. dr. Rob van der Laarse, dr. Zuzanna Dziuban, dr. Andriana Bencic, Phd candidate Dana Dolghin), Norwegian Institute of Technology (prof. dr. Marek Jasinski, dr. Gunnar Hatlehof), Staffordshire University (Assoc. prof. Dr. Caroline Sturdy Colls, arch. Kevin Colls, Phd candidate Will Mitchell, PhD candidate Czelsie Weston, PhD candidate Janos Kerti, Phd candidate Esme Hookway), University of West Bohemia (prof.dr. Pavel Vareka, Dr. Zdeňka Vařeková) Freie Universität Berlin (dr. Cord Pagenstecher, dr. Verena Buser) Universitat Pompeu Fabra (prof.dr. Paul Verschure, mr. Sytse Wierenga), Memorial Kamp Westerbork (Bas Korholt), Gedenkstätte Bergen Belsen (Stephanie Billib), Marie Janouskova (Memory of Nations)

In May 2017, the iC-ACCESS team carried out research at the Treblinka extermination and labour camp in Poland. The team – which included all research directions in the project a.i. cultural studies, heritage and memory scholars, archaeologists, historians and digital heritage specialists – spent a week investigating the material and political dynamics of the camp, its immediate post-war history and the history of memory practices shaping the sites. The focus of this particular visit was to identify the relation between the monumental area of the former camp (mid 1960s) and areas which have been only recently included in the memorial, such as the labour camp Treblinka 1 and the relevance this holds for memorial dynamics concerning the extermination camp. At the same time, the initial memorial itself has been a point of focus for all teams involved. The fact that the former camps, neglected in the first decades after the Second World War, were commemorated only in the 1960s, triggers in itself necessary debates about the post-war context of memorialization in the socialist space. These political dynamics have been crucial ever since. The post-1989 context in the European memorial landscape is equally relevant for the dynamics of the site, one point of interest being the fact that the current museum was established at Treblinka only in 2010. At the moment the site is undergoing structural changes, including plans to develop a new Educational Center.

Another important purpose of the visit has been conducting a new archaeological survey on the site, focused on unravelling material traces of what has been often considered an erased site of persecution and murder and consequently taking a critical stance on the debates concerning the camp's existence and the memorial implications of these claims. The non-invasive archaeology is meant to consequently also draw attention to the extent to which the space was aimed to be erased by the Nazis themselves in Treblinka and part of an extensive operation to hide the traces of crimes elsewhere. Between 800,000 and 1 million people, mostly members of the Jewish community, were murdered in the extermination camp between July 1942 and autumn 1943, of which the majority perished in gas chambers. Many other

opponents were detained and died due to condition in the labour camp. In October 1943, in the context of the changing dynamics of the war and the August revolt in Treblinka, the camp was dismantled, and material traces left concealed in the perimeter of a new farm built on the site. How this uncertain history later became a staple of narratives about Treblinka invites questions on the memorial dynamics of the camps, as commemoration and memorialization of the camps in Poland were mandated by larger political dynamics, such as the onset of the Cold War and the particularities of remembering the Shoah in the socialist space. What was hidden in 1943 was equally erased for other ideological purposes by the new communist authorities, an overlap which often generated appropriations and erasures. These memorial dynamics have equally been contested in the long debates around Jewish-Polish relations.

The excavations were carried out in the terrain of the first gas chambers and in the suspected area of the second, larger gas chambers. Further excavations were undertaken in the area of the camp's waste pit to learn more about the people sent to Treblinka and those who ran the camp.



Excavations at Treblinka extermination camp (Photo credit: Kevin Colls)



Some of the objects found in the extermination camp's waste pit (Photo credit: Kevin Colls)

The excavations demonstrated the extraordinary lengths that the Nazi

administration went to destroy the extermination camp. However, they also revealed thousands of objects and a considerable amount of building materials that demonstrate that - although well hidden - evidence of the camp's existence does survive.

Non-invasive survey work was also undertaken at the nearby labour camp and associated execution site in order to determine the fates of thousands more people who died as a result of ill-treatment and systematic killings. Post-liberation reports suggest that around 10,000 people were killed at this site. Member of the Polish Jewish and non-Jewish communities - along with a smaller number of Roma and other nationalities - were kept at the labour camp between June 1941 and July 1944. The nearby execution site was also used as a killing and burial site of Jews sent from the Warsaw Ghetto and neighbouring towns.



Ground Penetrating Radar survey at Treblinka execution site (Photo credit: Kevin Colls)

Ground Penetrating Radar and topographic survey methods were used to map the locations of marked and unmarked mass graves at the execution site. Advanced photogrammetry methods were also used to map the terrain of the forced labour camp. The team plan to use this mapping data to create virtual heritage tools and 3D visualisations in order to enhance public knowledge about both camps and their contested postwar history.

The archaeological data represented a means to open up a debate around the memorial dynamics of the site and its memorial framing. Subjected to different

claims of ownership and victimhood, the materiality of the Treblinka camp stands as an important leeway into the memorial dynamics of the site. The restrictions on conducting investigations on such a site - restricted mainly by the Halacha Law - next to memorial politics which are often disputed institutionally and between communities make dynamics of visibility or erasure of materiality illustrative of the selectivity, silences or canons of history practiced on the site today and equally in the past.

By looking at these, one can chart the political and social context in which Treblinka became a memorial (largely dependent on an approaching prescription date of crimes perpetrated by the SS) and the importance of this memorialization in the Cold War context. Despite the renewed visibility of the plight of the Jewish community in Poland, only 4 year later in 1968 an anti-semitic campaign as reaction to protests against the government (and to a power struggle inside the Polish Communist Party) led to a massive purge out of workplaces and wide scale immigration to Israel. These debates were illustrative of the type of dynamics in which sites of "anti-fascist" resistance operated at the time in the socialist bloc. The perspective on the Second World War and attributions of victimhood also changed in the following decades, dependent on the rising oppositional discourse of the 1980s. Reframed yet again by the 1989 transformation, the memorial dynamics around Treblinka have been negotiated between the gradually consolidating transnational Holocaust perspective and national anti-communist or nationalizing framings of Polish victimhood.

The entanglement of these two dimensions - materiality and narratives of remembrance - have been also informing possibilities of visualization on the sites, explored by UPF. In Treblinka, the team of the university aimed to find a possibility of associating and enriching the data produced for archaeological research with that of reconstruction through an overlay of perspectives on memory. During the meeting several tryouts of mock up vizualization were used to experiment with these possibilities.

Because of its secrecy in operational architecture, the experience of Treblinka has been conveyed through testimonies of the approximately 70 people who managed to escape during the revolt and survive the war. Given this particular context, the complicity of locals and the extent to which Treblinka was known has also been a particular line of interest in the project. Freie Universitat Berlin and UPF recorded an interview with a nearby inhabitant familiar with the existence of the camp and with the existent to which Polish-Jewish relations played out in the aftermath of the revolt in the camp and after the war, to be used in the platform or research outcomes. The collection of UPF has already contributed to a more precise overview of the extent of testimonies on the site and to the interpretations of many of the survivor stories over the following decades after the war.



