

Staffordshire University Cultural Genocide and Killing Sites Project

Before the Holocaust, Jewish cemeteries were at the heart of Jewish communities across Europe as the places where the history of the community was preserved and remembered. During the Holocaust, the Nazis saw them as physical and symbolic expressions of Jewish culture and they became targets of their attempts to erase all past and present traces of Jewish people. Tombstones were toppled, graves were desecrated and bones removed, funerary houses were looted and damaged, and cemetery land was used for other purposes. Not content with inflicting physical damage, the Nazis often used cemeteries as execution sites and mass graves were excavated for (and sometimes by) those killed.

This project will raise awareness of the causes and consequences of cultural and physical genocide within Jewish cemeteries in order to directly tackle racism, xenophobia and hostility between disparate groups in the present.

This will be achieved by:

- (1) Carrying out new research into the relationships between the destruction of property by the Nazis and their collaborators, and the use of religious spaces as killing sites.
- (2) Undertaking a series of “community action projects” at selected Jewish cemeteries where cultural and physical genocide occurred in the past and where neglect and vandalism is acute in the present.
- (3) Disseminating the results of (1) and (2) via a state-of-the-art digital platform.

The project will adopt a unique interdisciplinary methodology in order to achieve its aims and objectives, drawing upon techniques from history, archaeology, the digital humanities, conservation and community engagement. Detailed historical research will be undertaken regarding the nature of cultural and physical genocide within Jewish cemeteries using documents, photographs, aerial imagery, maps, plans and witness testimony. There has been little research into the reasons why Jewish cemeteries were used as killing sites or why some cemeteries were targeted and not others, and this research will address this and its impact upon the treatment of sites since World War II.

This will lead on to the “community action projects”, where members of the target groups (see below) will collaborate with the project team at two case study sites*. They will work alongside professional archaeologists in order to locate unmarked killing sites, historic individual graves and tombstones within Jewish cemeteries using a unique *non-invasive* approach (developed by the main applicant), which seeks to forensically document Holocaust sites whilst accounting for their religious and commemorative significance (Sturdy Colls 2015). This approach includes the use of: photogrammetry (using 360-degree photography and drone survey), laser scanning, topographic survey and geophysical techniques in order to generate 3D visualisations which will identify, characterise and preserve the material remains within the selected cemeteries by way of digital record. They will also work alongside experts in conservation in order to reinstate tombstones, remove graffiti and tidy up the cemeteries. By undertaking this work, it is the intention of the project to explore the benefits of community archaeology and restoration as a means of tackling intolerance. The selected case studies have been chosen because they are within communities where anti-Semitism and vandalism are particularly prevalent and participants will explore past and present examples of the destruction of cultural spaces in order to reflect on the causes and consequences of these attitudes and actions.

This data, along with that generated as part of the research phase, will feed into the state-of-the-art digital platform in order to provide a novel educational tool which can be used to raise awareness of the Holocaust and the communities it affected beyond the life-time of the project. This platform will also be developed in such a way that information about the sites examined and new sites can be added in the future.

This project is intended as a pilot for a planned long-term collaboration between the project partners as part of a commitment to researching this important, yet under-examined, aspect of Holocaust history. It intends to provide a novel framework for engaging civil society/opinion makers, educational policy makers and the wider public using new technologies.

* I propose 2 x 2wks of detailed fieldwork (where the archaeological methods will be applied). I am also proposing a two week reconnaissance visit during which we capture 360 degree photographs of a larger number of sites within a chosen case study region. We could look at more case studies in detail if we had match funding to make this possible or if we made the field season only 1 week.

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