

Holocaust Studies and Materials
Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały

2013

ISSN: 1895-247X
eISSN: 2657-3571
DOI: 10.32927
WWW: www.zagladazydow.pl

Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów IFiS PAN
Polish Center for Holocaust Research

Gone but not Forgotten: Archaeological approaches to the site of the former Treblinka Extermination Camp in Poland

Caroline Sturdy Colls

redakcja@holocaustresearch.pl

DOI: https://doi.org/10.32927/zzsim.809
Strony/Pages: 253-289

CC BY

OPEN ACCESS

Caroline Sturdy Colls

Gone but not Forgotten: Archaeological approaches to the site of the former Treblinka Extermination Camp in Poland

Introduction

Public impression of the Holocaust is unquestionably centered on knowledge about, and the image of, Auschwitz-Birkenau – the gas chambers, the crematoria, the systematic and industrialized killing of victims.[1] This has led to Hayes branding it the "capital of the Holocaust… the place most indelibly linked with all of its multiple dimensions."[2] This familiarity with the site is undoubtedly due to the existence of surviving structures at the camp and the pictures of it that have been published in the media since it was liberated in 1945. Alongside historical information and the possessions of the victims, these surviving materials provide both physical evidence of the crimes that took place and a visible reminder of the suffering of those sent to the camp.

Conversely, knowledge of the former extermination camp at Treblinka, which stands in stark contrast to Auschwitz-Birkenau in terms of the visible evidence that survives pertaining to it, is less embedded in general public consciousness. The current appearance of the site alludes little to its former function; having been leveled by the Nazis, landscaped to create the modern memorial and enshrined by pine trees, the site has an appearance more akin to a nature park (Plates 1 and 2). Although a symbolic memorial, railway platform and boundary are present at the site, the spatial layout of the camp is unclear and no original structures are visible above ground. Additionally, questions still remain about the locations of mass graves and cremation sites believed to contain the remains of over 800,000 people.

[1] Genevieve Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz: Nationalism and Religion in Post-communist Poland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Peter Hayes, "Auschwitz, Capital of the Holocaust: Review Essay," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 17, 2 (2003): 330–350.

[2] Peter Hayes, 'Auschwitz, Capital of the Holocaust: Review Essay', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 17, 2 (2003): 331.



Plate 1: The current appearance of the former extermination camp at Treblinka (© Caroline Sturdy Colls)



Plate 2: Aerial view of Treblinka showing the extent of forestation at the site (© www.Geoportal.pl)

As this paper will argue, the contrasting level of knowledge about Auschwitz-Birkenau and Treblinka[3] is centered upon the belief that physical evidence of the camps only survives when it is visible and above-ground. The perception of Treblinka as having been "destroyed" by the Nazis, and the belief that the bodies of all of the victims were cremated without trace, has resulted in a lack of investigation aimed at answering questions about the extent and nature of the camp, and the locations of mass graves and cremation pits. Indeed, the lack of visible evidence at Treblinka, and at other sites, has been used as an evidence of absence in the past; the general public and historical literature have taken the view that only documentary records and oral testimony can contribute to the narrative of such sites, whilst Holocaust revisionists have used the lack of in situ physical evidence to suggest that the events reported in the historical literature did not occur.[4]

However, this paper will demonstrate the potential of archaeological research to complement and supplement the historical narratives of the Holocaust through a discussion of ongoing research being undertaken at Treblinka. It will be demonstrated that, even at sites such as this where standing structures do not survive, considerable information can still be gleaned concerning layout, form and function through the analysis of more discrete indicators in the landscape. Similarly, this can be achieved without the excavation and disturbance of the remains, as demonstrated by the application of the interdisciplinary non-invasive methodology employed at Treblinka; thus the religious and commemorative importance of the site can be acknowledged during scientific investigations.[5] It will be argued that various misconceptions exist concerning the survivability of the physical remnants at Treblinka and at other Holocaust sites.

Archaeological Approaches

The events of the Holocaust, such as those that occurred at Treblinka, not only had a dramatic impact upon the lives of generations of people, but they also radically altered the landscape of Europe. Long after these sites were

[3] For the purposes of this paper, the name Treblinka will be used to refer to the former extermination camp, which is often referred to as Treblinka II. The research program described in this paper is being applied at Treblinka I, the former labor camp which is located 2 km from the Treblinka II site, but the results of this survey will be outlined in future publications once this work has been completed.

[4] Michael R. Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (Canada: Plume, 2000); Carlo Mattogno and Jürgen Graf, "Treblinka: Extermination Camp or Transit Camp?" (USA: Thesis and Dissertation Press, 2004, see http://www.vho.org/GB/Books/t/, retrieved 16 August 2012).

[5] See Caroline Sturdy Colls, "Holocaust Archaeology: Archaeological Approaches to Landscapes of Nazi Genocide and Persecution," *Journal of Conflict Archaeology* 7, 2 (2012): 71–105 for a more detailed discussion concerning the implications of archaeological research at Holocaust sites.

abandoned, traces of their existence will survive; some in the form of visible structural remains but, less acknowledged, as earthworks, vegetation change, topographic indicators and other taphonomic markers. Such traces have been shown to survive at archaeological sites that are thousands of years old and also in longer-term criminal investigations, yet they have rarely been considered as part of investigations of sites of the Holocaust.[6]

The Holocaust Landscapes Project was instigated in order to record such traces using a variety of techniques borrowed from archaeology, history, forensic science, geography and social anthropology. Documentary, cartographic, photographic and aerial reconnaissance material is assimilated with topographic and geophysical data in order to facilitate detailed landscape analysis, the identification of above-ground and sub-surface features, and reinterpretation of a site's layout in both spatial and temporal terms.[7] The topographic survey methods employed allow the positions of earthworks, vegetation change and other features visible on the surface, such as structural debris and artefacts, to be recorded. Digital terrain models are also generated using surveying methods which, being accurate to sub-millimeter level, are capable of revealing topographic change – often not visible to the naked eye – caused by the presence of buried features. The nature of these buried features can then be confirmed using geophysical survey. A variety of methods are used to allow different properties in the soil to be recorded. Features such as walls, structural debris, graves and other forms of soil disturbance may present themselves as anomalies, and their size and construction can be determined. All of this data can then be merged with, and compared to, historical sources such as aerial images and witness plans.

One of the key aims of this research is to demonstrate the diversity of the Holocaust, in terms of the physical evidence relating to it. In turn, this will demonstrate variation in terms of the actions and experiences of the victims, perpetrators, bystanders affected by these events. By doing this, it is hoped that the information generated by the application of this methodology will demonstrate

[6] For examples of how these indicators have been examined in a forensic archaeological context see John R. Hunter and Margaret Cox, *Forensic Archaeology: Advances in Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2005); Caroline L. Sturdy, "The Past is History? Investigation of Mass Graves of the Holocaust Using Archaeological and Forensic Archaeological Techniques" (MPhil (B) Diss. University of Birmingham, 2007). Only a handful of investigations have been undertaken at Holocaust sites using archaeological techniques and they have predominantly focused upon excavation. See Caroline Sturdy Colls, "Holocaust Archaeology: Archaeological Approaches to Landscapes of Nazi Genocide and Persecution, *Journal of Conflict Archaeology* 7, 2 (2012): 71–105 for an overview of these investigations.

[7] More information about this research can be found in Caroline L. Sturdy Colls, "Holocaust Archaeology: Archaeological Approaches to Landscapes of Nazi Genocide and Persecution" (PhD Diss. University of Birmingham, 2012) and Sturdy Colls, "Holocaust Archaeology: Archaeological Approaches to Landscapes of Nazi Genocide and Persecution," *Journal of Conflict Archaeology* 7, 2 (2012): 71–105.

the potential of Holocaust archaeology to enrich commemorative, heritage and education programs in the future.

On the basis that it was deemed impossible that the landscape of Treblinka had been sterilized of all traces of the Nazi's actions, an ongoing program of archaeological research was instigated in order to reveal new insights into the nature and extent of the camp. An important dimension of this research is the recognition that the history of Treblinka did not end with its abandonment or the collapse of the Nazi regime. When this is acknowledged and a site's post-abandonment history is also considered, it is possible to derive as much about the cultural memory associated with it and the cognitive processes that have shaped its formation, as the surviving remnants of structures, artefacts and other material remains. By considering what can be termed the intangible heritage of Treblinka e.g. attitudes towards the site, and the changes to it that have taken place since the war, this research also aims to contribute to its post-abandonment narrative and has considered the various political, social and religious issues that have continued to shape both its physical appearance and its place in public perception; indeed it is argued that such landscapes can be viewed as physical manifestations of such beliefs. It is these perceptions that will be the main focus of this paper.

Understanding these post-abandonment circumstances is also essential to ensure that the concerns and opinions of those with a connection to the site are duly considered. Indeed, these considerations were central to the methodology devised as part of this research for the survey of sites pertaining to the Holocaust, including Treblinka. Whilst this was not the first archaeological project at an extermination camp, given the work undertaken by Kola[8], Gilead et al[9] and Pawlicka-Nowak[10] this was the first survey of Treblinka and the first survey where the interdisciplinary approach devised allowed the sensitivities involved in the study of this period to be compensated for. No excavation was carried out and the ground was not disturbed. Any features and artefacts recorded were visible on the surface or were characterized using survey methods. Such an approach has three main advantages. In the first instance this facili-

[8] Andrzej Kola, *Bełżec: The Nazi Camp For Jews in the Light of Archaeological Sources, Excavations 1997–1999* (Warsaw and Washington: The Council for the Protection of Memory and Martyrdom, 2000).

[9] Isaac Gilead, Yoram Hamai and Wojciech Mazurek, "Excavating Nazi Extermination Centres," *Present Pasts* 1 (2009): 10–39.

[10] Łucja Pawlicka-Nowak, "Archaeological research in the grounds of the Chełmno-on-Ner extermination center," in *The Extermination Center for Jews in Chełmno-on-Ner in the Light of Latest Research, Symposium Proceedings September 6–7, 2004*, ed. Łucja Pawlicka-Nowak (Konin: District Museum, 2004); eadem, "Archaeological research in the grounds of the Chełmno-on-Ner former extermination center," in *Chełmno Witnesses Speak*, ed. Łucja Pawlicka-Nowak (Konin and Łódź: The Council for the Protection of Memory of Combat and Martyrdom in Warsaw, 2004).

tated detailed site investigation that adhered to the principal of Halacha Law, by avoiding the disturbance of burial sites and human remains. Secondly, this non-invasive methodology offered other advantages over excavation in the areas of public engagement, collaboration with local authorities and mediation between affected groups. For example, archaeology is usually seen as a destructive, invasive process that, particularly when undertaken at sites of conflict, may open old wounds and bring to the fore unresolved issues through the investigation of physical evidence.[11] By taking a non-invasive approach, this may help avoid such a situation; it may facilitate access to, and detailed recording of, sites where work has not previously been permitted, and help to build trust between local authorities and researchers. Finally, from a methodological perspective, excavation does irreversibly alter the physical evidence itself, either through the modification of the soil deposits in which it lies or through the physical removal of remains. A non-invasive approach is non-destructive and it also allows the broader context of a site to be assessed, rather than focusing on small areas, such as test pits, or individual features; thus the broader Holocaust landscape can be defined.

Re-Interpreting Treblinka

Described as the most "perfected" of the Operation Reinhardt death camps, Treblinka in Poland became the massacre site of over 800,000 European Jews, Poles and gypsies during the Holocaust.[12] Located 108 km from Warsaw, in the north-east portion of the General Government, this remote, previously unassuming area of forest adjacent to the River Bug housed an extermination centre (also known as Treblinka II), comprising of a complex of gas chambers, barracks, mass graves and, later, cremation pyres (Figure 1).[13] Constructed in 1942, it was argued at Nuremberg that "the erection of this camp was closely connected with the German plans aimed at a complete destruction of the Jewish population in Poland, which necessitated the creation of a machinery by means of which the Polish Jews could be killed in large numbers."[14] By the time the camp closed in August 1943, hundreds of thousands of Jews, gypsies and political prisoners

[11] Randall H. McGuire, *Archaeology as Political Action* (California Series in Public Anthropology) (California: University of California Press, 2008).

[12] Yitzhak Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka: The Operation Reinhard Death Camps* (USA: John Wiley & Sons, 1987), 37.

[13] Jankiel Wiernik, *A Year in Treblinka: An Inmate who Escaped Tells the Day-to-day Facts of One Year of his Torturous Experience* (New York: American Representation of the General Jewish Workers' Union of Poland, 1944).

[14] International Military Tribunal Nuremberg, *Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal Nuremberg,* 14 November 1945–1 October 1946, vol. 3 (Nuremberg: International Military Tribunal Nuremberg, 1946), http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/NT_major-war-criminals.html, pp. 567–568, retrieved 20 October 2007.



Figure 1: Location plan of Treblinka, showing the extermination camp known as Treblinka II and the penal labor camp known as Treblinka (© Caroline Sturdy Colls)

from Poland, Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Belgium and Yugoslavia had been murdered there.[15] The exact number will probably never be known, owing to the disposal of the corpses of the victims through various means. Estimates based on transport lists, records kept by a local railway worker and witness testimonies have varied from 700,000 up to 1.2 million, with the widely accepted figure being around 800,000 people.[16] The closure of Treblinka, like

[15] Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland (later: CCIGCP), *German War Crimes in Poland*, vol. 1 (Warsaw: Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland, 1946), 104; Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka.*

[16] Philip Friedman, *Martyrs and Fighters: The epic of the Warsaw Ghetto*. (London: Virago, 1982), 161; International Military Tribunal Nuremberg, *Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal Nuremberg*, 14 November 1945–1 October 1946, vol. 8 (Nuremberg: International Military Tribunal Nuremberg, 1946), http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/NT_major-war-criminals.html, p. 329, retrieved 20 October 2007; Witold Chrostowski, *Extermination: Camp Treblinka* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 2004), 99–101;

the other Operation Reinhardt camps, was ordered by Himmler and fewer transports arrived in the camp during early 1943.[17] During this quieter period, the prisoners planned a revolt which took place on the 2nd August 1943.[18] Of approximately 850 inmates, only 200 managed to escape, with even less surviving the rest of the war.[19] Additionally, the existence of a forced labor camp at the site (Treblinka I), which was operational from 1941 until almost a year after Treblinka II had closed, facilitated the implementation of the Nazi "death through work" policy for thousands more so-called enemies of the Reich (Figure 1).[20]

As noted above, the historical narrative of Treblinka has suggested that the site was entirely destroyed by the Nazis and that no physical evidence of the former extermination camp exists. It would appear that this situation has arisen as a result of numerous factors, some of which relate to the condition of the site itself and others which stem from the perceptions of it. However, a re-evaluation of historical material and archaeological survey has demonstrated that this is not the case and that, in fact, considerable traces of the extermination camp remain. Due to the confines of space, this paper will summarise some of the findings of the research at the site to date. The initial non-invasive survey results can be found in full in Sturdy Colls.[21] A book outlining all of the survey results from both Treblinka I and Treblinka II will follow in 2014.

Attempts to Hide the Crimes

Addressing the issues chronologically, one reason why it has been stated that Treblinka was entirely destroyed relates to accounts which record the attempts by the Nazis to hide their crimes during the period that the camp was in operation. In particular, there is a perception that the Nazis managed to destroy the remains of all of the victims sent to the extermination camps and that an industrialized, ordered "production line of death" was in place at all of these sites to facilitate this; this can be seen to be another "inheritance" of the iconography of

---

Gitta Sereny, *Into that Darkness: From Mercy Killing to Mass Murder* (London: Pimlico, 1995), 250; Samuel Rajzman, "The End of Treblinka," in *The Death Camp Treblinka: A Documentary* ed. Alexander Donat (New York: Schocken Books, 1979), 296; Muzeum Walki i Męczeństwa w Treblince. *Treblinka* (Siedlce, Muzeum Regionalne w Siedlcach, 2008).

[17] Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka*.

[18] Richard Glazar in Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah* (DVD, Videofilmexpress, 2005).

[19] "Extermination Camp – Treblinka II," Muzeum Walki i Męczeństwa w Treblince, www.treblinka.bho.pl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=6&Itemid=6, retrieved 20 January 2009.

[20] "The Penal Labor Camp – Treblinka I," Muzeum Walki i Męczeństwa w Treblince, www.treblinka.bho.pl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=5&Itemid=5, retrieved 20 January 2009.

[21] Sturdy Colls, "Holocaust Archaeology: Archaeological Approaches to Landscapes of Nazi Genocide and Persecution" (PhD Diss.).

Auschwitz-Birkenau.[22] Popular perceptions centre on the idea that the victims in the death camps were all sent to the gas chambers following which they were initially buried in mass graves until the development of the crematoria, when they were then cremated, with existing graves being exhumed.[23] Accounts of Sonderkommando members that detail the attempts made to hide and, in some cases, destroy the bodies through the grinding up and scattering of the ashes of the victims, also play a prominent part in historical narratives of the camps.[24]

Such beliefs have saturated the historical narrative of Treblinka and likely offer one explanation as to why a large-scale search for the graves of the victims has not been carried out. Whilst such practices did occur in the extermination camp, this "popular" perception oversimplifies the methods of killing and disposal at Treblinka. Such practices were not characteristic of the almost factory-like system in place at Auschwitz-Birkenau, but instead represented a much more primitive set of procedures that developed over time; the sheer number of people sent to Treblinka often meant that chaos, necessity or the sadism of the guards resulted in divergence from a standard method of killing or disposal at various times throughout the camp's operation.[25]

Additionally, the archaeological data derived to date challenges historical narratives which suggest that no burial sites survive at Treblinka outside of the areas represented by the memorial stones. Eleven pits, the largest in excess of 34 m in length and the smallest in excess of 10m, were recorded using geophysical survey in areas suggested by witnesses as having housed mass graves and cremation pits (Figure 2).[26] A number of other features recorded in the forested areas of the camp, which were characterized by distinctive vegetation, may represent further

[22] Jacek A. Młynarczyk, "Treblinka – obóz śmierci 'akcji Reinhardt,'" in *Akcja Reinhardt. Zagłada Żydów w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie*, ed. Dariusza Libionka (Warsaw: IPN, 2004), 3.

[23] For an example in relation to Treblinka, see "Treblinka," Yad Vashem, www1.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/microsoft%20word%20-%205886.pdf, retrieved 3 October 2009.

[24] For examples, see *Amidst a Nightmare of Crime: Manuscripts of Members of Sonderkommando*, ed. Jadwiga Bezwinska (Oświęcim: State Museum, 1973); International Military Tribunal Nuremberg, *Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal Nuremberg,* 14 November 1945–1 October 1946, vol. 7 (Nuremberg: International Military Tribunal Nuremberg, 1946), http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/NT_major-war-criminals.html, pp. 591–592, retrieved 20 October 2007; *Documents on the Holocaust: Selected sources on the destruction of the Jews of Germany, Austria, Poland, and the Soviet Union*, ed. Yitzhak Arad, Yisrael Gutman, Abraham Margaliot, Lea Ben Dor and Stephen T. Katz (8th edition, Lincoln, London and Jerusalem: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).

[25] Tadeusz Iwaszko, Wacław Długoborski and Franciszek Piper, *Auschwitz 1940–1945 Central Issues in the History of the Camp*, vol. 2: *The Prisoners – their life and work*, (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2000); Sereny, *Into that Darkness*.

[26] Sturdy Colls, "Holocaust Archaeology: Archaeological Approaches to Landscapes of Nazi Genocide and Persecution" (PhD Diss.). The dimensions are described in terms of their visible length as both largest and smallest of the features identified likely continued into the forested areas of the camp where it was not possible to survey.

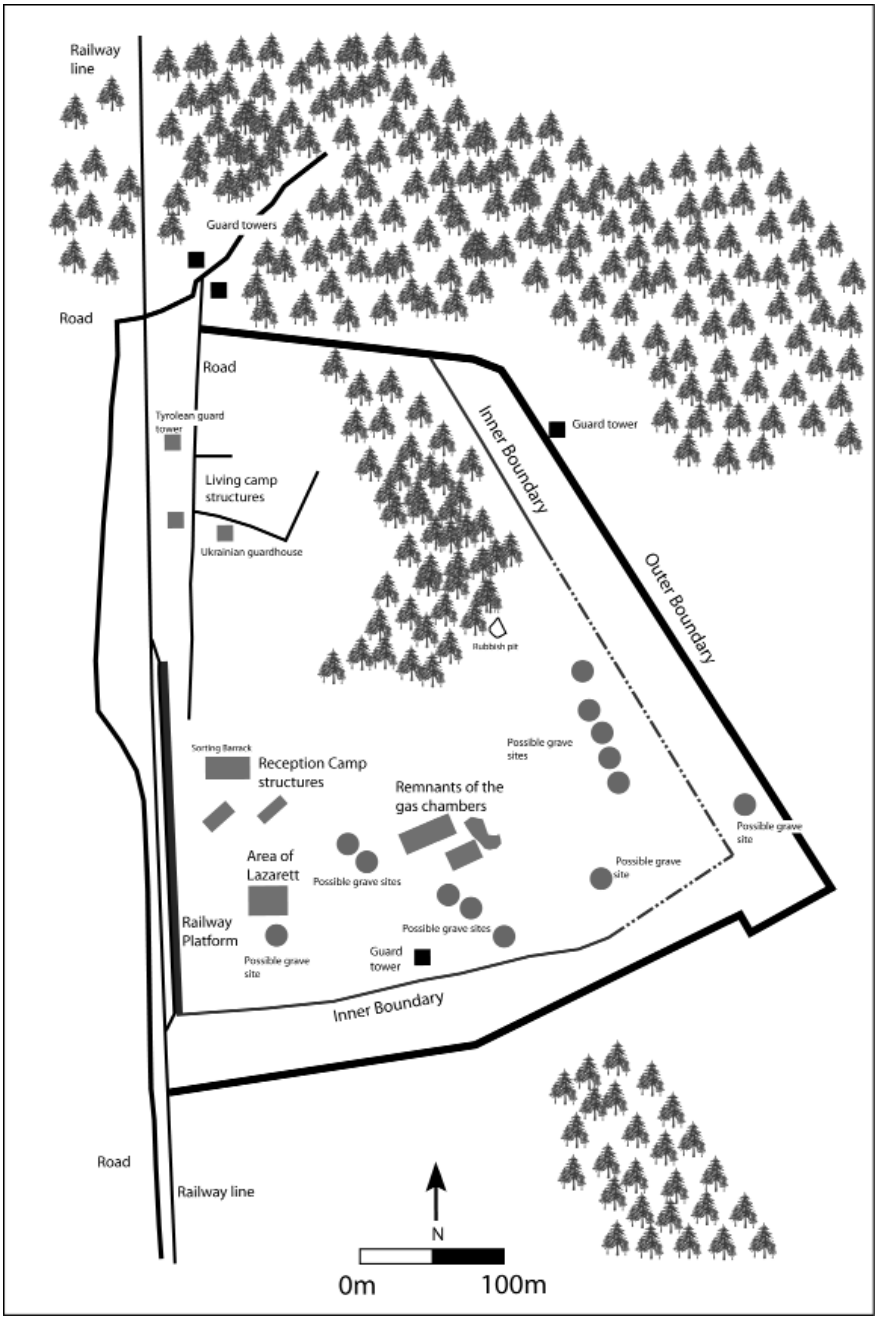


Figure 2: Interpretation plan of the main features recorded at Treblinka during archaeological survey. Note: the features are not shown as their actual shape in plan as this is a stylized illustration.



Plate 3: Defined, distinctive, dry vegetation observed in the forested areas that may represent further body deposition sites (© Caroline Sturdy Colls)

burial sites (Plate 3). Given that only a small portion of the camp was examined during fieldwork to date, it is anticipated that further remains will be located in other areas not yet surveyed. In light of these findings, and based on a re-evaluation of historical material and recent developments in forensic and archaeological investigation, several important points require consideration with regards to the ability by the Nazis to totally eradicate all traces of the 800,000 people murdered at Treblinka, which will be discussed in more detail below.

The first transport arrived at Treblinka from Warsaw on the 23 July 1942 and from this date until mid-August, Arad has estimated that between 5,000 and 7,000 people were sent to the camp each day, under the illusion that it was a transit camp.[27] By the end of August 1942, it was reported that the death toll in the

[27] Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka*.

camp had reached 10,000 to 12,000 people a day, yet only three gas chambers existed.[28] This meant that not all victims were sent to the gas chambers; some were shot, beaten or thrown alive into the so-called "eternal flame" located behind a false hospital (the Lazarett).[29] Witnesses place the Lazarett and associated burial pit in close proximity to the southern end of the railway platform. This was confirmed when the results of topographic and geophysical survey were compared with, and overlaid onto, witness plans and contemporary aerial images.[30]

During this early period, the main method used to dispose of the victims bodies was burial in mass graves. Body disposal groups were assigned, their sole responsibility being to dig large pits in the south and east portion of the camp.[31] However, as more victims were sent to Treblinka, large "kopachke" (*kopaczka*) or excavators were used to dig larger pits.[32] Some witnesses talk of pits as large as 60–70 m in length, whilst some allude to the presence of smaller ones, measuring approximately 25 m which were either dug in the early phase or still by hand later on.[33] This demonstrates how, just because new systems of disposal were introduced or seemingly systematic processes were employed, alternative means of disposal were still being undertaken.[34]

Witnesses also discuss attempts by the Germans to hide their crimes, which included both above-ground landscape modification, for example the use of a special "camouflage detail" and the construction of earth embankments to mask the view of the graves, through to below-ground efforts to accelerate decomposition, such as the use of lime to cover the corpses.[35] These attempts, alongside issues such as the psychology of hiding a crime, were considered when undertaking archaeological fieldwork. However, it should be noted that

[28] Ian Baxter, *The SS of Treblinka* (Stroud: Spellmount, 2010).

[29] Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka*; Rajzman, "The End of Treblinka," 231–251; "A Wehrmacht Soldier's Diary", Hubert Pfoch, www.nizkor.org/ftp.cgi/camps/aktion.reinhard/treblinka/siedice.002, retrieved 10 September 2009; Samuel Willenberg, *Surviving Treblinka* (Oxford and New York: Blackwell, 1989), 40.

[30] Sturdy Colls, "Holocaust Archaeology: Archaeological Approaches to Landscapes of Nazi Genocide and Persecution" (PhD Diss.).

[31] Wiernik, *A Year in Treblinka*; Richard Glazar, *Trap with a Green Fence: Survival in Treblinka* (2nd edition, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1999).

[32] Jacob Apenszlak, *Black Book of Polish Jewry* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1943), 143.

[33] Abraham Krzepicki, "Eighteen Days in Treblinka," in *The Death Camp Treblinka: A Documentary* ed. Alexander Donat (New York: Schocken Books, 1979), 92.

[34] Rajzman, "The End of Treblinka," 231–251; International Military Tribunal Nuremberg, *Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal Nuremberg,* 14 November 1945–1 October 1946, vol. 8 (Nuremberg: International Military Tribunal Nuremberg, 1946), http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/NT_major-war-criminals.html, retrieved 20 October 2007.

[35] Rachela Auerbach, "In the fields of Treblinka," in *The Death Camp Treblinka: A Documentary*, ed. Alexander Donat (New York: Schocken Books, 1979); Krzepicki, "Eighteen Days in Treblinka"; Glazar, *Trap with a Green Fence*.

such practices did not destroy the traces of the camp and the victims; they have simply masked them. Additionally, in terms of the below-ground attempts to destroy the remains, recent research into the effects of lime on buried human remains has demonstrated that, despite popular beliefs to the contrary, lime actually preserves cadavers.[36] Therefore, in this instance, the attempts to hide the crimes may actually assist in their detection.

Although information produced by the *Muzeum Walki i Męczeństwa w Treblince* states that the camp was reorganized in September/October 1942 because "the chambers turned out to be draughty and the corpses' removal too time-consuming," the reality of the situation in the camp at this time was more serious.[37] Owing to the large number of people being sent there, and the inexperience of the administration, "in Treblinka everything was in a state of collapse […] Many corpses of Jews were lying inside the camp. These corpses were already bloated."[38] This resulted in Commander Eberl being removed from his post and a new system of extermination being implemented.[39]

Franz Stangl took over as Camp Commander, with Kurt Franz as his deputy, and temporarily suspended transports to the camp between the 28 August and the 3 September to clear the backlog of corpses.[40] These changes necessitated the second phase of construction within the camp; new gas chambers were constructed, the "tube" was relocated and new Kommandos were established to dispose of the corpses, with all members of the earlier Death Camp working group being exterminated upon Christian Wirth's order.[41] This new system meant that 52,000 Jews from Warsaw were murdered in the first two weeks of September.[42] Consequently, the period from the end of August until December 1942 was described as "the most active period" in the extermination process at Treblinka by the Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland.[43]

---

[36] Eline M.J. Schotsmans, John Denton, Jessica Dekeirsschieter, Tatiana Ivaneanu, Sarah Leentjes, Rob C. Janaway and Andrew S. Wilson, "Effects of hydrated lime and quicklime on the decay of buried human remains using pig cadavers as human body analogues," *Forensic Science International* 217 (2012): 50–59.

[37] "Extermination Camp – Treblinka II," Muzeum Walki i Męczeństwa w Treblince, www.treblinka.bho.pl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=6&Itemid=6, retrieved 20 January 2009,

[38] Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka*, 59.

[39] "Franz Suchomel speaks on Treblinka," Franz Suchomel, www.holocaustresearchproject.org/trials/suchomelstatement.html, retrieved 23 September 2008; Anton Spiess, in Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah* (DVD, Videofilmexpress, 2005).

[40] Chrostowski, *Extermination: Camp Treblinka*; "Franz Suchomel speaks on Treblinka," Franz Suchomel, www.holocaustresearchproject.org/trials/suchomelstatement.html, retrieved 23 September 2008.

[41] Baxter, *The SS of Treblinka*.

[42] Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka*.

[43] CCIGCP, *German War Crimes in Poland*, vol. 1, 103.

From November 1942, some of the corpses of those sent to the camp were cremated. However, it was not until Himmler's visit in February 1943 that cremation reportedly became the main method of disposal alongside the exhumation of those already buried in mass graves.[44] Cremation allowed larger numbers of victims to be disposed of as well as providing a more covert way of hiding the traces of the crimes committed; "they later figured that burying the victims was not such a good idea, because someday those ditches would be dug up and what had gone on there would be known."[45] Witnesses talk of how Wirth was instrumental in the developments of the cremations and that he bought a cremation specialist from Bełżec to examine new ways to dispose of the bodies.[46] Lessons were learnt from other sites; initially, there are reports that the victims were made to line up at the edge of burning pits, into which they were shot, the success of which had been demonstrated at Stalingrad.[47] It has been argued that the need to develop new ways to hide the traces of the remains stemmed from the discovery of the mass graves at Katyń.[48] Additionally, existing mass graves were opened and burnt in situ.[49] A burning group (*Feuerkolonne*) was set up and experiments conducted with the use of crude oil and other accelerants whilst systems, such as layering women on the bottom as they burnt faster, were developed.[50]

In spring 1943, cremation pyres, so-called roasts, comprising of iron rails, were constructed and these were capable of holding several hundred bodies.[51] Most commonly, witnesses refer to the removal of the bodies of the victims from the gas chambers and their alignment on these rails: "a series of furnaces covered on the top with four rows of rails extended along the entire length of one of the walls of the pit. The bodies were laid on the rails, caught fire from the flames burning in the furnaces and burned. About 1000 bodies were burned simultaneously. The burning process lasted up to five hours."[52] This, Wiernik argues, saw the ability to handle "the new transports […] in a simplified manner;" the cremation followed directly after the gassing.[53] By July 1943, Wiernik also reported

[44] Glazar, *Trap with a Green Fence*; Krzepicki, "Eighteen Days in Treblinka"; Miriam Kuperhand and Saul Kuperhand, *Shadows of Treblinka* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[45] Rajzman, "The End of Treblinka,", 232.

[46] "Franz Suchomel speaks on Treblinka," Franz Suchomel, www.holocaustresearchproject.org/trials/suchomelstatement.html, retrieved 23 September 2008.

[47] Edi Weinstein, *Quenched Steel. The Story of an Escape From Treblinka* (Jerusalem, Yad Vashem Publications, 2002); Auerbach, "In the fields of Treblinka."

[48] Chrostowski, *Extermination: Camp Treblinka*.

[49] "Leleko Interrogation", Pavel Vladimirovich Leleko, www.nizkor.org/ftp.cgi/camps/aktion.reinhard/treblinka/leleko.002, retrieved 12 July 2008.

[50] Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka*, 176.

[51] Sereny, *Into that Darkness*, 220.

[52] "Leleko Interrogation", Pavel Vladimirovich Leleko, www.nizkor.org/ftp.cgi/camps/aktion.reinhard/treblinka/leleko.002, retrieved 12 July 2008.

[53] Wiernik, 30.

that three quarters of the victims had been cremated and that large excavators had been brought in to exhume them.[54]

However, as Fairgreave argues, "the layman is clearly under the mistaken impression that a body can be easily reduced down to ashes and thus not be recovered."[55] Recent work in forensic cremation demonstrates total eradication of bone requires extremely high temperatures, which the purpose-built cremation pyres were unlikely to have achieved.[56] As Robert Altschuh stated of Treblinka II "they are trying to find ways to hide the traces; they are burning the corpses. But they aren't going to find it so easy – even one corpse doesn't burn easily, hundreds of thousands of corpses…?"[57] The observation of burnt bone fragments in the topsoil and in the cracks of the monument during recent fieldwork confirms that the remains were not entirely destroyed.

Additionally, whilst it has often been argued that the mass graves themselves were all destroyed when they were exhumed, this is unlikely to have been the case. Whilst initial attempts were made to mix the ashes with soil, this was quickly abandoned and the cremated remains were put back into the original ditches from which they came. [58] Geophysical survey methods detect disturbances under the ground, such as those caused by the excavation of a pit or grave. These disturbances will remain detectable indefinitely, providing they do not encounter further disturbance; thus if the cremated remains were put back into the original graves, the grave cuts would still be detectable. Therefore, although it is impossible to confirm the nature of the graves without excavation (which is not advocated due to Halacha Law), some of the aforementioned pits identified during the survey likely represent these types of burial sites, particularly those to the rear of the memorial.

A review of historical literature also raises questions over the extent to which Himmler's orders were actually carried out in practice. Despite the order to cremate the corpses in November 1942, there were still reports of mass burials after this date.[59] This seems to be supported by the fact that, in February 1943, Himmler visited Treblinka and "discovered that, despite orders to the contrary, the corpses of all the victims had been buried instead of cremated."[60]

Similarly, although the official line was exhumation and cremation after this time, the impracticalities of digging up all of the corpses and the free will of the task forces ordered to dispose of the victims meant that it was unlikely that all

[54] Ibidem.

[55] Scott I. Fairgreave, *Forensic Cremation: Recovery and Analysis* (London and New York: CRC Press, 2008), 37.

[56] Tim T.J. Thompson, "Recent advances in the study of burned bone and their implications for forensic anthropology," *Forensic Science International* 146S (2004): 203–205.

[57] Sereny, *Into that Darkness*, 193.

[58] Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka*, 176.

[59] Krzepicki, "Eighteen Days in Treblinka," 90.

[60] Willenberg, *Surviving Treblinka*, 17.



Plate 4: Bones littering the camp upon the liberation of the area surrounding Treblinka II by the Soviet army (© Yad Vashem, YV 41E09)

of the bodies were subject to such practices. Auerbach stated that "those in the know are aware that not all the dead were cremated and that, aside from those who were buried naked, Jews in some places were buried fully dressed without their pockets being searched."[61] Abraham Goldfarb reported how, even following the orders to exhume and cremate the corpses,

> we secretly placed in the walls of the graves whole skeletons and we wrote on scraps of paper what the Germans were doing at Treblinka. We put the scraps of paper into bottles which we placed next to the skeletons. Our intention was that if one day someone looked for the traces of the Nazis' crimes, they could indeed be found,[62]

whilst Samuel Willenberg stated that "I must add that everywhere we worked we tried to leave a fragment of bodies in the mass graves in order that some traces of the people executed by shooting and buried."[63]

Consistent with these claims, several post-war reports allude to the presence of human bones at the site, some of it still retaining tissue.[64] Indeed Auerbach noted,

[61] Auerbach, "In the fields of Treblinka," 69.

[62] Abraham Goldfarb in Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka*, 176.

[63] Willenberg, *Surviving Treblinka*, 192–193.

[64] Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland, *German War Crimes in Poland* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1982); Władysław T. Bartoszewski in Willen-



Plate 5: Human remains found in advance of the construction of the memorial at Treblinka II (© Yad Vashem, YV 3960/21)

> as we moved further into the grounds, we walked over a field which was sown with human bones [...]. If only we could get an ethnologist to come here! He could have made the most accurate anthropological measurements relating to the racial features of the Jewish people.[65]

The district attorney is also cited: "those aren't just bones [...]. There are still pieces of half-rotted corpses lying there, bunches of intestines."[66] At Eichmann's trial in 1961, Dr. Hermann reported upon the scene he had noted during his post-war visit to the site: "there was a tremendous area many kilometers long and all over this area there were scattered skulls and bones and tens of thousands of pairs of shoes, many of them children's shoes."[67] This is also corroborated by post-war photographs, some of which even show that skeletal remains were still present during the construction of the memorial (Plates 4 and 5). Witness accounts also allude to the fact that some mass graves containing skeletal remains were simply disguised by planting saplings and other obstructive veg-

berg, *Surviving Treblinka*, 18; Marian Muszkat, *Polish Charges Against German War Criminals* (Warsaw: Polish Main National Office for the Investigation of German War Crimes in Poland, 1948).

[65] Auerbach, "In the fields of Treblinka," 71.

[66] Ibidem, 72.

[67] *Jefferson Tribune*, 3 May 1961.

etation, thus they may survive within the forested areas of the camp and these areas will be surveyed in the near future.[68]

Therefore, whilst a chronological trend in the killing methods used is evident, the methods of murder and disposal appear to be more closely related to other factors such as the victims' age, gender, health and, subsequently their location within the camp, their race, religion or the crime they were purported to have committed. An analysis of the purported camp layout in association with witness accounts and other documentary evidence reveals that the nature of killing within the camp was closely related to the location in which it was being carried out, with the methods becoming more systematic as the prisoners moved further into the camp compound.[69] This is also reflected in the locations in which their bodies are believed to have been disposed of and appears to be evident in the distribution of features identified during the archaeological survey (Figure 2). As already noted above, despite popular perceptions highlighting Nazi efficiency, the methods employed, whilst aimed at killing the maximum number of individuals, were also closely related to convenience. Of the eleven pits identified during archaeological survey, five were outside the main death camp area, closer to the railway platform, where witnesses state some of the early burials and the pits to dispose of the bodies of the elderly, sick and those who were dead on arrival, were located. A further six pits were located in the east portion of the camp, within the main death camp area where majority of victims would have been disposed of. The pits were outside the area of the memorial stones, suggesting that the stones were not cited according to confirmatory examination of the landscape (see further discussion below). Using non-invasive methods means that it is not possible to confirm whether the pits identified contain cremated or skeletalized remains, or if and when these remains were buried, exhumed or reinterred. However, owing to the diversity in disposal methods being used and the way in which these changed over time, it is likely that these pits contain complex stratigraphic sequences which include burials dating to various periods of the camp's operation. For example, one possible scenario is that the large pits at the rear of the camp may have initially represented mass graves, some or all of which may then have been excavated, with the bodies being cremated and then possibly reinterred.

Such trends can be observed at other sites pertaining to the Holocaust, thus demonstrating the potential to detect buried remains at other locations. Results of archaeological work at Bełżec confirms that not all of the bodies of victims were exhumed and cremated, and alludes to the varied nature of disposals within a single grave. O'Neil and Tregenza remark of one grave located at this

[68] "Treblinka Station Master Franciszek Zabecki," ARC, www.deathcamps.org/treblinka/zabecki.html, retrieved 17 July 2008.

[69] For a more detailed description see Sturdy Colls, "Holocaust Archaeology: Archaeological Approaches to Landscapes of Nazi Genocide and Persecution" (PhD Diss.), chapter four.

site that it "contained a mixture of carbonized wood, fragments of burnt human bones, pieces of skulls with skin and tufts of hair still attached, lumps of greyish human fat, and fragments of unburned human bones," thus demonstrating that earlier graves were re-used and not all of the remains were cremated.[70] Indeed, eleven out of thirty three graves contained unburnt remains, one of which was the largest grave at this site.[71] Countless other witnesses allude to a lack of cremations and attempts to attest to the crimes committed by the Nazis: "according to my orders I should have extended my duties over the entire area occupied by the Einsatzgruppen, but owing to the retreat from Russia I could not carry out my orders completely."[72] Similarly, the Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission at Majdanek reported that "judging by the large quantity of bones discovered in all parts of the camp (in pits, vegetable plots and under manure heaps), the Committee of Experts is of the opinion that bones were removed from the furnace before the time necessary for their complete incineration had expired."[73] Therefore, it is unlikely that the majority of the cremated remains from the Holocaust are ashes in the truest sense of the word. Given the developments in archaeological methods, the potential to locate some of these remains using non-invasive methods exists to ensure that the victims' graves can be appropriately marked, whilst remaining undisturbed.

Abandonment of the Camp

Many of the perceptions relating to the eradication of the structures at Treblinka have their roots in the period that immediately followed the camp's abandonment by the Nazis. The majority of historical texts that discuss the final stages of Treblinka II's existence as an extermination camp allude to the modifications that took place. Initial damage was caused by the revolt by prisoners on

[70] Robin O'Neil and Michael Tregenza, "Archaeological Investigations: A Review By Historians," www.holocaustresearchproject.org/ar/modern/archreview.html, retrieved 17 October 2007.

[71] Andrzej Kola, *Bełżec: The Nazi Camp For Jews in the Light of Archaeological Sources, Excavations 1997–1999* (Warsaw and Washington: The Council for the Protection of Memory and Martyrdom, 2000).

[72] Paul Blobel, "Evidence by Blobel on the Burning of Bodies and Obliterating the Traces of Bodies of Jews Killed by the Einsatzgruppen," in *Documents on the Holocaust: Selected sources on the destruction of the Jews of Germany, Austria, Poland, and the Soviet Union*, ed. Yitzhak Arad, Yisrael Gutman, Abraham Margaliot, Lea Ben Dor, and Stephen T. Katz (8th edition, Lincoln, London and Jerusalem: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 473.

[73] Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission for Investigating the Crimes Committed by the Germans in the Majdanek Extermination Camp in Lublin, *Communiqué of the Polish--Soviet Extraordinary Commission for Investigating the Crimes Committed by the Germans in the Majdanek Extermination Camp in Lublin* (Warsaw, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1944), 18.

2 August 1943 which resulted in some buildings being subject to fire damage.[74] Consequently, and as a result of the winding down of Operation Reinhardt, the last transports to Treblinka II arrived from Białystok on 18 and 19 August.[75] Following the extermination of the victims on these transports, a small group under the control of Kurt Franz was charged with dismantling the structures on the site, planting pine trees and lupines to disguise the body disposal sites and, as was standard practice at all of the Operation Reinhardt camps, a small farmhouse was built which would be manned by a Ukrainian guard, in case of unwanted interest.[76] These features have frequently been cited as the only surviving structures immediately after the camp's abandonment, something which has led historians and the public to believe that the rest of the camp was entirely destroyed.[77] Contemporary photographs demonstrate that these structures were burnt down by residents in 1944 and, therefore, it is often assumed that no trace of these survive either.[78] Re-use of the site has complicated interpretation; the area of Treblinka has been subject to bomb damage, occupation by the Soviet army, post-war looting activity and landscaping as part of the construction of the memorial.

However, the destruction of buildings in the archaeological record rarely results in the complete removal of all traces of such features. The construction processes involved in the laying of foundations, and the fact that these foundations are often left in situ upon the demolition of the rest of the structure they support, usually results in an identifiable trace centuries later. Additionally, the soil compression and compaction caused by the presence of structures, even those without solid foundations, would be identifiable in the archaeological record. Given the speed with which the Nazis commonly abandoned Holocaust sites, and the desire to hide the traces of the crimes through the most convenient means, prior to the survey it appeared likely from an archaeological standpoint that traces of the structures would survive.

Although a considerable portion of the former camp area is masked by the modern memorial and the forest, a number of features consistent with structural remains were identified through targeted survey of accessible areas of the Death Camp, Living Camp and Reception Camp (Figure 2). The dimensions and spatial distribution of these features, coupled with their comparison with historical sources such as witness accounts and photographs, are indicative of their form and function. As confirmed by topographic and geophysical techniques, two areas of structural debris appear to represent the remnants of the gas chambers,

[74] Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka*.

[75] Ibidem.

[76] "Treblinka Station Master Franciszek Zabecki," ARC, www.deathcamps.org/treblinka/zabecki.html, retrieved 17 July 2008; Sereny, *Into that Darkness*.

[77] CCIGCP, *German War Crimes in Poland*, vol. 1.

[78] Wiernik, *A Year in Treblinka*.



Plate 6: The proposed area of one of the barracks located in the Reception Camp at Treblinka. Note the stunted vegetation growth and visible depression (© Caroline Sturdy Colls)

whilst the locations of three further structures were located immediately adjacent to the railway platform. It is proposed that these structural remnants relate to the undressing and sorting barracks where those sent to the camp would have sent upon arrival.[79] In this area in particular, the presence of subsurface features has had a considerable impact upon the vegetation in the area, in that it has stunted growth (Plate 6). Also in this area, a number of artefacts in the form of

[79] For further information about the survey results, see Sturdy Colls, "Holocaust Archaeology: Archaeological Approaches to Landscapes of Nazi Genocide and Persecution" (PhD Diss.), chapter four.



Plate 7: The locations of one of the proposed guard towers at Treblinka, defined by the visible earthwork (© Caroline Sturdy Colls)

broken glass, demolition rubble and other material were observed. A number of earthworks were also recorded around the camp, which when compared to historical data, appeared to represent the locations of guard towers (Plate 7).

Similarly, a large area of defined vegetation, located in the south east corner of what would have been the Living Camp area, which was visible on wartime aerial images, is still evident on the ground. Although inaccessible to survey equipment, an inspection of this area revealed a considerable number of artefacts located on the surface, including spoons, mugs and other metal objects, some of which revealed maker's symbols (Plate 8). This area has been suggested by Laponder as having been the camp's waste disposal site.[80] In this instance, although representing an obstruction to archaeological work, the vegetation has prevented access and disturbance to this part of the site, thus it has been protected since the war. These findings also confirm the lack of a comprehensive site inspection, given that these artefacts remained in situ for almost seventy years despite all of the other developments on the site. Finally, despite the aforementioned assertions that the Ukrainian guard house was destroyed, traces of it have been encountered during walkover survey. When the location of a number of bricks and a defined area of vegetation was recorded and overlaid onto war-

[80] Peter Laponder, *Reconstructing Treblinka Death Camp* (Unpublished Report, 2000).

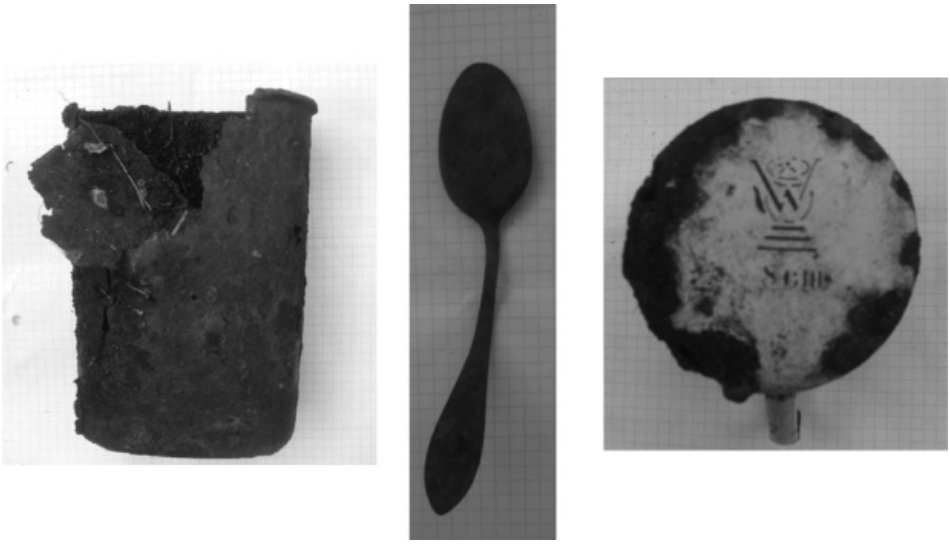


Plate 8: Some of the artefacts found on the surface in the forest at Treblinka in an area believed to the camp's waste disposal site (© Caroline Sturdy Colls)

time aerial images, it became apparent that these are located in the area of the guardhouse. This simple measurement alluded to multiple phases of the camp's pre- and post-abandonment history; the location of the Ukrainian guardhouse also represented the location of the former camp bakery, whilst the bricks from which it was constructed came from the gas chambers when they were dismantled.[81] Similarly, these bricks originally came from a tower in Małkinia, which was demolished by the Nazis to facilitate the gas chambers' construction.[82]

Many of these indicators alluded to above were recorded using simple walkover survey as they were visible in the landscape; thus they represent the more subtle, and often overlooked, physical evidence that exists at sites of the Holocaust.

Contemporary Site Investigations

The fact that remnants of Treblinka survives was further confirmed by the analysis of historical material relating to investigations of the camp undertaken immediately after the war. Interestingly, such material has rarely been alluded to in the historical narratives of the camp. Indeed, it can be demonstrated that

[81] "Extermination Camp – Treblinka II," Muzeum Walki i Męczeństwa w Treblince, www.treblinka.bho.pl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=6&Itemid=6, retrieved 20 January 2009.

[82] Yad Vashem Archive, 1448b.

these narratives have perpetuated the perception that the camp was destroyed, as set out below.

A limited number of site investigations took place at Treblinka immediately after the war to determine what physical evidence survived as testament to the crimes that had taken place. The first occurred following the Soviet invasion of the area in August 1944, when an investigation team comprising of army officers questioned witnesses and spent two days examining burial locations in the vicinity of Treblinka I.[83] Three mass graves, containing 305 bodies and a number of individual graves were exhumed.[84] The subsequent report that was produced highlighted that, although no invasive work was undertaken at Treblinka II, "a huge area of the camp was covered with cinders and ashes" whilst the remains of a burnt house, a cattle stall and various pits containing personal belongings were noted.[85]

After the war, it was decided that "the Germans committed such unprecedented crimes and in so vast quantity that in order to revive the Polish state it was necessary to create an institution, centralizing every effort in the direction of the detection of each of the crimes and the protection of the evidence they perpetrated."[86] Consequently, prompted by the Jewish Historical Commission and the need to collect evidence in the wake of the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials, the Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland was established. Operating under this auspice, the main investigation began at Treblinka II on the 6 November 1945 by a team comprising of Judge Łukaszkiewicz, Prosecutor Maciejewski, a licensed surveyor, local officials, Rachela Auerbach and Józef Kermisz from the Central Jewish Historical Commission and four Treblinka II survivors.[87]

During the period from the 9–13 November, more invasive work took place at the camp, the results of which were published in a Polish text entitled *Obóz Straceń w Treblince* (The extermination camp in Treblinka)[88], *Biuletyn Głównej Komisji Badania Zbrodni Niemieckich w Polsce*[89] and in the Nuremberg Trial Records.[90] At this time, the first plan of the camp was created by a professional

[83] GARF [State Archive of the Russian Federation], 7021.

[84] Ibidem.

[85] Ibidem.

[86] Zdzisław Łukaszkiewicz, *Obóz straceń w Treblince* (Warsaw: PIW, 1946), 3.

[87] CCIGCP, *German War Crimes in Poland*, vol. 1; Łukaszkiewicz, *Obóz straceń w Treblince*; Auerbach, "In the fields of Treblinka."

[88] Łukaszkiewicz, *Obóz straceń w Treblince*.

[89] Zdzisław Łukaszkiewicz, "Obóz zagłady Treblinka," *Biuletyn Głównej Komisji Badania Zbrodni Niemieckich w Polsce* 1 (1946): 133–144.

[90] International Military Tribunal Nuremberg, *Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal Nuremberg*, 14 November 1945–1 October 1946 (Nuremberg: International Military Tribunal Nuremberg, 1946), http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/NT_major-war-criminals.html, retrieved 20 October 2007.

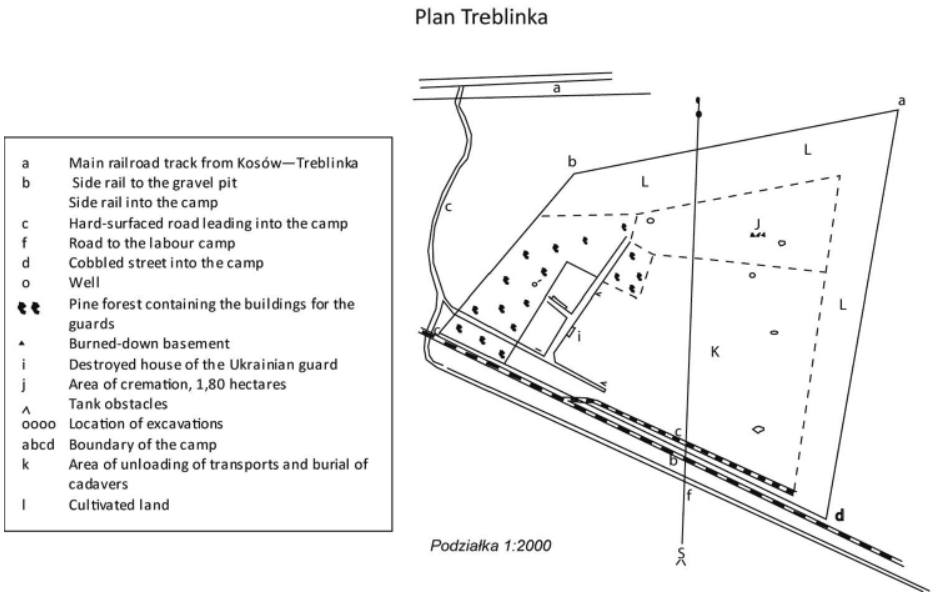


Figure 3: Digitized version of the plan of Treblinka II created during the 1945 survey (redrawn by the author based on Łukaszkiewicz 1946)[a]

[a] *"Plan Treblinka," Zdzisław Łukaszkiewicz, www.deathcamps.org/treblinka/maps.html, retrieved 12 July 2007.*

surveyor, which revealed its purported shape and shows the features still visible on the ground (Figure 3). Yet this plan is not the one on display at the memorial site (Figure 4) and other witness plans, which are entirely different in shape, have been deemed most reliable.[91]

This plan also reveals the locations of small excavations undertaken by the survey team (Figure 3). Excavations were undertaken near the apparent location of the "camp hospital," revealing several personal belongings and coins, and test pits were dug in the area thought to contain the gas chambers, although no building foundations were noted.[92] However, in the latter case it was reported that "undisturbed layers of earth were uncovered" at a depth of only 1.5 m.[93]

[91] The plans created by Jankiel Wiernik and Franz Stangl have been deemed most reliable, given that these individuals had the greatest level of access into the death camp area. However these plans are square and so differ considerably from the actual shape of the camp, as shown in aerial imagery and through archaeological survey.

[92] Stanisław Wojtczak, "Karny obóz pracy Treblinka I i ośrodek zagłady Treblinka II", *Biuletyn Głównej Komisji Badania Zbrodni Hitlerowskich w Polsce* XXVI (1975): 117–185.

[93] Ibidem: 184.

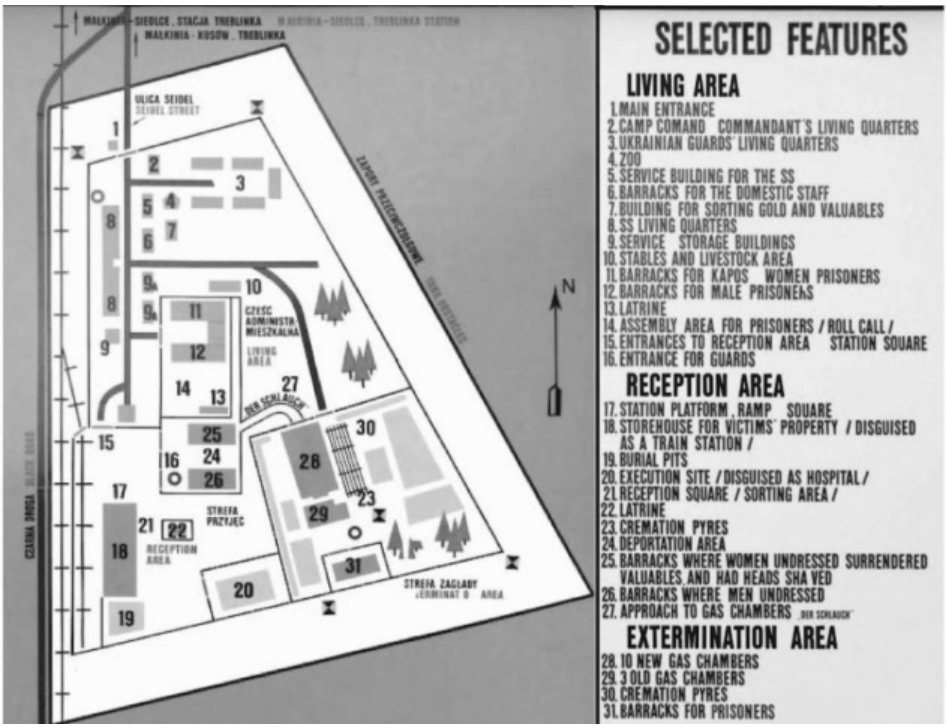


Figure 4: The map currently on display at the memorial site at Treblinka (photograph of the sign copyright Caroline Sturdy Colls)

A large crater was excavated to a depth of 7.5 m near to the Lazarett and "numerous human remains were found by these excavations, partially still in a state of decomposition," again revealing that not all the bodies were cremated.[94] However, in a statement later issued by the investigators, it was announced that no mass graves had been found at the site.

Indeed, in their disregard for other types of remains, many reports by these investigators appear contradictory:

> At the present time no traces of it [the camp] are left, except for the cellar passage with the protruding remains of burnt posts, the foundations of the administration building, and the old well. Here and there can also be traced the remains of burnt fence posts and pieces of barbed wire, and short sections of paved road. There are also other traces. For example, in the north-eastern part, over a surface covering about 2 ha (5 acres).[95]

[94] Ibidem.

[95] CCIGCP, *German War Crimes in Poland*, vol. 1, 97.



Plate 9: Artefacts littering the landscape at Treblinka II in 1944, following the camp's abandonment by the Nazis (© Novosty Press 1944)

Similarly, this investigation team observed that "the south-western part of the camp site is covered with the remains of all kinds of aluminum, enamel, glass and porcelain vessels, kitchen utensils, trunks, rucksacks, and remnants of clothing. Almost the whole camp-site is now covered with pits and holes."[96]

To an archaeologist, these remnants certainly cannot be defined as "no traces."[97] Wassili Grossman who, in 1944, was one of the first people to write an account of Treblinka II and one of the earliest to view the site in the immediate aftermath of its closure, also recorded that a considerable number of artefacts, including the personal belongings of the victims and the camp staff, as well as bones and teeth littered the landscape.[98] A number of contemporary photographs also support these conclusions, revealing the presence of kitchen utensils and tools, as well as rubble from the demolished structures (Plate 9).

Similarly, Auerbach, in her book, *In the Fields of Treblinka*, also confirms the presence of considerable surviving traces of the camp. Although this report sits half way between scientific and theatrical, it offers valuable insights into the nature of the camps at the end of the war and seems to again confirm claims made by witnesses, that not all of the bodies at the camp were entirely cremated.[99] Yet,

[96] Ibidem, 98.

[97] Ibidem, 97.

[98] Wassili Grossman, "The Hell of Treblinka," in Chil Rajchman, *Treblinka: A Survivor's Memory* (London: MacLehose Press, 2011), 178–179.

[99] Auerbach, "In the fields of Treblinka."

the documents relating to this early investigation demonstrate that no scientific study was undertaken, and it appears that little site recording was undertaken and the remains were left in situ.[100] Auerbach did, however, make several further useful observations constructive to forensic archaeologists: the scavenging that had taken place at the site, by animals and people looking for valuables, was observed; testimonies of witnesses were recorded in relation to the disposal of human remains; the different grave locations used for the various prisoners were discussed.[101] Although somewhat dramatized, descriptions such as this represent one of the few sources that recall the post-war condition of the sites, thus making an invaluable contribution to site histories and landscape change reconstructions.

However, despite these accounts and the findings of the investigative team, a statement was issued on the 13 November 1945 terminating the work at Treblinka II, "in consideration of the oncoming autumn, the present rainfall and the necessity of a rapid conclusion of the judicial preliminary investigations."[102] Given the size of the camp and the short period actually spent examining it, it would have been impossible for the investigation team to have conducted enough research to conclusively rule out further burials and certainly it was not in their remit to recover the remains, thus they were left in situ. Additionally, as only limited test-pitting was undertaken, the presence of buried structural remains also cannot be ruled out. That said, despite lasting only five days, this survey still represented the most comprehensive examination of the site prior to this research.

These post-war investigations have almost certainly contributed to many of the popular perceptions that have arisen concerning Treblinka which have subsequently been perpetuated in the literature; the author has also observed this trend in relation to other sites from this period.[103] Not only have these investigations often been seen as proof that the physical remnants of these sites had been fully examined, but the terminology that they used can be seen to have placed the emphasis on standing structures as the only valuable source of evidence.[104]

Similarly, the belief that all of the remains of the victims have been located, exhumed or were totally obliterated by the Nazis can also be seen to stem from the assertions of post-war investigations; thus resulting in the view that there is nothing left to find.[105] However, as shown, these surveys rarely included the

[100] Łukaszkiewicz, "Obóz zagłady Treblinka," 133–144; Auerbach, "In the fields of Treblinka."

[101] Auerbach, "In the fields of Treblinka."

[102] Wojtczak, "Karny obóz pracy Treblinka I i ośrodek zagłady Treblinka II," 185.

[103] Sturdy Colls, "Holocaust Archaeology: Archaeological Approaches to Landscapes of Nazi Genocide and Persecution" (PhD Diss.), chapter six.

[104] Zdzisław Łukaszkiewicz, "Obóz zagłady Treblinka," 133–144.

[105] Franciszek Piper, *Auschwitz 1940–1945 Central Issues in the History of the Camp*, vol. 3: *Mass Murder* (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2000); Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka*; Chrostowski, *Extermination: Camp Treblinka*.

comprehensive examination of burials and, where this did occur, exhumations were rarely complete nor was the entire site surveyed.[106] Such beliefs appear to have transcended the decades and the presence of further buried or concealed evidence has, therefore, been overlooked.

Memorialization

Approaches to the site following these investigations, as part of the memorialization of the atrocities that occurred, have also shaped public perceptions. The entire area remained neglected and subject to looting until 1959, when the decision was taken to construct a memorial.[107] Between 1959 and 1961 this monument, designed by Adam Haupt, Franciszek Duszeńko and Franciszek Strynkiewicz, was constructed, fundamentally altering the landscape at Treblinka II (Plate 10).[108] This original memorial remains at the site, having been restored in 1995, and since 1983 it has been designated a Polish national monument, housing the *Muzeum Walki i Męczeństwa w Treblince* (Museum of Fighting and Martyrdom).[109] The monument at Treblinka II comprises of 17,000 stones, symbolizing Jewish matvoh (headstones) and represents the towns and villages from which the victims came.[110] The concrete into which these stones are set is purportedly located over the mass graves and cremation pits.[111] A large obelisk, bearing a relief of tortured souls, a large memorial stone bearing the words *Nigdy Wiecej* (Never Again) and a symbolic cremation pit were also built, which form the centre of memorial services at the site. A symbolic railway platform, tracks and a gate, along with granite stones which purportedly mark the camp boundary, are the only indicators of the layout of the camp highlighted to visitors. Eleven memorial stones were also constructed adjacent to the symbolic railway platform, acknowledging the various nations from which victims at Treblinka II came. A museum also exists at the site, dis-

[106] CCIGCP, *German War Crimes in Poland*, vol. 1; International Military Tribunal Nuremberg, *Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal Nuremberg*, 14 November 1945–1 October 1946, vol. 7 (Nuremberg: International Military Tribunal Nuremberg, 1946), http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/NT_major-war-criminals.html, retrieved 20 October 2007.

[107] Edward Kopówka, and Piotr Tołwiński, *Kamienie milczą – ja pamiętam* (Siedlce: Muzeum Regionalne w Siedlcach, 2007); "Extermination Camp – Treblinka II," Muzeum Walki i Męczeństwa w Treblince, www.treblinka.bho.pl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=6&Itemid=6, retrieved 20 January 2009.

[108] Katarzyna Radecka, *Treblinka: Materiały dotyczące realizacji Mauzoleum Ofiar Obozu Zagłady w Treblince* (DVD, Gdańsk, 2011).

[109] Kopówka, Tołwiński, *Kamienie milczą – ja pamiętam*.

[110] "Extermination Camp – Treblinka II," Muzeum Walki i Męczeństwa w Treblince, www.treblinka.bho.pl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=6&Itemid=6, retrieved 20 January 2009.

[111] Pers. comm. Edward Kopówka.



Plate 10: The memorials at Treblinka II: the memorial in the central area of the former extermination camp (top left), the symbolic cremation pit (top right), the symbolic railway line (bottom left) and the symbolic railway platform (© Caroline Sturdy Colls)

playing some of the items found at the camp, and limited signage is also located on the approach to the memorial.

Several issues arise in terms of the methods used to determine the location of the monument, the landscape change caused by its installation and its impact upon archaeological surveys of the site in the future. Firstly, in terms of the nature of the investigation undertaken in advance of the memorial's construction, there is only limited information available. Photographs taken in 1960 suggest that the locations of the mass graves were determined based on the presence of lupines, which were purportedly planted by the Nazis to disguise the site's former function.[112] It also appears that small test pits were dug throughout the areas thought to contain mass graves and that the concrete memorial was then cited according to these findings. However, the discovery of apparent burials that are bisected by the memorial suggests this was not conducted thoroughly and on a large scale; most likely they were undertaken to determine the presence of human remains, rather than to determine the overall extent, and shape in plan of, the burials.

Secondly, the extent of the ground disturbance caused by the construction of the memorial this is difficult to estimate. Contemporary photographs represent

[112] Wiernik, *A Year in Treblinka*; "Treblinka Station Master Franciszek Zabecki," ARC, www.deathcamps.org/treblinka/zabecki.html, retrieved 17 July 2008; Sereny, *Into that Darkness*.

the main source of evidence and indicate that a number of temporary structures were installed across the site whilst the memorial was being built.[113] Similarly, the memorial now masks a large portion of the former Death Camp.[114] This precludes the use of all geophysical techniques in these areas, which can otherwise be used to determine the presence buried remains and ground disturbance, and has prevented any other investigations in these areas since the 1960s.[115]

Finally, it would appear that the belief that nothing survived outside of the areas designated by the memorial has resulted in further landscape modification at the site since the 1960s until the present day. Although a degree of landscape change can be attributed to the Germans, photographs demonstrate that only a small portion of the camp was forested immediately after the war.[116] Following the construction of the memorial further trees were planted, reportedly to demarcate the boundaries of the Death Camp, whilst the area inside these boundaries were sown to grass; indeed it was the intention of the architect that the site would be allowed to become overgrown.[117] Indeed, the forestation continued to increase over time, with footage from the film *Shoah*, filmed in the early 1980s, revealing that the number of trees now present on the site were absent at this time, whilst others have been removed since this date.[118] Thus the memorial landscape at Treblinka II is constantly changing; whatever the reason for this, it is clear that these modifications have not been based on examinations of any surviving remains and they have contributed to popular perceptions of the site.

Indeed, archaeological survey combined with analysis of aerial photographs from 1943 and 1944 demonstrate that the modern memorial does not entirely accurately depict the boundaries of the camp (Figure 5). Most notably, the northern boundary was shown to be fifty metres further north than the current memorial boundary stones suggest. This has important implications in terms of identifying previously unlocated structures in the Living Camp in particular.

Survivability

Therefore, in summary, a re-evaluation of historical material, and the collection and analysis of archaeological data, allows a narrative of Treblinka to be derived that challenges popular perceptions of the site. It would appear that, to date, a history of this site that centers around its total eradication by the Nazis,

---

[113] Radecka, *Treblinka: Materiały dotyczące realizacji Mauzoleum Ofiar Obozu Zagłady w Treblince* (DVD).

[114] Pers. comm. Edward Kopówka

[115] Laurence Conyers, L. and Dean Goodman, *Ground-penetrating Radar: An Introduction for Archaeologists* (2nd edition, London: Altamira Press, 2004).

[116] Sereny, *Into that Darkness*, 145.

[117] Radecka, *Treblinka: Materiały dotyczące realizacji Mauzoleum Ofiar Obozu Zagłady w Treblince* (DVD); pers. comm. Edward Kopówka.

[118] Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah* (DVD).

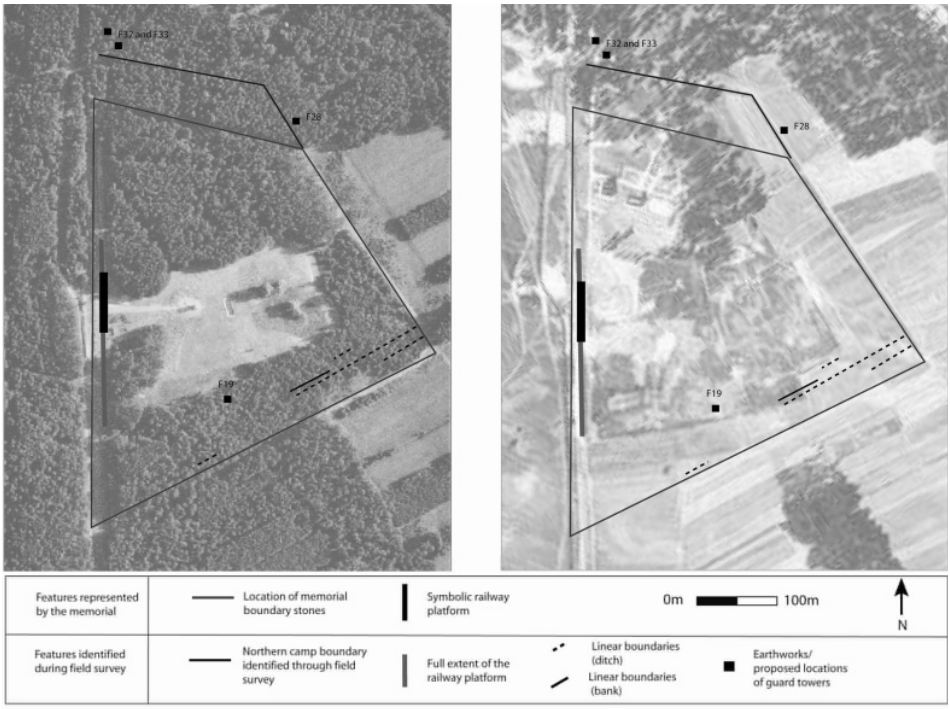


Figure 5. Field survey results overlaid onto a modern satellite image (© Geoportal 2010) and a contemporary aerial photograph (copyright United States Holocaust Memorial Museum), showing the boundary currently marked by memorial stones compared to the proposed location of the northern camp boundary

as well as the total destruction of all of the victims sent there, has been preferred in favor of one that acknowledges the photographs of human bones suggesting that not all victims were cremated, or one which accepts that the complete removal of all traces of all the of all bricks, concrete, pathways, personal belongings and human remains at the site would not have been physically possible. As shown, there are a number of reasons why such a situation has arisen – limited field investigation; the lack of available and affordable technology; limited understanding concerning the impact of the intervention that the construction, function and demolition of the camp had in the landscape; the perception of archaeology as being an invasive process (see below). A number of other social and political reasons have also impacted upon the approaches to, and perceptions of, many Holocaust sites, including Treblinka, for a discussion of which the reader is referred to Sturdy Colls.[119] Crucially, however, the reality is that

[119] Sturdy Colls, "Holocaust Archaeology: Archaeological Approaches to Landscapes of Nazi Genocide and Persecution," *Journal of Conflict Archaeology* 7, 2 (2012): 71–105.

the Nazis may have attempted to destroy all traces of the camp, post-war looting and landscape modification may have taken place but, given the scale of the events, total sterilization of the archaeological record is simply not viable. This has already been confirmed by the archaeological investigations that have taken place to date.

Why Archaeology?

So what are the broader implications of these new approaches for Holocaust studies? Hamilakis has argued "the political ethic puts the archaeological enterprise constantly into doubt, asking always difficult questions, including the most fundamental of all: Why archaeology?"[120] Given the number of issues involved in the examination of the Holocaust such a question is addressed here. What can archaeological methods contribute to the study of this period that cannot be provided by historical research alone? What impact are these results likely to have in terms of public understanding of the events or the future of commemoration, heritage and education strategies? What are the major benefits of an approach that draws on a variety of disciplines and subdisciplines?

To consider the first question, it must first be pointed out that the observations made with regards to what history cannot provide are not intended as a criticism of the discipline. Archaeological research is fundamentally dependent upon historical findings for its focus: projects are often devised based on historical knowledge, whilst survey areas and supporting evidence are defined by documentary, oral and photographic sources. Therefore, the two should be seen as interdependent as, in turn, archaeological work can provide the corroboration needed to definitively confirm historical research.

Additionally, there are some areas in which archaeologists are perhaps best placed to contribute. Assessing known historical sources with knowledge of construction and demolition processes, an understanding of stratigraphy and geology, and comprehension of the dynamics of the burial environment can allow new perspectives on archival material to be derived. Archaeological research can ask new questions of old material; documentary evidence for example will be utilized in different ways by archaeologists and what cannot be found in archives, can potentially be derived from analysis of the landscape. New aspects of the past can be explored through archaeological research and historical knowledge can be corroborated, complemented or challenged. As González-Ruibal confirms, "most historical archaeology is justified by the belief that we need alternative stories – that oral and written data do not tell us everything

[120] Yannis Hamilakis, "From Ethics to Politics," in *Archaeology and Capitalism: From Ethics to Politics*, ed. Yannis Hamilakis and Philip G. Duke (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press. 2007), 24.

about the past, that there are other things to be learned from artefacts and other experiences have yet to be accounted for."[121]

It seems reasonable to ask the question, if such evidence has not been considered, how then can we claim to fully understand these events? If we have not explored the material remains that can provide us with "alternative stories" of the past, how can we accept that our current knowledge of the Holocaust is accurate and representative of its extent and nature?[122] Consequently, it is important to move away from the notion that the presence of historical sources precludes the need for physical evidence in the field of Holocaust research so that new insights into the events can be provided.

There are many questions that cannot be answered without a physical assessment of the landscape. The confirmation of the existence of the surviving structures cannot occur without the use of field survey and geophysics. An understanding of the impact of burials on vegetation change, soil compaction and topography enables the presence of subterranean features to be confirmed. Archaeology can provide information about people's lives that is not available through any other means, particularly where such evidence may not have been written down or may have been lost.[123] As such, this research can be seen as an important step in moving away from the selective narratives of the site. This, coupled with the fact that non-invasive methods facilitate the investigation of the sites without disturbing the remains, demonstrates the potential of archaeological surveying techniques to enhance our knowledge of other similar sites pertaining to the Holocaust, particularly those where a consideration of Jewish Halacha Law is required.

Of course, as well as allowing us to revisit aspects of the past, archaeological work presents opportunities to provide a future resource; a number of questions have been answered, whilst others not previously considered have been raised for the future. The passing of time and the associated loss of evidence that has occurred presented a sense of urgency to ask such questions and to provide a new body of material. Not only should this material address commemorative, heritage and educational needs with respect to the events of the Holocaust itself, but it also offers the potential to highlight the continued relevance of these events in light of ongoing problems with genocide, a lack of social cohesion and racial hatred.

As Teresa Świebocka[124] has argued, camps with few or no standing remains attract fewer visitors, whilst the majority of Holocaust sites aside from Ausch-

[121] Alfredo González-Ruibal, "Time to Destroy: An Archaeology of Supermodernity," *Current Anthropology*, 49, 2 (2008): 248.

[122] Ibidem.

[123] Megan Brickley, "A Mirror to Life: Analysis of Human Remains," in *Beneath the Bull Ring: the Archaeology of Life and Death in Early Birmingham*, ed. Simon Buteaux (Studley: Brewin, 2003); González-Ruibal, "Time to Destroy": 247–279.

[124] *Auschwitz: A History in Photographs*, oprac. Teresa Świebocka (2nd edition, Oświęcim: The State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau, Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1995).

witz are visited by those with a personal connection or by those with a keen interest in this period of history. Given the nature of the emotive nature of these sites, the majority of people will not visit several of the camps or memorial sites. Consequently, this raises questions over the future sites such as Treblinka as time passes. As survivors and their families pass on, the need for development land increases, landscape change takes its toll, and the practical and financial requirements sites rise, there is a real danger that knowledge will be lost.

Therefore, there is clearly a need for a sustainable heritage resource. The increased understanding of the layout of the sites provided by archaeological survey, cartographic data and historical information provides the opportunity to redevelop the sites. At Treblinka, for example, there is the potential to remark the boundary and define the locations of identified features based on the findings of this survey. Similarly, the approach of assessing the broader landscape of sites, adopted as part of this project, has been taken on by the museum authorities, who are pressing ahead with plans to better integrate Treblinka I and II as a memorial site.[125] It is at this stage that further interdisciplinary aspects need to be introduced to the overall methodology of examining the physical remains; heritage managers, landscape architects, conservators and builders all need to be consulted to ensure that a landscape can be produced that satisfies the religious and commemorative needs of visitors, whilst also remaining true to the newly uncovered inclusive history of the sites in question.

The digital nature of the data produced during archaeological surveys also lends itself to virtual heritage provision, thus allowing it to be used for educational purposes and providing access to it for the general public across the world. The survey data can easily be integrated with oral testimonies, historical documents and maps, witness plans, contemporary and modern photographs and aerial images, thus producing a digital database that can provide the infrastructure for websites or exhibitions. This digital database can of course be easily built upon as future fieldwork is undertaken and 3D models can also be integrated, offering the opportunity to reconstruct the site but also, for those unable to visit, the prospect of understanding its extent, nature and layout. Educational packs for schools, exhibitions and more traditional means of dissemination, such as books, magazine articles and conference papers, can all allow the archaeological results to be integrated into the history of this period, and can provide a visual resource for future generations.[126]

[125] Pers. comm. Edward Kopówka.

[126] Council for British Archaeology, *Defence of Britain Project* (York: CBA, 2002).

Conclusion

The information derived to date at Treblinka has been aimed at invoking questions over the need to reconsider the history of the site and the Holocaust as a whole. It could be argued that the physical nature of the archaeological record presents more tangible and poignant reminders of this period. The use of both established and emerging technologies derived from a variety of disciplines can be used in a complimentary fashion to derive new insights into the above-ground and subterranean evidence that survives as a testimony to the events of this period. Additionally, simple measurements, the examination of vegetation change and topography, the overlaying of maps and aerial images, the identification of artefacts and structural remnants on the surface all represent uncomplicated methods yet have been shown to be capable of revealing considerable information. Perhaps, therefore, the most pertinent effective of the archaeological methodology in terms of revealing what has been forgotten or overlooked at the sites examined was not the suite of complex scientific methods, but simply the impetus to look at the landscape. It has been shown that it is not the case that the remains do not exist, but that they have not been sought. Therefore, the archaeological work has allowed known historical sources to be revisited and new sources of evidence to be revealed. Crucially, the survey has demonstrated how much has been forgotten or, perhaps more pertinently, how much has not been remembered about the reality and long lasting legacy of Treblinka.[127]

Since the submission of this paper, further survey work has been undertaken at Treblinka and small test pits have been excavated to confirm the results of the initial survey. This has confirmed the location of the Old Gas Chambers in the area indicated by the non-invasive survey. It is important to state that the non-invasive work allowed the areas containing mass graves of Jewish victims in the extermination camp to be avoided during these excavations. Further non-invasive research included a LiDAR survey, which is a form on airborne laser scanning. This has allowed a number of structures, roads, mass graves and other features to be identified at both the extermination and labor camp. The complete results of these surveys will follow in a book about Treblinka in 2014.

[127] For a discussion of the differences between "remembering" and ‚not forgetting' at Holocaust sites, see John G. Beech, "The Differing Development Paths of Second World War Concentration Camps and the Possibility of an Application of a Principle of Equifinality," in *Materiél Culture: The Archaeology of Twentieth Century Conflict*, One World Archaeology 44, ed. John Schofield, William Gray Johnson, and Colleen M. Beck (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); Sturdy Colls, "Holocaust Archaeology: Archaeological Approaches to Landscapes of Nazi Genocide and Persecution" (PhD Diss.); Sturdy Colls, "Holocaust Archaeology: Archaeological Approaches to Landscapes of Nazi Genocide and Persecution," *Journal of Conflict Archaeology* 7, 2 (2012): 71–105.

Abstract
Public impression of the Holocaust is unquestionably centred on knowledge about, and the image of, Auschwitz-Birkenau – the gas chambers, the crematoria, the systematic and industrialized killing of victims. Conversely, knowledge of the former extermination camp at Treblinka, which stands in stark contrast in terms of the visible evidence that survives pertaining to it, is less embedded in general public consciousness. As this paper argues, the contrasting level of knowledge about Auschwitz-Birkenau and Treblinka is centred upon the belief that physical evidence of the camps only survives when it is visible and above-ground. The perception of Treblinka as having been "destroyed" by the Nazis, and the belief that the bodies of all of the victims were cremated without trace, has resulted in a lack of investigation aimed at answering questions about the extent and nature of the camp, and the locations of mass graves and cremation pits. This paper discusses the evidence that demonstrates that traces of the camp do survive. It outlines how archival research and non-invasive archaeological survey has been used to re-evaluate the physical evidence pertaining to Treblinka in a way that respects Jewish Halacha Law. As well as facilitating spatial and temporal analysis of the former extermination camp, this survey has also revealed information about the cultural memory associated with the site and how much has been forgotten about its history.

Keywords
Treblinka, Holocaust archaeology, extermination camp, physical evidence, Jewish Halacha law