
2.1 Historical Background

The events of the Holocaust have been thoroughly documented by historians and the reader is referred to this published material if detailed information is required about their chronology and specificity (e.g. Friedlander 2014; Gilbert 2014; Friedman 2012; Snyder 2011; Bergen 2003; Hilberg 2003; Lewy 2000). However, a summary of the history of the Holocaust is provided here for the benefit of those not familiar with the crimes perpetrated by the Nazis and in order to provide clarity concerning many of the places, people and events mentioned throughout this book.

Although some historians continue to argue that the Holocaust was a Jewish event, the definition that it was the persecution of Jews, Roma, Sinti, the disabled, homosexuals, black people, Jehovah's Witnesses, political prisoners and anyone else considered an 'enemy of the Reich' is adopted throughout this book (Friedlander 2014; Grau and Shoppmann 2013; Evans 2010; Penton 2004). This persecution included not only mass murder but also 'annihilation through work', mental and physical torture, internment, deprivation (of provisions, of freedom of movement and of contact with loved ones), forced sterilisation, rape and segregation (Pillay 2003). In terms of temporal scope, these forms of persecution began in 1933 when the Nazis came to power and ended with the fall of the regime in 1945. That said, many places, people and events remained, and remain, linked to the Holocaust through the long-lasting impact that the crimes perpetrated had. For example, the mass graves excavated by the liberating forces are still deemed to be part of the Holocaust, on the basis that many of the casualties buried within them died as a direct result of Nazi persecution (Cesarani et al. 1997; Abzug 1987).

When the Nazi Party took control of Germany on 30 January 1933, whether or not plans had been made at that point, this was the first step on the road to genocide. Almost immediately, the Nazis established internment sites to control those that they deemed to be inferior or a threat to the regime (Megargee 2009). Whilst many were established in existing structures, a number of purpose-built camps were constructed. This included Dachau concentration camp, which was to become the model camp on which others were based (Marcuse 2008). At these internment sites, ad hoc executions occurred alongside torture and many prisoners were forced to undertake forced labour. As early as 1934, the *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD) secret service department was established to research the 'Jewish Question' and the implementation of the Nuremberg Laws followed a year later (Longerich 2010). These laws imposed a number of restrictions upon 'inferior' individuals and groups, including the Jews. The desire for *Lebensraum* meant that the deportation and resettlement of minority groups began to occur at this time and, by the time *Kristallnacht* occurred on 9 and 10 November 1938, tens of thousands of people had already been sent to the camps (Megargee 2009). Many were tortured, deprived of food, subject to harsh labour or executed. The onset of World War II on 3 September 1939 saw the annexation of Poland by

Nazi Germany and the enactment of Hitler's order that 'without pity or mercy all men, women and children of Polish descent or language' should be killed to free up living space (Lukas 2013, p. 3). At the same time, plans were being developed and implemented for the mass murder of the disabled. The euthanasia or T-4 programme, as it became known, resulted in the deaths of more than 70,000 people in hospitals or specially developed euthanasia centres located throughout Germany between 1939 and 1941 (Burleigh 2002). Although the program officially ceased in 1941, thousands more were killed right up until the end of the war (*ibid*). Through lethal injection, neglect and shootings, the Nazis systematically murdered the mentally ill and disabled, as well as others whom they had interred in medical institutions (Sereny 1995). Nazi ideology promoted the creation of a pure Aryan race and, as such, anyone deemed inferior had to be removed from areas containing Aryans (Arad 1987). Initially, a plan was devised to deport Jews to Madagascar but this was quickly abandoned in favour of establishing ghettos throughout occupied Poland and, later, elsewhere in Europe (Browning 2012). The first were established in June 1940, some as open ghettos, others as closed ghettos. Many of those interred were forced to carry out labour to aid the war economy (Gruner 2008). The concentration camp system also expanded considerably during this time and gassing experiments were already being carried out in the newly constructed Auschwitz I in September 1941 (Megargee 2009). The invasion of the Soviet Union (Operation Barbarossa) has been seen as the crucial turning point in Nazi racial policy, as it facilitated the covering up of large-scale executions of essentially anyone whom the Nazi Party saw fit to kill (Breitman 2002). In 1941, the Einsatzgruppen units were established; four heavily armed task forces were commissioned to kill Soviet Jews by the order of Reinhard Heydrich (Evans 2010). Trained in criminology and killing techniques, the Einsatzgruppen murdered approximately 2 million people, thus leaving 'a trail of mass graves containing hundreds of thousands of corpses' (Büchler 2003, p. 412).

Although the 'Final Solution' was supposedly devised at the Wannsee Conference, held on 20 January 1942, the large-scale killing of Jews, Roma, Sinti, the disabled and political prisoners has already taken place in various forms (Browning 2005). Initially, this included the use of gas vans at places like Chelmno in Poland and Semlin in Serbia (Montague 2012; Byford 2011). The construction of the Operation Reinhard camps—Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka—did, however, mark the first attempt to kill millions of people through more efficient, even industrialised means (Berger 2013; Arad 1987). Vast networks of camps and ghettos were established throughout Europe to facilitate the internment and deportation of millions of people. Several labour camps were also established in the Lublin region and incorporated into Operation Reinhard (USHMM 2013). Over the course of less than a year, the Operation Reinhard camps alone resulted in the deaths of approximately 1.7 million people (see Berger 2013 for latest estimates); the exact total will never be known given the lengths that the Nazis went to in order to hide their crimes. Other concentration camps throughout Europe built gassing facilities, whilst others continued to kill people through horrendous working and living conditions, and through executions (Fig. 2.1).

Whilst Germany, Poland, Austria and countries closest to the Reich were affected at the start of the war, others such as Hungary did not face large-scale persecution until 1944 (Aly 1999). Although the scale and methods of killing varied geographically, Dawidowicz (1990, p. 427) has argued that 'wherever German rule was total and supreme, the Jews were consigned to annihilation' and the same can be said of other minority groups and political enemies. As it was clear to the Nazi administration that the war was to be lost, thousands of people were taken from the camps and ghettos and sent on death marches (Blatman 2011). By the end of the Second World War, millions of people had been killed in the camps and ghettos, and at thousands of executions sites—often in the towns and villages where they lived (see footnote in Chap. 1). Thousands more people were subject to deportation, internment, torture, deprivation and forced labour. Many died after the liberation of the camps as a result of the circumstances they had endured. For example, following the liberation of Bergen-Belsen camp on 15 April 1945, a further 13,000 people died and the image of 'thousands of naked and decompos-



Fig. 2.1 The main Nazi camps that were operational during the Holocaust. (Copyright: Caroline Sturdy Colls)

ing corpses...often simply incapable of greeting the liberators' whose 'bodies were eventually bulldozed into mass graves' has become synonymous with the post-war period (Lattek 1997, pp. 37–38; Fig. 2.2). Many victims buried after liberation were not identified and the locations of these graves were rarely marked due to the massive scale of the cleanup operations (Cesarani et al. 1997). Because of the extent of the suffering experienced by the survivors and the scar that the Holocaust left on the world, its history certainly did not end in 1945 (Sect. 3.3 and Chap. 11).

2.2 Investigating Genocide

The area of Europe that Snyder (2012, p. viii) has called the 'Bloodlands', where Hitler and Stalin murdered millions of people between 1933–1945, witnessed 'mass violence of a sort never before seen in history'. Through 'state institutionalised, deliberate and systematic practices of making people disappear' (Juhl 2005, p. 3), as well as through starvation, terrible living conditions, ad hoc executions and harsh labour, these regimes enacted genocide at a time when the term itself did not yet exist (Sect. 2.2.5). The uniqueness of these events required an investigative response also 'never before seen in history' (Snyder 2012, p. viii). The illegal nature of these mass killings meant it was necessary that individuals, groups and even whole regimes were held to account. For the first time,



Fig. 2.2 Bodies being buried in mass graves at Bergen-Belsen by the British liberating forces. (Copyright: Yad Vashem)

human bodies and killing sites became key pieces of evidence in achieving this (see also Keenan and Weizman 2012 for a discussion of the role of human remains in criminal proceedings). Although the bodies of those killed during the First World War had been recovered on a large scale, these deaths were seen as an expected occurrence on the battlefield and so the circumstances surrounding them were not investigated at length (The Great War undated). Whilst some of those killed by the Nazi and Soviet regimes were soldiers (and so could be identified based on their belongings), the majority of people killed were civilians who were often stripped of anything that made identification possible at that time. Therefore, the investigation of these deaths necessitated the development of new methodologies and approaches in the field. Holocaust archaeology as a practice where archaeologists were involved did not develop until much later, but many of the early approaches to the investigation of genocide influenced the course of subsequent examinations of mass graves and physical evidence that is buried or concealed (Hunter et al. 2013; Haglund 2002). In order to consider the extent to which the physical evidence of the Holocaust has been examined, and to suggest future directions for Holocaust archaeology as a field of study, the history of the investigation of genocide is outlined below.

2.2.1 During World War II

Even before the end of World War II, evidence of the crimes perpetrated by the Nazis and other Fascist regimes in Europe was being collected. Some material, such as aerial photographs and other surveillance information, was being collected for military purposes but it also captured the crimes being perpetrated as part of the Holocaust. Some of it was later drawn upon as part of war crimes trials, the rest was merely archived. Therefore, as a source of evidence to be drawn upon in modern investigations, this material is invaluable (Sects. 5.2, 5.3 and 5.12).

Elsewhere, more active investigations were being undertaken into the unlawful killing of Polish soldiers in Katyń forest (Fig. 2.3). After receiving information from Polish railway workers, it was the German army that began to investigate claims that mass graves of Polish soldiers existed within the Soviet-occupied zone (Sanford 2009). The announcement that 3000 bodies had been found in a mass grave by a German investigative team led to the creation of an international team and large-scale excavations were carried out in 1943 (Cienciala et al. 2008). The examination of the graves was far from unbiased, as the Germans and Soviets tried to find or create evidence against each other to assign blame for the killings (Fitzgibbon 1977). Although the Soviets actually carried out the executions, it was the Germans who were blamed for them and the evidence found during the excavations was even presented at the Nuremberg trials (IMTN 1947(17)).

That said, a detailed assessment was made of the nature of the graves by medical and legal professionals and a number of new techniques were developed (Haglund 2002). It cannot be said that the graves were examined archaeologically, due to the fact that they were investigated in the 1940s prior to the recognition of the value of utilising archaeologists in the investigation of recent conflict.



Fig. 2.3 Mass grave investigations being carried out at Katyń, where many novel search and recovery techniques were developed. The presence of personal effects and uniforms made identification possible in most cases. (Copyright: Yad Vashem)

However, many of the techniques went on to be used by forensic archaeologists later that century (Blau and Ubelaker 2009). The graves at Katyń were found only a short time after the crimes took place and it was noted that the graves were visible due to the presence of ‘suspicious mounds planted over with young pine trees’ (Haglund 2002, p. 246). Botany experts were also employed to identify the age of the ground cover on top of the graves. Here, we see visual indicators being examined that are fundamental in modern forensic archaeological investigations (Sect. 6.5.2). Because the victims of the Katyń massacre were military personnel, many were clothed and, as such, identification was possible due to the presence of personal possessions. For example, of the 4143 bodies exhumed at Katyń, 2914 of them were identified through personal artefacts (Haglund 2002). Additionally, as many of the scientists involved in the exhumation of this grave were medical personnel with an interest in determining the cause of death, autopsies were performed on a sample of the bodies recovered (IMTN 1947(17), p. 365; Zawodny 1962, p. 17). The graves were also compared to other Soviet burials in the area in order to identify who was responsible for the crimes, suggesting an awareness of the importance of examining grave construction, which was ahead of its time (Hunter et al. 1996). For the first time, scientists were employed and ballistic samples were taken from within and around the graves (Zawodny 1962, pp. 20–24). Cienciala et al. (2008) provide an insightful account into the various ways that various organisations tried to protect the evidence found at Katyń based on the belief that the Soviets would try to destroy it. It should be remembered that Katyń was the first place that an international multidisciplinary mass grave investigation team was employed, an approach which was not repeated until the atrocities in Rwanda and the Balkans were investigated by United Nations (UN; Haglund 2002).

When the concentration camps were liberated towards the end of the war, the physical evidence of the Holocaust was firmly cemented in public consciousness through photographs and film footage captured by the liberating forces. The military and nominated authorities photographed many of the buildings in the camps, the fences, the victims who remained, and the bodies of those who had not survived. At sites such as Majdanek, which was liberated in 1944, investigative committees were quickly established to document the crimes perpetrated and conduct exhumations of mass graves (Kondoyanidi 2010; Fig. 2.4). The analysis of the skulls of the victims in Majdanek for signs of gunshot injuries followed much the same methodology as that employed at Katyń, but here specialists were bought in also to examine the context in which the graves were found, e.g. the camp itself (Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission for Investigating the Crimes Committed by the Germans 1944). An investigation of the gas chambers was also carried out to determine how they functioned which included testing for the presence of Zyklon B and carbon monoxide (ibid). The liberating Soviet forces also carried out preliminary examinations at Treblinka, Bełżec and Sobibor in 1944, although these camps had already been demolished in 1943 (Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes

Fig. 2.4 One of the towers at Majdanek in 2009. Images of these towers became iconic after the liberation of the camps. (Copyright: Caroline Sturdy Colls)



in Poland 1946). At other camps, such as Bergen-Belsen, where inmates were still present, the priority for the liberating forces was to care for them and to dispose of the corpses of those who had not survived, as opposed to immediately carrying out a ‘forensic’ assessment of the site (Shephard 2006).

2.2.2 Early Investigations of Holocaust Sites

The majority of investigations at Holocaust sites occurred immediately after the Second World War or in its final months. Specially assembled war crimes commissions were created in order to collect evidence for court trials against members of the Nazi Party. These commissions mainly comprised doctors and lawyers but sometimes included architects and surveyors. The main purpose of these commissions was to verify what crimes had been committed in a given location and to identify potential perpetrators. Therefore, these commissions conducted interviews with witnesses, visited camps and mass graves, and examined some of the surviving physical evidence (Fig. 2.5). The majority of these investigations had a regional or even national remit but the reports were often based on a sample of smaller, localised areas. In Poland, the Central Commission for Investigation of German War Crimes in Poland (1946) carried out surveys at concentration camps to record the presence of surface remains and produce detailed accounts their history.

At Chelmno and Treblinka, the surveys undertaken by the commission utilised oral testimonies to identify the nature of the killings and to determine the estimated number of victims (Central Commission for Investigation of German Crimes in Poland (1946). Other investigative teams examined camps and massacre sites across the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia (Heller and Simpson 2013; Profatilo

Fig. 2.5 An examination of corpses after exhumation in Valmiera, Latvia. (Copyright: Yad Vashem)



1945). On occasion, when it was deemed necessary to strengthen the case of the prosecution, mass graves were excavated and autopsies of the victims' bodies were carried out. For example, at Belzec it was determined that 553,000 people had been killed based on the partial excavation of nine burial pits; 'the evidence found indicated that thousands of corpses had been cremated and any remaining bones crushed into small pieces' (O'Neil 1998, pp. 50–51). Given the scale of the events, and the fact that forensic anthropological and archaeological methods had not been developed at this time, for the most part emphasis was placed upon verifying that the camps and graves existed, rather than detailed investigation (Arad et al. 1999; IMTN 1947). Many reports of these commissions do not give specific information about the number of bodies contained within mass graves and excavations were often carried out very rapidly in only a matter of days. Alternatively, only a small number of bodies were subject to detailed investigation. For example, during the excavation of two pits near Rogan in Ukraine, the commission recorded how 'according to the findings of the Expert Medical Commission, upward of 15,000 bodies were buried in these pits.... Five hundred bodies were removed from the pits, of which 215 were submitted to medico-legal examination' (Profatilov 1945, p. 424). As this account demonstrates, even immediately after the crimes took place no attempt was made to identify or even recover the majority of victims of the Holocaust and it would appear that the presence of human remains was noted solely to provide evidence for the legal cases being mounted against the alleged offenders. Similarly, recently discovered footage showing these investigations in Eastern Europe demonstrates that some of the autopsies conducted were equally as rapid (Unseen Holocaust 2014). On occasions, excavations or surveys were undertaken at some of the camps in order to produce plans that could be used in war crimes trials. Once again, however, these were produced relatively rapidly and the practicalities involved in the investigation of these sites meant that these excavations were often on a very small scale (for an example see Łukaszkiwicz 1946a). Whilst the limited scope of these reports seems inadequate, particularly in light of current demands for the 'expert witness', standard protocols for mass grave analysis did not exist at this time nor did the technology to facilitate investigations that consisted of techniques aside from excavation (Hunter et al. 2013; Hunter and Sturdy Colls 2013; Cox et al. 2007; Menez 2005). When the logistics involved in investigating crimes on such a scale are considered alongside the post-war conditions in many of the countries concerned, it is perhaps not surprising that exhaustive search and recovery programmes were not carried out.

2.2.3 Early Attempts to Identify Holocaust Victims

Immediately after the war, a series of searches and exhumations were undertaken by teams from Western Europe. In contrast to the above commissions, the investigations focused on specific sites with the primary aim of identifying specific individuals. One such group was the British War Commission, headed by Major Mant, which was responsible for locating the bodies of British service personnel who had been held as prisoners of war (PoWs), some in the concentration camps (Mant 1950, 1987). Mant's work was significant not only due to the fact that he was the first, and to this day one of the few, practitioners who has attempted to identify victims of the Holocaust, but also because he offered new insights into the process of decomposition within mass graves (Mant 1950). However, these investigations did still have a very specific focus, as opposed to examining the physical evidence pertaining to this period as a whole. Although during the course of these searches mass graves dating to the Holocaust were excavated, this was often only partial and only the British individuals being sought were identified—thus the other victims interred in the grave were not afforded this 'basic dignity' (Haglund 2002, p. 245).

Similar aims were pursued by the French investigation unit, *Mission de Recherché des Victimes de la Guerre* (Rosensaft 1979). In this case, excavations were undertaken in accordance with the Franco-

German Convention, which ‘in part...provided for the exhumation and repatriation by the *Mission de Recherche* of the identifiable remains of French deportees who had perished in Germany during or immediately after the war’ (Rosensaft 1979, p. 156). In the course of such investigations, it is estimated that 54,000 bodies were exhumed, although only 8576 of these were identified (Rosensaft 1979, pp. 159–160). Opposition to the work of this commission was limited until their proposed exhumations of victims buried in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp and the adjacent Hohne cemetery, which resulted in an 11-year legal battle in front of the Arbitral Commission on Property, Rights and Interests in Germany, following criticism from the German government and the Jewish community (United Nations 1959; Rosensaft 1979, p. 155). This was due to their desire to excavate in areas believed to contain the remains of Jewish victims, something that is strongly discouraged by Jewish Halacha Law (Sect. 3.5.2). Although elements of their methodology are questionable by modern standards, this commission was among the first to suggest the importance of ante-mortem data recorded on identification cards filled in by the victims’ families (Rosensaft 1979)—an innovative technique for the time and one which is now commonly used in the identification of missing persons in mass death scenarios (Black et al. 2011; Interpol 2009). In 1958, the commission argued that ‘in the presence of new principals of medico-legal and anthropological science, it is inaccurate and obsolete to pretend that one cannot arrive at sufficient certainty of the identity of skeletons inhumed in the mass-graves of concentration camps’ (Mallet et al. 1958). Yet, widespread investigation of this kind did not occur at the time, or since, due to a number of religious, political, social and practical issues which will be discussed further in Chap. 3.

2.2.4 Holocaust Memorials

The post-war investigations of Holocaust sites led to the erection of many memorials and the creation of Holocaust museums across Europe and beyond. The time that elapsed between the events and their erection varied between sites, often as a result of political circumstances and attitudes towards the Holocaust in the specific area concerned. This will be discussed further in Chap. 11. Of relevance here are the various ways in which Holocaust sites are marked. The following broad categories can be defined, although it is acknowledged that investigations have occurred at some of these sites in recent years by archaeologists as discussed in Sect. 2.3:

Marked Sites Where In-Field Investigations Took Place After the War: Memorials were erected immediately after the war at some sites, often as a result of their identification by the commissions set up as part of the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg described above (Sect. 2.2.2). At some sites, extensive exhumations were carried out of individual mass graves and the memorials erected accurately reflect the locations of graves and other elements in the execution landscape. However, at the majority, only limited investigations were conducted and not all places connected to the killings were examined. The locations of the memorials placed at these sites have often been assumed to be correct. The early placement of memorials is likely to be one reason why archaeological work has not taken place at most of these sites, due to the belief that the victims have been adequately commemorated. Those archaeological investigations that have taken place have demonstrated the potential for other graves and connected sites to be present in the vicinity of marked sites, and for memorials to have been placed in the wrong location (Sturdy Colls 2014a; Gilead et al. 2009; Ivar Schute, pers. comm.; Sects. 2.3.3.2 and 2.3.3.3).

Marked Sites Where No In-Field Investigations Took Place: At some sites, memorials have been erected at killing and body disposal sites without any in-field investigation taking place. In some cases, this may have been due to the fact that it was deemed sufficient to erect a sym-



Fig. 2.6 The symbolic memorial at Treblinka extermination camp in Poland, which has often wrongly been seen as an accurate reflection of the location of key camp features. (Copyright: Caroline Sturdy Colls)

bolic memorial which made no claim about being representative of any buried evidence present (Fig. 2.6). There have been occasions where it has been believed that these symbolic memorials do actually mark buried evidence and, thus, this has led to the belief that there was no need to make any further attempts to locate this evidence. One example of this is the memorial at Treblinka, where it is often believed that the large megalith marks the location of the gas chambers, despite the fact that this was not the architect's intention. Archaeological work at the site has proved that this is definitely not the location of the gas chambers because they are in fact located further to the south-east (Fig. 2.6).

At other sites, memorials were erected by the state (based on witness testimonies) or by local communities (based on their own knowledge of events). In some cases, these memorials may well be accurately located. However, in others, they may be inaccurate. These memorials may contribute to the belief that there is no need for in-field investigation; thus, other connected sites and graves may be overlooked.

Unmarked Sites: Knowledge of many of the killing sites was only retained at local level and some were forgotten altogether (US Commission 2005). Therefore, many of these sites remain unmarked. In-field investigation remains the only definitive way of locating these sites and ensuring that they are marked in the future.

As time passed since the Holocaust, efforts to locate sites and to investigate known sites at length reduced in number. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, a number of war crimes trials led occasionally to attention being turned back to the physical evidence from this period. However, for the most part, efforts were focused on building memorials and monuments, or on moving on and suppressing the memories of the crimes that were perpetrated (Sects. 3.3 and 11.5). Somewhat ironically, at the same time, the investigation of genocide more broadly was developing rapidly and archaeological involvement in it was emerging elsewhere across the world, as outlined below.



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