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# The Dispersed Holocaust

## *Pluralising Research on the Violent Past in Eastern Europe*<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Holocaust research and commemoration has a certain tendency to focus on concentrated forms of violence (ghettos and camps), while often overlooking the equally devastating Holocaust by bullets in Eastern Europe. Growing research on that chapter of the Holocaust points to the fact that this decentralised genocide, involving mass shootings, claimed a similar number of Jewish victims but has received less attention due to many geopolitical, empirical, and cognitive barriers. The concept of a “dispersed Holocaust”, which refers to phenomena even broader than the Holocaust by bullets, highlights the widespread nature of wartime atrocities, including the murders of Jews fleeing transports, hiding after ghetto liquidations, being targeted during the *Judenjagd* (“hunt for Jews”) in the “third phase of the Holocaust”, or dying on the roadside during death marches. These killings differ from concentrated ones as they more often occurred publicly or were otherwise observed, implicating high numbers of members of the military and local communities as perpetrators, witnesses, or collaborators who thus shared knowledge of this genocide. Today, many killing sites remain uncommemorated or forgotten, posing challenges to local and national memory cultures. Reframing the Holocaust as a dispersed and plural phenomenon emphasises regional variations of violence, which also reveals its cooccurrence with other forms of murder or genocide. This pluralistic approach offers opportunities to promote more inclusive memory cultures, challenge exclusionary narratives, and counter “memory competition” or “memory wars” that rely on monolithic understandings of the past. It may also shed more light on the diverse forms of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe. Recognising the dispersed Holocaust is equally challenging as its centralised form will enrich both scholarly understanding and commemorative practices, offering a more comprehensive view of this genocide’s diverse manifestations.

On 14 October 2010, the Rabbinical Commission for Cemeteries in the Office of the Chief Rabbi of Poland in Warsaw received a letter originally addressed to the Lublin branch of the Jewish Religious Community. In the missive, an eyewitness, Stanisław Zybała, enumerated and briefly described local killings of Jews during the Second World War and enclosed a map on which he had drawn his local area, marking six Holocaust sites (Fig. 1). Al-

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When taken together, these small, scattered events do not introduce any overarching historiographic narrative (Operation Reinhardt, ghetto liquidation, etc.), but they are part of local history as described in a booklet by the eyewitness Zybała and another local lay historiographer Regina Smoter-Grzeszkiewicz entitled *Ludność żydowska w gminie Radecznicza* (The Jewish Population in the Radecznicza Commune),<sup>2</sup> in which the authors identify the murders in more detail. The map sent to the Rabbinical Commission, I will argue, points to the need to both move beyond the dominant conception of the Holocaust as best exemplified by the violence of the camps and ghettos and emphasise more strongly the breadth and impact of many smaller, dispersed, and more conventional acts of killing that happened predominantly “east of the camps”.<sup>3</sup>

### “Concentrating” Attention

“Auschwitz (Auschwitz-Birkenau, Konzentrationslager Auschwitz, KL Auschwitz) is the German Nazi concentration and extermination camp, recognised as the most emblematic symbol of the Holocaust and a site of genocide globally”;<sup>4</sup> Auschwitz is “the pars pro toto of the National Socialist concentration camps and the Holocaust in the broader discourse on World War II and European history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century”;<sup>5</sup> “Auschwitz has become a universally recognized symbol, for many the symbol, of the Holocaust”;<sup>6</sup> and, finally, “Never again Auschwitz”.<sup>7</sup> This frequently expressed belief about the paradigmatic nature of Auschwitz-Birkenau (both as a death camp and as a concentration camp) now unites the broader public, representatives of governments and the political sphere, commemorative institutions, scholars and researchers who identify with European culture, as well as those who speak from non-European perspectives or similar positions.<sup>8</sup> This as-

2 Regina Smoter-Grzeszkiewicz and Stanisław Rozwar Zybała, *Ludność żydowska w gminie Radecznicza* (Stowarzyszenie Przyjaciół Szczepieszyna, 2015), 16–17.

3 I work with the concept of geographical reorientation of Holocaust studies in my book Roma Sendyka, *Poza obozem. Nie-miejsca pamięci – próba rozpoznania* (Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2021).

4 See: <https://www.auschwitz.org/en/press/basic-information-on-auschwitz/>.

5 See the announcement of the meeting: “Auschwitz im Kontext. Die ehemaligen Konzentrationslager im gegenwärtigen europäischen Gedächtnis”, Polnisch-österreichische wissenschaftliche Tagung, Polish Academy of Sciences in Vienna, 2014, accessed 12 December 2024, [https://www.oeaw.ac.at/fileadmin/mediapool/archiv/work/Auschwitz\\_im\\_Kontext.pdf](https://www.oeaw.ac.at/fileadmin/mediapool/archiv/work/Auschwitz_im_Kontext.pdf).

6 Marek Kucia, “The Meanings of Auschwitz in Poland, 1945 to the Present”, *Holocaust Studies* 25, no. 3 (2019): 220.

7 This slogan was widespread in the Eastern bloc. See Zofia Wóycicka, *Arrested Mourning: Memory of the Nazi Camps in Poland, 1944–1950* (Peter Lang 2014), 264.

8 See, for instance, Jürgen Zimmerer, *Von Windhuk nach Auschwitz?: Beiträge zum Verhältnis von Kolonialismus und Holocaust* (LIT Verlag, 2011). Proponents of comparative genocide studies point to the rooting of Holocaust practices in the German colonial experience, and numerous studies follow the emancipation of other genocide victims, highlighting the role that comparisons to the Holocaust or its symbol – Auschwitz – play in the process. See, for example, A. D. Moses, “Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas in the

sumption provides a starting point for dominant contemporary educational, social, or remembrance policy measures.<sup>9</sup>

In this text, I would like to reflect on the consequences of this metonymising practice, which reduces a complex historical event to the (already shortened) name of one of the camps. More broadly, I argue that focalising categories like “Auschwitz,” “camp,” or “ghetto”, understood as related to spaces possessing closed boundaries (although the reality was far more complex), reinforces a preference for cognitive strategies seeking territorial, temporal, administrative, and documentary coherence. These strategies not only facilitate the codification and planning of research, allowing it to be organised and rooted solidly in data; they also enable the creation of general models of the Holocaust that are crucial for educational or musealisation strategies. While these focalising templates systematise research and commemoration, they also drastically limit the interest in data that does not fit these models.

### *The Camps as Holocaust*

“The word ‘Auschwitz’ has become a metonym for the Holocaust as a whole”, wrote Timothy Snyder in *Black Earth. The Holocaust as History and Warning*, critically referring to this dominant equivalence.<sup>10</sup> First, he argues, centralisation models focusing on death camps disguise the fact that “the vast majority of Jews had already been murdered, further east, by the time that Auschwitz became a major killing facility”.<sup>11</sup> Snyder is referring to the murder of Jews during the advance of the Eastern Front from June 1941, which temporally preceded “Operation Reinhardt”, that is, the liquidation of the Jewish population concentrated in the ghettos, initiated on 16 March 1942.

In addition to distorting the timeline of the genocide, Snyder argues, the use of Auschwitz as a metonym obscures the scale, impact, and consequences of murder carried out in a conventional, “non-industrial” way through face-to-face executions. “If the Holocaust is identified only with Auschwitz, this experience, too, can be excluded from history and commemoration.”<sup>12</sup> Focusing on close interactions challenges the assumption that the Holocaust occurred in isolation from its social context. This, in turn, proves

“Racial Century”: Genocides of Indigenous Peoples and the Holocaust”, *Patterns of Prejudice* 36, no. 4 (October 2002): 16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/003132202128811538>; Dorota Głowacka, “‘Never Forget’: Intersecting Memories of the Holocaust and the Settler Colonial Genocide in Canada”, in *Holocaust Memory and Racism in the Postwar World*, ed. Shirli Gilbert et al. (Wayne State University Press, 2019), 386–418. See also Rebecca Jinks, *Representing Genocide: The Holocaust as Paradigm?* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016).

9 Bogusław Dybaś, Irmgard Nöbauer, and Ljiljana Radonić, *Auschwitz im Kontext* (Peter Lang, 2019). The publication is the result of a meeting in 2014 (see footnote 2).

10 Timothy Snyder, *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* (Tim Duggan Books, 2015), 207.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., 208.

that the Holocaust was not a “great mystery” to Germans. “The genocide took place, to put it bluntly, in full public view”, wrote Frank Bajohr and Dieter Pohl in their book *Der Holocaust als offenes Geheimnis. Die Deutschen, die NS-Führung und die Alliierten*.<sup>13</sup> And Snyder adds specificity to this claim by recalling the forms of extermination on the Eastern Front, claiming that descriptions of these events reached thousands of families in Germany: “In the East, where tens of thousands of Germans shot millions of Jews over hundreds of death pits over the course of three years, most people knew what was happening.”<sup>14</sup>

Finally, Snyder writes, the “mythical” and “reductionist” perspective focused on “Auschwitz” changes the perception of the camp itself: “Auschwitz ... does not seem like an actual place. It is surrounded by mental as well as physical barbed wire”,<sup>15</sup> which negatively affects the chances of an ethical doctrine that can convince the public that ordinary people were capable of crimes. This creeping unreality, rooted in distortion brought about by the unequal distribution of attention to other aspects of the Holocaust, creates an urgent need to refocus the cognitive field.

In the following pages, I make the case for a critical shift. I argue that for a full understanding of the course and consequences of the Holocaust that is inclusive of Central and Eastern European history, it is vital to resist centralising – and reductionist – thinking by building alternatives and complementary models. My aim is to provide a preliminary definition of the term “dispersed Holocaust”,<sup>16</sup> which is increasingly used in Polish historical research.<sup>17</sup> Efforts made in the last decade have yielded some important new concepts but have still failed to generate metaphors and cognitive models that could challenge the influence of the figure of the “camp” on the general/global public.

13 Frank Bajohr and Dieter Pohl, *Der Holocaust als offenes Geheimnis. Die Deutschen, die NS-Führung und die Alliierten* (C. H. Beck, 2006), citation from the 2020 edition, 13.

14 Snyder, *Black Earth*, 207.

15 *Ibid.*, 209.

16 I introduce and discuss this term more extensively in the chapter “Rozproszona Zagłada, zdecentralizowana przemoc” [Dispersed Holocaust, decentralised violence] in Roma Sendyka, *Poza obozem. Nie-miejsca pamięci – próba rozpoznania* [Beyond camps. Non-Sites of memory] (Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2021). I also write about decentralised violence in Roma Sendyka, “Sites of Violence and Their Communities: Critical Memory Studies in the Post-Human Era”, *Heritage, Memory and Conflict* 1, (23 November 2021): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.3897/hmc.1.63263>. I first encountered the word “dispersed” in a comment on KL Plaszow by an artist, Jason Francisco, who critically discussed the camp’s chances of escaping the shadow of the Auschwitz museum.

17 Between 2016 and 2020, the concept was implemented by the team working on the project “Uncommemorated Sites of Genocide and Their Impact on Collective Memory, Cultural Identity, Ethical Attitudes and Intercultural Relations in Contemporary Poland” (National Programme for the Development of the Humanities, Poland, 2016–2020). The members of the research team were Aleksandra Janus, Karina Jarzyńska, Maria Kobielska, Jacek Małczyński, Jakub Muchowski, Łukasz Połuszny, Roma Sendyka (PI), Kinga Siewior, Mikołaj Smykowski, Aleksandra Szczepan, with Katarzyna Grzybowska and Katarzyna Suszkiewicz. Since 2023, the research project “Mass Graves of Holocaust Victims” using the concept of “dispersed Holocaust” has been developed at the German Historical Institute in Warsaw (team led by Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska).

### *The Holocaust by Bullets*

Centralised attention led, as the editors of the publication *Killing Sites – Research and Remembrance* put it, to a situation that “left thousands of sites where millions were murdered as part of the same ‘Final Solution to the Jewish Question’ on the sidelines of memory and education”.<sup>18</sup>

The construction of a counterweight to mainstream research began in the early twenty-first century, with the efforts of French clergyman Patrick Desbois, who, after his first visit to Eastern Europe in 1990 and then a decade of further preparations, visited Ukraine in 2002 in search of the Rava Ruska camp where his grandfather had been held as a prisoner of war during World War II. The discovery of the dramatic state of the memorials, especially those of Jewish victims, inspired the founding of the Yahad-In Unum Foundation in 2004,<sup>19</sup> which documents, researches, and offers education about what Desbois called the Holocaust by bullets. The dissemination of the term was fostered by the publicity around Desbois’s 2007 book *Porteur de mémoires: sur les traces de la Shoah par balles*, which was published a year later in English as *The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest’s Journey to Uncover the Truth Behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews* and was awarded the 2008 National Jewish Book Award in the United States.<sup>20</sup> The conceptual contribution of his work influenced scholars and laid the foundation for further work to generate metaphors and cognitive models for the genocide of the Jews on the Eastern Front.

Yahad-In Unum defines the Holocaust by bullets as the executions carried out by members of SS special units, called Einsatzgruppen, between 1941 and 1944: “These mass shootings took place mostly, but not only, in the occupied territories of the former Soviet Union following the invasion in 1941. The goal behind the shooting operations was to kill ‘enemies’ of Hitler’s Third Reich: Jews, Roma and Sinti, Communists, partisans or their sympathizers. The majority of victims were Jews – over two million human beings were killed one by one, at close range.”<sup>21</sup> The psychological strain and time-consuming nature of the procedure influenced the decision taken at Wannsee in January 1942 to accelerate the extermination through more mechanised forms of killing.<sup>22</sup>

The killing by bullets, as Snyder pointed out, preceded the “epoch of the ovens”, but it also continued during the “liquidation” of ghetto inhabitants in the death camps.<sup>23</sup> The number of victims of the Holocaust carried out by conventional shooting

18 Thomas Lutz, David Silberklang, Piotr Trojański, and Juliane Wetzel, “Foreword”, in *Killing Sites – Research and Remembrance 1*, (Metropol Verlag, 2015), 15.

19 See: <https://yiu.ngo/en>.

20 Patrick Desbois, *Porteur de mémoires: sur les traces de la Shoah par balles* (Lafon, 2007).

21 See: <https://www.thefhm.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Yahad-In-Unum-The-Holocaust-by-Bullets-Guide.pdf>, 13-14.

22 Patrick Desbois, *In Broad Daylight: The Secret Procedures behind the Holocaust by Bullets* (Simon and Schuster, 2018).

23 Dieter Pohl, “Historiography and Nazi Killing Sites”, in *Killing Sites*, 34.

methods is close to that estimated for the victims of the camps and those who died of starvation and disease in the ghettos: Paul Shapiro mentions 1.5 million victims;<sup>24</sup> Mary Fulbrook writes about 1.8 million people being shot;<sup>25</sup> Patrick Desbois, Dieter Pohl, and Karel Berkhoff agree that there were more than two million victims.<sup>26</sup> Estimates therefore assume that between a quarter and a third of Holocaust victims were killed in executions.<sup>27</sup> For many scholars, this is an obvious reason for treating the Holocaust by bullets with the same degree of attention as the two previously emancipated themes of Holocaust research.<sup>28</sup>

The collapse of communist Europe, together with the opening of the region's borders and archives, brought renewed attention to this previously obscured chapter of the Holocaust. Desbois's journey to the east was part of the wider wave of interest in the topic from researchers in democratic countries. As Paul A. Shapiro emphasises, these researchers encountered considerable scholarship and archives that had developed in the Eastern Bloc over decades, which must be considered the precursors of the contemporary research trend commented on above, albeit with a caveat concerning the reliability of some of the documents. A vast amount of documentation was produced by the post-war special commissions charged with investigating Nazi crimes in communist countries, by the courts judging cases of collaboration, and even by the secret services.<sup>29</sup> Post-war and post-1989 local and grassroots efforts to preserve knowledge of the sites of the killings must also be recognised as part of the vernacular archive built up in the region.<sup>30</sup> Western pioneers who studied German mass shootings in the East are usually found among the historians who opened the field of perpetrator studies: the works of Christopher Browning (*Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, 1993),<sup>31</sup> Daniel Goldhagen (*Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, 1997),<sup>32</sup> and Richard

24 Paul A. Shapiro, "Foreword", in *The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest's Journey to Uncover the Truth Behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews*, by Patrick Desbois (St. Martin's Publishing Group, 2008), xi.

25 Mary Fulbrook, *Reckonings: Legacies of Nazi Persecution and the Quest for Justice* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 105.

26 Desbois, *In Broad Daylight*; Pohl, "Historiography and Nazi Killing Sites", 37; Karel Berkhoff, "Afterword", in IHRA, *Killing Sites*, 227.

27 Mario Silva and Andrew Burns, "Preface", in IHRA, *Killing Sites*, 13.

28 IHRA, *Killing Sites*.

29 Shapiro, "Foreword", ix-x.

30 Dieter Pohl in 2015 commented on the state of research as follows: "Some twenty years ago relatively few historians were interested in the so-called Killing Sites of the Holocaust, places of mass executions in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union, the Baltic States, Poland, parts of Yugoslavia. Of course, historians were aware of the mass shootings in these areas, but they paid comparatively little attention to the places themselves. It was the survivors, the victims' relatives, activists of memorialization, often communal administrations who took care of these places of mass murder. Monuments were erected at many of these sites immediately after the war, and even more since the 1960s." Dieter Pohl, "Historiography and Nazi Killing Sites", 31.

31 Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (HarperPerennial, 1993).

32 Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (Abacus, 1997).

Rhodes (*Masters of Death: The SS Einsatzgruppen and the Invention of the Holocaust*, 2002)<sup>33</sup> laid the groundwork for understanding the actions of mobile units.

Today, the researchers who study the Holocaust by bullets<sup>34</sup> and local actors who have begun to receive scientific, organisational, and financial support<sup>35</sup> collaborate to identify killing sites, victims, and perpetrators and to develop initiatives to commemorate and educate the public about this form of anti-Jewish genocide. The work underway, according to Paul Shapiro's assessment, "opens a new way forward",<sup>36</sup> continuing what Desbois and his growing team accomplished: the indexing of sites of mass executions and interviews collected make it possible to verify the materials found in older communist archives. The newly collected oral history testimonies allow us to probe into past events and the ways they were emotionally experienced, remembered, and how they influenced post-war attitudes toward the past.<sup>37</sup> What distinguishes them from earlier, more numerous testimonies is primarily the fact that the interviewees are non-Jews and child observers of past events separated from the Holocaust by a temporal, emotional, and cognitive gap.

### *The Decentralisation of Genocide*

Acknowledging the Holocaust by bullets may draw it closer to the center of Holocaust historiography and, in effect, decentralise the latter in several ways. The most obvious argument for decentralisation comes from spatial studies that innovatively use Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and mapping, which allow researchers to both zoom out to see the continental scale of the Holocaust and zoom in on individual killing sites, sometimes even down to the level of the individual person.<sup>38</sup> In the process, the large-scale persecution locations that generated "centralised" topographical metaphors have been replaced by an uncoordinated network of small, scattered sites of execution or burial locations. References to closed town districts or wire-enclosed camps have given way to a multitude of index points related to pits and ravines into which the bodies of victims were dumped. Dieter Pohl estimates that there were between five thousand and ten thousand mass execution sites in the former Soviet Union, Poland,

33 Richard Rhodes, *Masters of Death: The SS-Einsatzgruppen and the Invention of the Holocaust* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2002).

34 The support and funding from the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), the organisation that launched the Multi-Year Work Plan project "Killing Sites" in 2011, had a visible impact on increasing interest in the topic. See Silva and Burns, "Preface", 13.

35 See, for example, the activities of the Rabbinical Commission for Cemeteries and the Forgotten Foundation founded in Poland in 2014, or the Forum for Dialogue Foundation, established in 2017.

36 Shapiro, "Introduction", x.

37 *Ibid.*, xi.

38 See, for instance, Anne Kelly Knowles, Tim Cole, and Alberto Giordano, eds., *Geographies of the Holocaust*, (Indiana University Press, 2014).

Central Europe, and in the former Yugoslavia; several hundred more locations can be found in other countries in Europe occupied by Nazi Germany: the geography of this phenomenon, as Pohl acknowledges, will be extremely difficult to reconstruct.<sup>39</sup>

The radically different topographical character of this aspect of the Holocaust is easily understood by comparing cartographic documentation: the map constructed by the Yahad-In Unum researchers, which today contains almost 2,100 locations of massacres, differs fundamentally in terms of the number of marked places on conventional maps of the Holocaust.<sup>40</sup> The latter, as Aleksandra Szczepan points out, frequently single out camps and Auschwitz and mark the routes of the victims' transport so the observer's attention is focused on the largest of the death camps,<sup>41</sup> as is the case, for example, on the cover of multiple editions of Martin Gilbert's *Holocaust Atlas*.<sup>42</sup> The decentralisation of execution sites equates to a dispersion of archival resources, witnesses, and research venues, which renders the ongoing research painstaking and slow, making it difficult to gain momentum. On another level, the dispersion of sites means that it is challenging to introduce institutionalised forms of commemoration or practices of care.<sup>43</sup>

Despite two decades of development and the rapid progress made in site identification and archaeological research, this sub-field of Holocaust research has not generated a significant number of new overarching analyses.<sup>44</sup> This might be the reason for the emergence of approaches that go beyond top-down historiographical research: in her 2021 study *The Ravine*, Wendy Lower reveals the events of and actors involved in the Miropol massacre of 13 October 1941, by conducting a detective-style investigation centered on a photograph capturing the moment of the shooting.<sup>45</sup> Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska reconstructs the public awareness of mass executions in post-war West Germany by tracing the reception of the

39 Pohl, "Historiography and Nazi Killing Site", 37.

40 See: <http://www.yahadinunum.orgwww.yahadmap.org/en/#map/>.

41 See the discussion here: [https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch\\_permalink&v=941249609616149](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=941249609616149), which appears under the title *Scattered Holocaust, Weak Commemorations*, accessed 12 December 2024.

42 Martin Gilbert, *Atlas of the Holocaust* (Joseph, 1982).

43 As Deidre Berger pointed out: "The many challenges dealing with protection of the sites begins with Jewish tradition, which does not permit removal of bodies, making it necessary to work with the sites in the condition in which they are found. This differs from centralized German war graves cemeteries in Ukraine, where bodies are gathered from numerous sites. These sites are often more easily accessible and located on terrain that lends itself more readily to construction work." Deidre Berger, "Protecting Memory: Preserving and Memorializing the Holocaust Mass Graves of Eastern Europe in: Killing Sites", 98. Desbois was motivated by a similar observation: "While the mass graves of the thousands of Jews who were shot are untraceable, every German killed during the war has been reburied and identified by name. The cemeteries are on the scale of the Reich. Magnificent cemeteries for the Germans, including the SS, little graves for the French, white stones covered in brambles for the tens of thousands." Desbois, *The Holocaust by Bullets*, 34.

44 See, for example, the database Yahad-In Unum is creating, as well as those of smaller organisations such as the Forgotten Foundation: <https://zapomniane.org/en/#map>.

45 Wendy Lower, *The Ravine: A Family, a Photograph, a Holocaust Massacre Revealed*, (Mariner Books, 2021).

Hans Scholz novel *Am grünen Strand der Spree* (1955–1960)<sup>46</sup> and the subsequent radio play and television series based on the book.<sup>47</sup> Jenny Watson is developing a project tracing literary representations of the Holocaust by bullets. Killing sites associated with mass shootings stood at the center of research on memory cultures generated by uncommemorated sites of wartime violence (“Uncommemorated Sites,” Jagiellonian University, Kraków, 2016–2020)<sup>48</sup> and on forms of commemoration of mass grave sites in the post-war era (“Mass Graves of Holocaust Victims/Holocaust Mass Graves,” German Historical Institute in Warsaw, 2023 – ongoing).<sup>49</sup>

It is worth noting that the potential for Einsatzgruppen history to revise post-war Holocaust metaphors and framings was suggested long ago: in a review of Hanna Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), Józef [Joseph] Wulf criticised what he saw as a narrowing thesis of the “banality of evil”. The record of the Einsatzgruppen trial in Nuremberg (1947), Wulf claimed, would have revealed a very different view to Arendt than the one she described encountering at Nuremberg, not least because the Nazi executions on the Eastern Front were carried out by highly educated experts in philosophy, theology, economics, and law.<sup>50</sup>

### *From the Holocaust by Bullets to Killing Sites*

Different terms were applied to post-1941 execution sites: post-war and grass-roots terminology includes “war graves”, “common burials”, “fraternal graves”, “pits”, and “sites where they shot Jews”.<sup>51</sup> Karel Berkhoff likewise highlights the significant terminological divergence among those involved in research on “killing sites”: some institutions have developed their own vocabularies including “murder sites” of Jews in the (former) Soviet Union (Yad Vashem), “mass murder sites” (Holocaust Atlas of

46 Published in English translation as Hans Scholz, *Through the Night*, trans. Elisabeth Abbott (Thomas Y. Crowell, 1959).

47 Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska, *Microhistories of Memory: Remediating the Holocaust by Bullets in Postwar West Germany*, (Berghahn Books, 2023).

48 Sendyka, “Sites of Violence and Their Communities”, full issue. See also Roma Sendyka, *Poza obozem. Nie-miejsca pamięci*; Roma Sendyka, Maria Kobielska, Jakub Muchowski, and Aleksandra Szczepan, eds., *Nie-miejsca pamięci 1: Nekrotopografie* (Instytut Badań Literackich Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2021); Roma Sendyka, Aleksandra Janus, Karina Jarzyńska, Kinga Siewior, eds., *Nie-miejsca pamięci 2: Nekrotopologie* (Instytut Badań Literackich Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2021).

49 See: <https://www.dhi.waw.pl/en/fundamental-research/fundamental-research/masowe-groby-ofiar-zagłady/>.

50 See: <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/wissen/geist-soziales/joseph-wulfs-rezension-zu-hanna-arendts-eichmann-buch-16603967.html>. The review was commissioned by *Der Spiegel* in 1964, but it was not published until the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* printed it on 29 January 2020. See Anja Keith, Detlev Schöttker, “Arendt und Wulf. Eine ‘Spiegel-Affäre’”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 24 (2020): 3, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/wissen/geist-soziales/spiegel-warum-wurde-joseph-wulfs-arendt-rezension-nicht-gedruckt-16603964/wulfs-fluechtlingspass-des-12134719.html>.

51 Roma Sendyka, “Uncommemorated Sites of Genocide: Mass Graves, Pits, or Garbage Dumps? Vernacular Responses to the Holocaust in Poland”, *Environment, Space, Place* 15, no. 2 (2023): 14–33, <https://doi.org/10.1353/spc.2023.a910009>.

Lithuania), and “massacre sites” (Belarus Memorials Project). Others emphasise the presence of human remains in their terms: for instance, “mass graves” (LoTishkach) and “sites of mass graves” (Yahad-In Unum).<sup>52</sup>

The terminological uncertainty surrounding the phenomenon of mass shootings in the East is based on the fact that – as can already be seen in the definition used by Yahad-In Unum cited above – these murders involved groups other than Jews (Roma, prisoners of war, political prisoners, the disabled, communists; mass murders were also part of local conflicts, e.g., the Polish-Ukrainian conflict in Volhynia).<sup>53</sup> Executions had the same form and took place during the same period, and sometimes the victims, regardless of their identities, were deposited in the same places. The Holocaust by bullets, therefore, does not stand out from its historical context with the same sharpness as the Holocaust that took place in camps and ghettos, as seen in the report on the Babyn Yar Memorial Center: “The killings by Nazi Germany of other victim groups, in a largely deliberate process, *inextricably interwoven with the Holocaust* (whereby some of the victim groups included Jews).”<sup>54</sup> The “Eastern perspective” on the Holocaust is, thus, less susceptible to isolationist understandings of the Holocaust resulting from the Holocaust singularity thesis,<sup>55</sup> and it more easily and with less controversy is open to comparison.

In initiating research projects related to the actions of the Einsatzgruppen, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), an organisation linking thirty-five countries in the field of Holocaust research, did not, symptomatically, choose the term “Holocaust by bullets” as its core concept. The multi-year research plan that resulted in the 2015 publication *Killing Sites – Research and Remembrance* was built around the term “killing sites”. Dieter Pohl explained the term as follows: “What is a mass Killing Site? The main criteria are that a mass killing was perpetrated and that it was perpetrated at a particular site designated

52 Karel Berkhoff, “Afterword”, in *Killing Sites*, 228.

53 On the overlap of events: “It is reasonable to state that mass executions were a specific feature of the Holocaust, but also a feature of German violence against the non-Jewish population in Eastern Europe. And it is difficult to draw a clear line between crimes against Jews and non-Jews. The Einsatzgruppen started their mass executions against both Jewish men and non-Jewish alleged communists; among the Soviet POWs singled out for murder were approximately 50,000 Jewish Red Army soldiers, and the anti-partisan warfare included killing Jewish partisans or family camps uncovered in the forests. There were other overlaps. Of the 5.6–5.8 million murdered Jews, approximately 2–2.2 million died in mass executions, 2.5 million in extermination camps, and approximately one million died due to other circumstances, in ghettos, other camps or during death marches. The Germans and their Axis allies shot between 1.3–1.5 million non-Jews: partisans, Roma, specific groups of Soviet POWs, the mentally disabled, Bosnian Serbs, and others. Among all of them, probably more than 100,000 non-Jewish civilians were shot within or nearby camps or prisons.” Dieter Pohl, “Historiography and Nazi Killing Sites”, 37.

54 Emphasis added. Karel Berkhoff et al., *Basic Historical Narrative of the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center*, 29 October 2018, 3, <https://pure.knaw.nl/portal/en/publications/basic-historical-narrative-of-the-babi-yar-holocaust-memorial-cen>.

55 See the debate described in Michael Rothberg and Jürgen Zimmerer, “Enttabuisiert den Vergleich!”, *Die Zeit*, 31 March 2021, <https://www.zeit.de/2021/14/erinnerungskultur-gedenken-pluralisieren-holocaust-vergleich-globalisierung-geschichte>.

for this purpose, such as a clearing in a forest, a cemetery, a building, etc. These mass killings were generally done by shooting.”<sup>56</sup> The decisive factor for combining the murder sites of people of different ethnicities into one category was whether the perpetrator was acting within the framework of a “German or collaborator racist ideology”.<sup>57</sup> According to Pohl, killing site executions should be distinguished from those that occurred in the area or in connection with the liquidation of ghettos and the operations of concentration camps (e.g., “Aktion Erntefest”), as well as from those carried out in the same area by other forces (e.g., by the NKVD).

The second important criterion for distinguishing the category of “killing sites” was the mass nature of the crime, which was already signaled in the definition adopted by Yahad-In Unum. As Pohl reported, within the IHRA, the criterion to describe an interment as a “killing site” was the presence of twenty-five victims if the execution took place in larger and medium-sized communities; if a village or town had a population of only a “few dozen Jews or Roma”, ten victims were sufficient to consider the location a “killing site”.<sup>58</sup>

As may be gleaned from the discussion above, such efforts to provide a definition link the events of the Holocaust by bullets to the experience of mass death, making it, in a way, conceptually more comparable to mass death in camps. However, it is worth emphasising that the criteria above (of ten or more victims constituting a killing site) are not consistent with the definitions of a “mass grave” used in conflict archaeology, forensics, and investigations by tribunals investigating crimes in the former Yugoslavia or Rwanda, which push the boundary significantly downward, proposing that the term “mass grave” be used to describe a site with six or even two bodies.<sup>59</sup>

### *The Third Phase of the Holocaust*

The concept of a killing site, based on the criterion of large numbers and groupings of victims, tends to allow smaller acts of murder to slip through the definitional sieve and, consequently, to escape the attention of the Holocaust researchers and the public. Meanwhile, smaller – even individual – killing sites, as scholars from the “Polish School” of Holocaust research argue, are frequent and significantly represented in accounts and testimonies. As a result, they are nothing short of constitutive of the memory of the Holocaust and are fundamental for understanding the far-reaching impacts of the Holocaust in “the East”. They are especially characteristic of the so-called third phase of the Holocaust.

56 Pohl, “Historiography and Nazi Killing Sites”, 27.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Sendyka, *Poza obozem*, 191.

As Dariusz Libionka writes, “the term ‘third phase of the Holocaust’ has been in use in the historical literature for some time now, but often without any clarification of the term or any indication of the timeframe. In the case of the GG [General Government – R.S.], this refers not so much to the period after the end of the deportations and the liquidation of the ghettos but to all kinds of extermination measures taken against Jews trying to evade the machinery of extermination.”<sup>60</sup> For instance, “escaped prisoners who jumped off trains going to the extermination camps were caught. As a rule, they were led, often by peasants, to police and gendarmerie stations and killed there.”<sup>61</sup>

The term “third phase of the Holocaust” refers to the various means by which the last individuals hiding on the “Aryan side” were pursued and caught after Operation Reinhardt ended.<sup>62</sup> In 1942, as Libionka writes, “the entire territory of the GG became the arena for the ‘hunt for Jews’ (Judenjagd), which continued until liberation. In the eastern areas, the tracking down of Jews continued until the summer of 1944 in western lesser Poland until January 1945.”<sup>63</sup> The “Jew hunt”, recently popularised in the historiography of the Holocaust by the work of Jan Grabowski, was conducted by Germans and the local administration. The occupiers could also count on the compulsory or voluntary participation of locals.<sup>64</sup> Manhunts were organised by the police or district governors, while forced expeditions of mobilised gendarmerie units or Baudienst junkers could be summoned to assist. The search was typically supervised by German gendarmes of the Kriminalpolizei (Kripo). As Libionka estimates, “most of the escapees from ghettos, labor camps, and transports did not make it to liberation, and the circumstances of their deaths, except in cases that were investigated and prosecuted after the war, remain unknown.”<sup>65</sup>

Grabowski identified the period when the “liquidation” of the ghettos took place as the moment of moral transformation, or rather, the moment marking the complete disappearance of ethical norms: “Sometime in 1942, and it is impossible to determine exactly when, it became acceptable, in the eyes of many, that the taking of Jewish life was no longer considered a crime, or a sin.”<sup>66</sup> Due to the public nature of the procedure, Grabowski contends,

60 Dariusz Libionka, *Zagłada Żydów w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie: zarys problematyki* (Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku, 2017), 248.

61 Libionka, *Zagłada Żydów w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie*, 248–249.

62 See Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski’s definition: “During the liquidation actions, a part of the Jewish population was murdered in situ, in the liquidated ghettos, while some (according to our count, around 10 percent) managed to flee.” Jan Grabowski and Barbara Engelking, *Night Without End: The Fate of Jews in German-Occupied Poland* (Indiana University Press, 2022), 33.

63 Libionka, *Zagłada Żydów w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie*, 248.

64 Alina Skibińska and Jakub Petelewicz, “Udział Polaków w zbrodniach na Żydach na prowincji regionu świętokrzyskiego”, *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 1 (2005): 114–147.

65 Libionka, *Zagłada Żydów w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie*, 250.

66 Jan Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland* (Indiana University Press, 2014), 83.

the entire wartime community became implicated, they became responsible for the effectiveness of the Holocaust. Szymon Datner, a pioneering Polish Jewish historian of the Holocaust, estimated that about one hundred thousand Jews hiding in occupied Polish territories perished in the last phase of the war.<sup>67</sup> Yehuda Bauer, following the findings of Polish historians, gave a range of 130,000 to 200,000 victims.<sup>68</sup> Jan Grabowski wrote, “Given the numbers above, one can assume that the number of victims of the *Judenjagd* (hunt for Jews) could reach 200,000 – and this alone within the prewar Polish borders.”<sup>69</sup>

### *The Dispersed Holocaust*

The Holocaust as observed from the small towns and villages of occupied Poland differs from the one popularised in the global understanding of the term. Jews were deported to ghettos and then returned: ghetto fugitives usually hid in areas where they had acquaintances among the local population. Captured during the third phase of the Holocaust, they were killed in smaller-scale, dispersed executions.

Symptomatically, Desbois’s attention on the persecuted Jews ends with the mass grave itself; in his works and speeches, he emphasises the harrowing image of the “moving grave”. In *Porteur de mémoires*, the not-quite dead mass grave minutes after the execution serves as the final frontier, a trap that absorbs even those who survived the execution.<sup>70</sup> Meanwhile, the research of Polish scholars, survivors’ accounts,<sup>71</sup> and also the descriptions of witnesses<sup>72</sup> point to a group of refugees of the Holocaust by bullets in the case of those who managed to escape death during the executions, sometimes by literally crawling out of the pit of death. Their fate is extremely difficult to reconstruct, but when done, their ex-

67 Szymon Datner, “Zbrodnie hitlerowskie na Żydach zbiegłych z gett. Groźby i zarządzenia ‘prawne’ w stosunku do Żydów oraz udzielających im pomocy Polaków”, *Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego* 75 (1970): 28–29.

68 Yehuda Bauer, “Creating a ‘Usable’ Past: On Holocaust Denial and Distortion”, *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 14, no. 2, (3 May 2020): 219, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23739770.2020.1805916>.

69 Jan Grabowski, “Estimates of the Losses of Polish Jews in Hiding, 1942–1945: Revisiting Yehuda Bauer’s Observations”, *The Journal of Holocaust Research* 36, no. 1 (2022): 102, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25785648.2021.2014673>.

70 Desbois, *The Holocaust by Bullets*.

71 Barbara Engelking, “‘A minut cu nacht’ Analiza doświadczenia Żydów, którzy przeżyli masowe egzekucje”, in *Oto widać i oto słycać: Świadcowie Zagłady w okupowanej Polsce*, ed. Barbara Engelking, Jacek Leociak, Dariusz Libionka, and Alina Skibińska (Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2024); Barbara Engelking, “‘Many of Those Who Were Only Wounded Suffocated, Buried Alive’: Analyzing the Experiences of Jews Who Survived Mass Executions”, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 36, no. 2 (2022): 171–189, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hgs/dcac022>. See also Jacek Leociak, “Wyjście z grobu”, *Teksty Drugie* 1 (2004); Roma Sendyka, *Holocaust by Bullets: Expanding the Field of Holocaust Art*, accessed 12 December 2024, <https://www.ehri-project.eu/holocaust-bullets/>. Here, you will find the cases of Jonah Stern and Pinchas Burstein.

72 See the archive of Yahad-In Unum: <http://www.yahadinunum.orgwww.yahadmap.org/en/#map/>.

perience sheds light on the uncoordinated, scattered acts of anti-Jewish violence.

One can only estimate the myriad forms of death from the rare post-war testimonies: the invaluable accounts collected in the 1970s and 1980s by the ethnographer Eugeniusz Czubala offer a shocking catalogue of individual deaths during the “third phase of the Holocaust”. In the section of the book entitled “War and Occupation”, one can find harrowing stories of Jews frozen on the shoulders of roads and in ditches, killed in swamps and pastures, murdered in the forest, thrown into wells, killed in the very houses in which they initially found refuge, raped and murdered while making their way to the next shelter, or killed by Germans or their auxiliaries stationed nearby or by local inhabitants.<sup>73</sup>

The term I propose, “dispersed Holocaust”, encompasses any form of Jewish death during and immediately after the Second World War as long as it was derived from wartime social relations that did not occur within a camp or ghetto. The majority of these events relate to the period after June 1941 and the territory east of Auschwitz-Birkenau, but as researchers of killing sites acknowledge,<sup>74</sup> it is possible to point to a small number of events that preceded this period and which took place in western and southern Europe. Similarly, murders committed after the end of the war can also be included insofar as they resulted from wartime mindset. Paying greater attention to even individual murders that occurred through personal contacts and in a different manner than those identified by historians of the ghettos and camps can better reveal the full extent of the dramatic fate of the persecuted population and expose the brutalization of wartime societies.

### *Conclusions: From Dispersed Holocaust to Holocausts*

Any comprehensive necro-topography of the Holocaust – the mapping of dispersed deaths of the persecuted taking into account the various forms of the Holocaust “in the East” – that does not use the criterion of mass death and an a priori assumed number of victims would be considerably more complex than one that is centralised around the global message of camps and ghettos. Indeed, it would be more complex than even the necro-topography reconstructed in studies of the Holocaust by bullets and killing

73 Dionizjusz Czubala and Piotr Grochowski, *O tym nie wolno mówić .... Zagłada Żydów w opowieściach wspomnieniowych ze zbiorów Dionizjusza Czubali* (Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2019); Dionizjusz Czubala, “Pamięć Zagłady w narracji folklorystycznej”, *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 13 (2017): 203–229, <https://doi.org/10.32927/ZZSiM.357>. See also Piotr Filipkowski, “Historia mówiona jako wybór źródeł. Wokół ‘O tym nie wolno mówić’: Zagłada Żydów w opowieściach wspomnieniowych ze zbiorów Dionizjusza Czubali”, *Studia Litteraria et Historica* 9 (2020): 1–16.

74 Dieter Pohl, “Historiography and Nazi Killing Sites”, 34. See also Alexander Korb, *Im Schatten des Weltkriegs: Massengewalt der Ustaša gegen Serben, Juden und Roma in Kroatien 1941–1945* (Hamburger Edition, 2013); Max Bergholz, *Violence as a Generative Force: Identity, Nationalism, and Memory in a Balkan Community* (Cornell University Press, 2016).

sites. A hypothetical exhaustive map of Holocaust sites would ultimately never be complete, but it would include sites of persecution and sites of death: camps and subcamps, ghettos and other forms of detention (transfer centers, prisons), sites of mass shootings, locations of deaths during transport, sites of smaller when it comes to the number of victims murders, executions, and deaths from illness or exhaustion in hiding, as well as sites of deaths during death marches in the final months of the war. It could interact with a map of places where Jews were killed not on racial grounds but for political, class, property, or personal reasons, including post-war pogroms and murders in places to which Jews attempted to return, as long as these deaths were “inextricably interwoven with the Holocaust”. Such a map would contain a multiplicity of marked sites, revealing their fragmentation and dispersion. It would be an attempt to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the Holocaust, one that more fully takes into account the diverse forms of death suffered by Jews both from and in Central and Eastern Europe.

In lieu of this hypothetical map, if the geographical complexity of the Holocaust can be captured in the more general formula of the “dispersed Holocaust”, the term can shed light on the specific nature of this genocide “beyond camps”: first, the murder of Jews took place in public, so both perpetrators and persons living in the surrounding communities had a great deal of knowledge about the events and were involved in them to a greater extent and in greater numbers than has heretofore been acknowledged. Second, the presence of these often uncommemorated death or execution sites has had an impact on local memory cultures that is not yet sufficiently understood. Third, the commemoration of such sites, which are diverse in terms of history, terrain, ecology, and social environment, faces greater difficulties than the now well-developed practices of commemorating victims of camps and/or ghettos.

The dispersed Holocaust might reveal more distinctively the diverse internal character of the genocide against the Jews. In this light, the Holocaust could be understood *plurally*: as *Holocausts*, and more often referred to by local terms (such as *Zagłada* or *Khurban*). Such an approach would help support local, “situated” Holocaust studies, understood as studies of diverse, locally embedded events in which the positionality of all actors, including present-day researchers, might play a more visible role. Second, the model of the dispersed Holocaust sheds more light on the *inextricably interwoven* yet different forms of extreme violence against different population groups. This would support comparative research that challenges the isolationist approach to the Holocaust without overlooking its significance. This would, finally, successfully challenge existing centralised thinking and support inclusive forms of memory culture that transcend the “competition over memory”.

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