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*Conference Report*

**Moving the Dead. Soil as Public Space for Political Struggles over the Reinterpretation of WWII in Poland, Belarus, Ukraine and Russia. Sektion auf dem 55. Deutschen Historikertag**

**Organizer:** Verband der Historiker und Historikerinnen Deutschlands

**Date, Venue:** 18.09.2025, Bonn

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The interdisciplinary panel, which was part of the “55. Deutscher Historikertag.”, proposes a new perspective on soil as a public and politicized space amplifying power struggles about hegemonic narratives. It referred to ongoing research in memory studies concerning the soil as public space in Central and Eastern Europe and focused on human remains in the aftermath of World War II and the more recent mnemonic conflicts that broke out after the opening of these burial sites. As a working hypothesis the organizers pointed to asymmetrical power dynamics between the state and descendants of the victims as an underlying configuration. Resonating with the general topic of dynamics of power – this panel raised new questions concerning the mass murder sites in Eastern Europe as public spaces.

Introducing the panel, FELIX ACKERMANN (Hagen) explained the appeal shared by all the presenting researchers that soil should be used as a public space and is deeply influenced by past and present symbolic resignifications. Through the intensification of burial and mass killing sites after the Second World War, the sites hold power relevant in today’s discourses and intensifying geopolitical conflicts. Following a new phase of reburial processes a vivid movement of bodies can be documented in Lithuania, Poland and Belarus. Ukraine witnesses the production of new sites of both civil and military casualties of armed conflict. The issue and questions arising when approaching such sites have never been more present as ongoing wars as the Russo-Ukrainian war lead to the production of new burial sites while limiting the access to others.

OXANA GOURINOVITCH (Zürich) illustrated how during WWII the national-socialist colonial project of “Großdeutschland” used archeological excavations in Eastern Europe as a form of physical ground control and were therefore exerting symbolic violence. Through the emergence of an interdisciplinary research team such as agronomy and road construction, but especially prehistory and archeology social-nationalist Germany sought for traces of an alleged Germanic past in the occupied territories of the Belarusian Socialist Soviet Republic in the “Reichskommissariat Ost”. During the colonial project “Generalplan Ost”, aiming to gain “Lebensraum” for German settlements in Eastern Europe, archaeological excavations of human remains by the Germans took place on various burial sites in the BSSR. Through these excavations, German researchers such as the prehistorian Professor Carl Engel sought to confirm the alleged aetiology of the Belarusian state of being a Nordic, if even a Germanic territory. By occupying not just the nation present at this time, but also trying to construct a genealogical claim on the soil, they aimed to prepare these regions for the establishment of Germanic settle-

ments as the ultimate goal of named project. Part of this alleged aetiology contained the belief that Nordic influences had penetrated the Baltic lands which ultimately situated them in Central Europe – and not in Eastern Europe – and therefore suitable for “Germanic” People. During a first phase of implementation between 1942 until 1943 civilians were deported and local resistance against the establishment of German settlements was triggered.

Concluding the project “Generalplan Ost” as a process of “trial and error“, Gourinovitch illustrated the power dynamics of soil as another facet of occupation through the physical control of the ground. Additionally, the project became a symbolic act of display about the overall power of the occupier delivering its own attempt to justify occupation by abusing the soil.

After the end of the Second World War, the Mass murder burial sites in Central- and Eastern Europe experienced a new phase of reburial processes. ANNA IZABELLA ZALEWSKA (Łódź) vividly revealed the following emergence of asymmetrical power struggles over the control of the soil marked by mass violence. Demonstrating an interdisciplinary approach to the topic, Zalewska revealed such power dynamics between the descendants’ attempt to express their grief while state strategies sought to abuse the material memory and therefore the control of national commemoration as such. Focusing on the Katyń massacre, which was conducted by NKVD units between April and May 1940, with more than 20,000 ethnic Polish, Ukrainian, Belarusian and Jewish officers of the Polish Army murdered. After the Second World War the USSR regained control over these burial sites and therefore material influence over the soil. By performing extensive excavations, the state attempted to erase the traces of mass murder conducted by Soviet forces through creating new interpretations of these mass burial sites which put national-socialist Germany to blame. After 1991 the Katyń Massacre became an increasingly potent symbol of national suffering while evoking the question on how to cope with the Russian Propaganda Machine which still proves to be relevant.

Until today, more than eight decades after the Katyń massacre, Russia continues to deny any Soviet involvement in these mass murders while national memory policy still claims them to be victims of the German fascist Regime. Due to the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war access to these burial sites became limited if not completely closed off. Zalewska therefore stressed a historical-archeological approach which strives to transcend these war related limitations and the modes of controls over these sites and regaining access through digital data and remote sensing by using material memory as a method to overcome the control of these sites. Concluding, Zalewska appeals for a confrontation of obliterating traces of war crimes through a process of documenting and interpreting to expose intentional transformation of evidence i.e. the material memory.

This theme found resonance in GUNDULA POHLs (Hagen) research about appropriating sites of the Holocaust by Bullets in Belarus under Lukashenka’s dictatorship through excavations as a practice of symbolic violence. Following massive civil protests in 2020 against the authoritarian regime, Lukashenka’s regime introduced a mnemonic doctrine to regain power over cultural narratives – by establishing a new master narrative. Aiming to reveal the “historical truth”, the

narrative commemorates the victims before and after the German occupation on the territory of Belarus – regardless of their cultural heritage even though most of the victims were Jewish – as Belarusian people. Moreover, it merges past and present into a imagined continuous Western threat as the doctrine seeks to draw lineage between national-socialist “Lebensraum” planning and Western supranational institutions of today, such as the EU and NATO. Oppositional approaches to these narratives are framed as fascist which further intensifies the justification for state oppression as “anti-fascist-defense” and leads to an increasing isolation of Lukashenka’s regime from Western society. Seeking for a practical approach to further legitimise this narrative, Lukashenka employed a special military division occupied with the excavation of the human remains of these mass murder sites to rebury them at other sites without proper regard to their cultural heritage and customs. Commemoration practices include vivid and explicit display of the exerted violence by national-socialist Germany while lacking any kind of contextualisation and therefore becoming deficient in transparency. While the soldiers of the special military division are praised for its patriotic service to the country, any critique towards the narrative and the chosen approach is now criminalized by the introduction of the 2022 law for the denial of the “Belarusian genocide”.

Through the vivid illustration of the hegemonic mnemonic doctrine forced upon by Lukashenka’s regime, Pohl managed to convey the act of symbolic violence upon the civil society as exemplified by the excavations. Pohl concludes by stressing the instrumentalization of the massacres’ victims in order to consolidate national memory while pointing out the importance of soil as a public space, too.

Concluding the panel, MAGDALENA SARYUZ-WOLSKA (Warsaw) strived to open up new dimensions towards burial sites marked by mass violence and the possibilities of approaching such for researchers as well as for the public. Zalewska demonstrated the challenges of attempting to approach and properly reveal these sites even for multidisciplinary research and especially with the ongoing war and aggressions of Russia towards Ukraine, gaining access to these sites became much more difficult. Additionally, occupying forces such as the Belarusian regime of Lukashenka as well as Russia seek to obtain hegemonic power over cultural narratives through national commemoration. The Panel evokes questions on how we treat the human remains while maintaining the burial rules belonging to their cultural heritage. Referring to postcolonial debates, concepts such as necroviolence are proving to be increasingly accurate in describing the violence over the soil of mass murder sites and the dead victims as well as the violence against the descendants and the forced mnemonic reinterpretation. Therefore, the analysed excavations of human remains open up environmental, political and practical dimensions which have to be considered when approaching these topics.

Fostering other perspectives for further research the dimension of the original perpetrators to the interpretation and commemoration of such burial sites remains undisclosed. Can we commemorate people in these mass burial sites where they fell victim, or would that lead to a reproduction of the perpetrators’ power dynamic, who forced signification upon these sites by the crimes they committed? Can these burial grounds be a mnemonic device and honoring the people’s heritage without repeating patterns of symbolic violence? Therefore, the question of the engraved power relations in soil and the debate about mass burial sites refers to the current

discourse about memorials and the appropriate way of remembering without reinforcing the dynamics of power and impotence, which themselves lead to the commemorated actions.

**Panel overview:**

Chairs of panel: Felix Ackermann (Hagen) / Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska (Warsaw)

Felix Ackermann (Hagen): Introductory Remarks

Oxana Gourinovitch (Zürich): Bones, Blood and Soil. German Colonial Archeology and Spatial Planning in Eastern Europe during WWII

Anna Izabella Zalewska (Łódź): Transcending the Modes of Control over the Material Consequences of Mass Violence on the Territories of Russia and Ukraine through Digital Data and Remote Sensing

Gundula Pohl (Hagen): Excavations as a Practice of Symbolic Violence. Appropriating Sites of the Holocaust by Bullets in the Republic of Belarus

Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska (Warsaw): Concluding Remarks

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