

# SAVING THE PAST – SHAPING THE FUTURE

An initiative to *preserve, present* and *project* the sites of Nazi crimes

Future Memory Foundation

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## THE PROBLEM: EUROPE'S MEMORY CRISIS IN THE ABSENCE OF WITNESSES

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We are facing the end of the "age of the witness." Over the last sixty years, witness and survivor testimonies were fundamental for the commemoration of Nazi crimes. They have connected subsequent generations with this horrifying past and were pivotal in anchoring it in collective memory. However, with the mortality of the witness, this model of commemoration is reaching its limits, and recent surveys have shown that current generations have little knowledge of this period [1]. We are risking a catastrophic collapse of the collective

memory of Nazi crimes and the Holocaust in particular, despite many efforts to preserve and present individual memories in museums, exhibitions and through other media.

**Since the living memory of Nazi crimes disappears, we may become the generation to forget about it, compromising our European humanist traditions and identity. This cannot be allowed to happen. Urgent action is required.**

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## AIM: LEARN FROM THE NAZI TERRORSPACE IN THE SERVICE OF THE HUMAN CONDITION

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**The answer to the fundamental crisis of collective memory is to turn to a permanent but precarious witness of Nazi crimes: the local physical space defining the European landscape of Nazi terror.**

Nazi crimes and the Holocaust were perpetrated across a vast network of sites including killing pits, ghettos, extermination centers and camps for the destruction of political prisoners, the exploitation of slave labor and the imprisonment of prisoners-of-war. More than 42.000 camps formed the network of Nazi terror distributed all-over Europe, centrally organized and administered by a number of institutions, collections, research, and on-site information sources. Compared to the immense amount of camps, only an archival Even there, most of the physical features have disappeared: demolished, assimilated into the landscape or transformed into memorial parks. The majority of these sites have gone completely. We believe in the particular importance of these physical sites for activating individual processes of meaning building for the sake of the future of humanity. **Thus, space itself must be turned into a medium of collective commemoration.** Based on the preservation of the physical traces, the Nazi landscape of terror in Europe has to be made undeniably visible and accessible far beyond the historical location itself in combination with the historical sources that document the crimes perpetrated in this space.

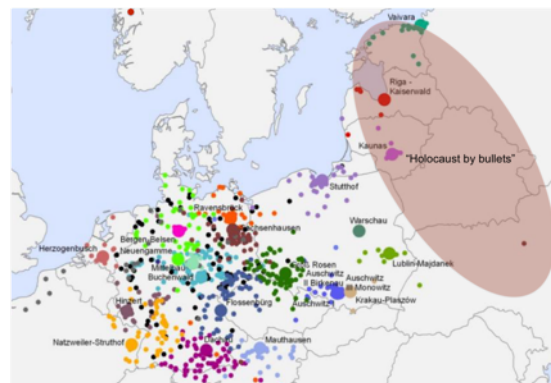


Figure 1: The Nazi landscape of terror comprise over 4200 sites. USHMM.org

**More than ever, today and in the future, the fundamental crisis of humanity during the Nazi era needs to be answered by an exceptional intellectual and technological effort to advance the value of life, society, personality, and solidarity in the face of its ruthless destruction seventy and more years ago. We propose to use advanced science grounded information technologies to assist in answering this challenge and realize a network of interconnected sites that are augmented using digital means serving as portals of learning and reflection on the human condition, human rights, in the past, present and future.**

## THE TASK: RECONSTRUCTING THE SPATIAL STRUCTURE OF NAZI TERROR

Existing memorial sites or museums offer a traditional historiographical approach. In particular, they have not included the multiplicity of campsites all-over Europe as grounded in the physical landscape of terror integrated with pertinent historical sources (e.g., images, maps, construction plans) and personal descriptions (e.g., from testimonies and diaries). As a result, the systemic, global characteristics of the process of Nazi crimes has been lost.

**We propose to use virtual and augmented reality techniques to reconstruct 100 sites of the landscape of terror and their interrelated structure.**

These reconstructions will be tied to a vast amount of historical material such as eyewitness accounts, official documents, photos and artifacts that will all be digitized and suitably contextualized. This network will be accessible through both physical and virtual visits and describes the core of the landscape of Nazi crimes. Hence, by using advanced digital humanities

technologies, we will conserve, protect and develop the memory of the Holocaust and Nazi crimes for future generations. A starting-point has been set and implemented at the Bergen-Belsen Memorial between 2011 and 2014 and still in daily use with its visitors (Figure 2 and 3). For the first time, a three-dimensional, virtual model of the former camp has been constructed and presented within a three-wall-projection space. This immersive interactive presentation has been linked with a mobile tablet-based application that allows visitors to physically visit the former campsite and perceive and experience the historical spatial structures and details of fences, buildings and camp sections as part of the landscape. Most importantly, multiple geo-localized sources are accessible that open in-depth perspectives into the use and experience of this node in the landscape of terror, providing a context for reflection and meaning generation.



Figure 2: The landscape of terror 70 years later. Left: Bergen Belsen memorial today. Right: the Bergen Belsen site as experienced through an augmented reality tablet application developed by the Future Memory project.



Figure 3: The Bergen Belsen 3D virtual reconstruction as presented at the memorial.

**The Saving the Past – Shaping the Future initiative will further develop and extend this paradigm.** For a representative subset of camps, reconstructions will be realized and integrated with sources of historical information. Additionally, graphical representations of the interrelations between these camps will be developed, combined with interviews with survivors

that will be structured around the organization of space itself, a form of capturing history not pursued so far. This master model will contextualize individual sites within a cartographical, topographical, sociological and experiential framework, which entails geo-localized information on the landscape of terror and the role and faith of individuals within it. Users will be able to grasp

how this system developed, learn about different functions, types, as well as the relations of a subset of

camps and the experience and destiny of its victims.

## THE OBJECTIVES: PRESERVE – PRESENT – PROJECT

The task to reconstruct the network of the landscape of Nazi terror needs to be embedded into a broader plan and vision. Thus, the initiative has to exploit the following three objectives:

### ***Preserve the Sites***

A master plan for the long-term preservation and protection of the physical remains of former Nazi terror sites needs to be urgently put in place. They serve as silent witnesses, historical objects and sacred places.

### ***Present the Terror-scape***

An infrastructure for the presentation of the network of terror sites in education and research has to be developed and implemented. This infrastructure has to be as accessible to the general and specialized user as possible, to serve as a virtual guide to the physical spaces and their complex and conflicted histories, and to include and connect all relevant sources, eyewitness accounts, and survivor testimonies which convey the spatial experience and its embedded memory of Nazi crimes and the Holocaust.

### ***Project the Meaning***

The contemplation of our memory of the past must fuel a meaning generation process that shapes our future. Following a science grounded interactive learning and understanding approach, combined with the

concreteness of the historical site, we seek to realize a sustainable meaning to the knowledge and emotions that will be encountered in the confrontation with the Nazi landscape of terror. This meaning giving process has to approach both our present and future and is of direct relevance to many aspects of our society.

### ***Bridge to the Future***

Show that the atrocities of the past are integral aspects of the human condition, that require continuous analysis, education, and vigilance.

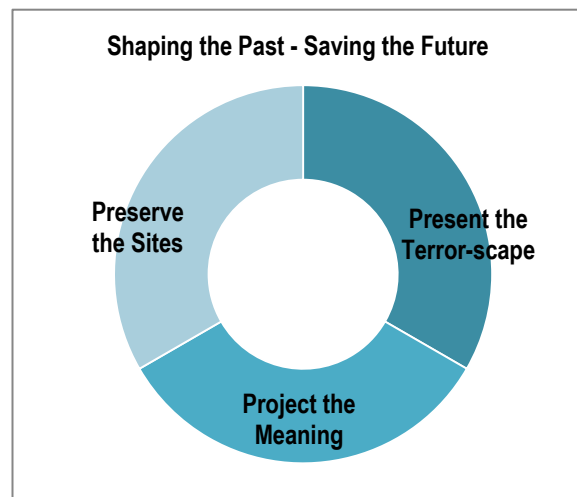


Figure 4: The Future Memory approach has been further validated and tested at a number of sites across Europe including: the Wiener Library, London (2015), Herdenkingsoord Westerbork, the Netherlands (2017), Memorial site Fallstad, Norway (2018- ) and is currently being piloted at a number of sites in the Netherlands, Croatia, and the Czech Republic. Image: Future Memory tablet application at Fallstad memorial (Norway) the only SS concentration camp in Norway that was mainly used for the imprisonment and execution of political prisoners, hostages, and prisoners of war.

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### **References:**

[1] Foster et al. (2014) What do Students Know and Understand of the Holocaust, University College London