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Aufbau von Forschungsinfrastrukturen für die e-Humanities

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“Public History of the Holocaust: Historical Research in the Digital Age” (Coference-Report)

This conference focused on the opportunities and implications of the internet as a public space for the study of the Holocaust. Since historical research is based on the examination and investigation of source material, the ability to access and work with increasing amounts of materials in digital format from multiple institutions presents a tremendous opportunity for historians. However, these new possibilities also create new challenges for historians and archivists; issues such as the quality of information available online and the importance of supporting research while discouraging the spread of misinformation such as hate speech and Holocaust denial. Infrastructure projects such as EHRI (European Holocaust Research Infrastructure) address this situation by providing a platform for cooperation and for providing context for evaluating the quality and accuracy of sources.

In her introduction, Conny Kristel, Project Director of EHRI and Co-director of DARI-AH (Digital Research Infrastructure for the Arts and Humanities), pointed out that Holocaust studies were started not by researchers at universities and academic institutions, but by survivors themselves and their associates. From the beginning, Holocaust studies have had a responsibility to the general public.

The keynote speakers were Johanna Wanka, the German Federal Minister of Education and Research, and Robert-Jan Smits, Director-General of DG Research and Innovation of the European Commission. The conference was moderated by the journalist Astrid Frohloff. Dr. Wanka stressed the fact that remembering the Holocaust is an important part of the social tradition in Germany. Research infrastructures like EHRI support researchers working together and provide access to Holocaust data to aid in this purpose, but more international cooperation is necessary in order to make better use of the existing archives and resources. A newly established Centre for Holocaust Studies in Munich, founded by the Ministry of Education, will strengthen interdisciplinary and international research on the Holocaust in Germany. In his keynote address, Mr. Smits noted that he had been surprised to learn that there was hardly any structured cooperation between archives and institutions with holdings related to the Holocaust over longer periods of time. In response to this situation, the EHRI project was founded with the explicit goal of making Holocaust research and sources more accessible to the general public.

In a short video introduction to the conference (<http://www.ehri-project.eu/berlin-conference-film>), visitors to Holocaust Memorial sites were asked about the Holocaust and its history, and how they engage with and learn about this event. Many of those interviewed mentioned internet resources as their primary information source; therefore, one challenge for Holocaust studies is to take advantage of new possibilities for outreach and citizen engagement while simultaneously raising awareness about the limitations of these information structures.

The conference began with a discussion of the history of the study of the Holocaust and the meaning of the Holocaust in contemporary culture by Georgi Verbeeck (Uni-

versity of Leuven). Since the Holocaust is perceived as one of the defining moments of the twentieth century, this prominence as a cultural reference point means that it can also be used for misuse and misrepresentation, such as the rise of Holocaust denial. New media and new tools offer wonderful opportunities for scholarship, but they can also be misused by those who wish to spread misleading information. For these reasons, it is important to create educational programs that focus on the individual narratives and that represent the Holocaust in the proper context. In discussing new directions for Holocaust scholarship, Verbeeck makes a distinction between the “Holocaust”, meaning the larger narrative of the event, and the “holocaust”, which refers to the many individual personal experiences and narratives that are a powerful tool in educating members of the public.

The discussion was followed by presentations by speakers from four major institutions for Holocaust research: Dina Porat (Yad Vashem, Israel), Sara Bloomfield (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum), Rebecca Boehling (International Tracing Service), and Angelika Menne-Haritz (German Federal Archive). These institutions are all engaged in public outreach and Holocaust education and teaching, and they are all exploring public history projects that have as a goal to stimulate discussion and interaction with members of the general public as well as historians, particularly with the loss of the generation of first-hand witnesses to the Holocaust.

The International Tracing Service (ITS)

One outstanding example of practicing public history is the International Tracing Service (ITS) in Bad Arolsen, Germany. Director Rebecca Boehling gave a short overview of the history of the ITS. Founded in 1943 on the initiative of the Allied Forces Headquarters at the British Red Cross in London, the Department of International Affairs was transformed into a Tracing Bureau. The new service was responsible for tracing and registering missing persons, which was also the starting point for the collection of documents. After several moves, the ITS, now a humanitarian organization, settled in Bad Arolsen, in the center of the four Allied occupation zones. It strategically helped war victims and displaced persons, and collected materials such as documents from the concentration camps, ghettos and labor camps as well as from the Gestapo. Today the ITS has around 30 million documents relating to over 17 million people, which makes it the largest collection worldwide of documents pertaining to victims of Nazi persecution.

The ITS was managed by the International Committee of the Red Cross from 1954-2007; during that period, it functioned primarily as a tracing service and therefore restricted access to researchers such as historians who wished to work with the material. In 2007, increasing pressure led the ITS to open its archive to the public and to transform its mission to that of a research center.

Like other archives that are dealing with the transformation of physical documents to digital resources, questions arose about how to make the material available: what tools and software should be used to make documents accessible and readable? Which collections should be made available and which should be restricted? How to

deal with questions about the reliability and accuracy of documents, particularly those containing personal narratives?

In addition to expanding their online resources, the ITS also began several outreach activities such as creating networks with other Holocaust research and history institutions, organizing workshops for families of Nazi victims and public workshops for genealogical researchers, and raising awareness, especially in various scholarly communities as well as the general European public.

The conference concluded with a panel discussion on “History in the Digital Public Space—Opportunities and Challenges” with speakers Yossi Matias (Google), Jane Ohlmeyer (Trinity College Dublin), Ralph Schroeder (Oxford), Stefanie Schüler-Springorum (TU Berlin), Georgi Verbeeck, and Christopher Wolf (Hogan Lovells). This discussion addressed topics such as the role of legal measures in fighting the dissemination of misinformation about Holocaust denial, the advantages and disadvantages of technology and research infrastructures for scholarship in the digital age, and their impact on society.

For more information about the conference, and for the presentations, please see www.ehri-project.eu/public-history-holocaust

Photos from the conference are available at <http://www.ehri-project.eu/public-history-holocaust/photos>