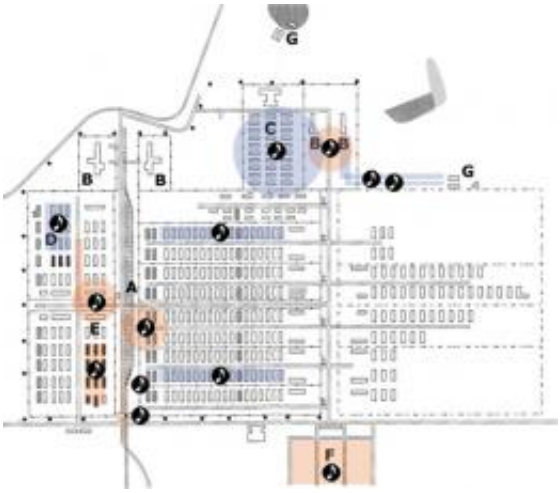
Stanford researcher maps melodies used in Holocaust to control prisoners

July 19 2012, By Benjamin Hein



A digital rendering of the 'musical geography' of Auschwitz Camp II (Birkenau). The red circles indicate where the 'forced music' played by guards could be heard, while the blue circles illustrate how the 'voluntary music' of the inmates spread throughout the camp. Credit: Melissa Kagen

It's hard to imagine Bing Crosby's classic ragtime song "Sweet Sue, Just You" wafting through a Nazi German concentration camp.

But at Auschwitz-Birkenau – the most infamous Holocaust prison – a mix of American jazz and ragtime classics, as well as somber hymns and marching songs, could often be heard within the camp walls.

This strange medley of melodies has long intrigued Melissa Kagen, a

doctoral candidate in German Studies at Stanford. So last winter, Kagen began a research project to examine the camp's musical culture in the context of geographical space.

She wanted to know if where the music played in the camps – whether in the kitchen, near a gate or in cells – had different effects on the inhabitants.

Using survivor testimonies and camp administration records, she is developing digital maps of the "musical geography" of the prison.

By focusing on the spatial aspects of music, Kagen's research offers historical insight into how music can be used as a means for controlling and torturing prisoners in present-day detention facilities.

Because it was among the first prison camps to systematically employ music in such a way, Auschwitz provides a valuable case study that sets a precedent for facilities such as Guantánamo Bay where music has been used as a form of "no-touch" torture.

Measuring music's impact

Scholars have long known that music was a regular part of life in Nazi concentration camps. But the inherently transient nature of sound has made it difficult to measure its impact on the camp and its inhabitants.

"Music in the Holocaust is a relatively well-explored research topic," said Kagen, a student of modern German musicology and literature. "But because it does not leave a lasting historical footprint, it has not been considered spatially before."

Kagen uses an unconventional interpretation method to translate the source material into a visual form. Rather than dwelling on the

significance of a specific song, she focuses on references about the locations where music was heard.

"Reading the first-hand accounts of prisoners, I noticed that one particular space – Block 24, near the camp entrance – kept coming up in relation to music," she said.

Music, as Kagen discovered, provided a proportionally small number of prison guards with the means to maintain control over large portions of the camp without any actual physical presence.

Since sound travels by air, Kagen speculated that when music was played at Auschwitz, it could easily occupy large spaces. Neither the barbed wire fencing nor the thin brick or wooden walls of Auschwitz's barracks could provide a sufficient protective barrier from the music for prisoners.

Kagen's maps illustrate this fluid nature of sound by superimposing color-shaded areas of music onto a transparent infrastructure background, thereby uncovering a prison landscape unseen until now.

It is a landscape in which divisions between public and private space cease to exist almost entirely.

"The prisoners wished to die in peace, which is to say, they wanted the barest hint of autonomy over the space in which they die," said Kagen. "But the melodies of Bach, Beethoven and Horst Wessel, along with jazz songs, wrested every last bit of space away from them."

Kagen's visualizations also illustrate that so-called "voluntary music," played by inmates and marked in blue on the maps, provided inmates with some measure of personal space and, by extension, a means for resistance.

The mosaic Kagen has drawn of competing red and blue areas corresponding to "forced" and "voluntary" music underscores prisoners' success in challenging German spatial control over the camp.

For brief moments of time, while the "voluntarily" played music filled the air, prisoners could close their eyes and feel a certain sense of personal space restored by the familiar – if fleeting – melodies of their own choosing.

Thus far, scholars have only been able to speculate about the magnitude of prisoner resistance. Kagen's research enables researchers to visually assess questions of where, when and how resistance was mounted by Auschwitz inmates.

"Trying to understand what these camps must have sounded like is a vital way that scholars can see connections between what's happened recently at Guantánamo and what happened then at Auschwitz-Birkenau," Kagen said.

Mapping music

The task of creating a visible representation of a largely invisible medium presented a unique challenge for Kagen, who began her research with little experience in digital media.

An interdisciplinary team of historians, geographers and graphic design specialists from Stanford's Spatial History Project trained Kagen in cartographic design and digital mapmaking.

The trick, she learned, was to keep the images as simple as possible. Two colors – red and blue – corresponding to "forced" and "voluntary" music prevent viewers from becoming distracted by the camp's traditional spatial boundaries such as roads, fences and buildings.

Each map also includes digital recordings of the songs in question. By hovering over certain areas of the map viewers can listen to one of 24 musical excerpts of tunes that were known to have been played in the camp.

However, Kagen warned that due to the nature of her sources, viewers are advised not to read her maps too literally. It is difficult, for instance, to estimate the volume, location and frequency of a musical performance, particularly when such information is derived from survivors' testimonies given years after the event.

Additionally, the recordings were produced by modern-day musicians and, as a result, do not accurately reflect the actual performances conducted in the camp.

Kagen said she expects her maps to draw more extensive scrutiny and criticism, mainly because they try to replicate the sensory environment of a highly charged and emotional subject. Yet she says experiencing the sounds of Auschwitz is an imperative first step to asking the right questions – both about the past and the present.

More information: humanexperience.stanford.edu/

Provided by Stanford University