Geography and mapping give new dimension to study of the Holocaust

May 19 2015, by Marlene Cimons

Numerous scholars in recent years have made the horrors of the Holocaust real to the public through various media, including books and memoirs, films, art, photography and museum exhibitions. Anne Kelly Knowles and her collaborators are using a different approach to better understand the genocide: geography and mapping.

More specifically, the researchers are employing historical geographic information systems (GIS), computer programs that store, display, and analyze data of past geographies to gain new insights into how the Nazis implemented the Holocaust, the patterns of events, and the impact of the Holocaust on different places.

"The key is to recognize that perpetrators and victims experienced the Holocaust at different scales, but that those scales registered – came together – in particular places at particular times," says Knowles, a professor of geography at Middlebury College, who is joining the faculty of the University of Maine in Orono as a professor of history in fall 2015.

"We wanted our geographical explorations and experiments to be deeply grounded in history," she adds. "At the same time, we wanted to ask new questions about the scale of the Holocaust, the meaning of place, and the significance of spatial patterns. Mapping complex data, like the development of the SS concentration camps system, inevitably shows you things you would not know – unless you make a map."

GIS "allows you to layer many kinds of information in the same visual space, and to use animation to see change over time,'" Knowles says. For example, in compiling a data base of 1,300 concentration camps and their associated labor camps," you can ask the computer program a question about the data, and it provides the answer as a map," she says. "I could ask: 'Which camps were established by Jan. 1, 1942?' and it would show me in a map. I could continue to ask questions, and see how the number of camps grew."

Michael De Groot, a former undergraduate history major at Stanford University involved in the research, developed a series of digital layers showing the political boundaries of Europe during WWII. Using animation, he showed how the boundaries changed over time in combination with the expansion of the camps. "When you watch this particular animation, you can see the growth of the Reich and the growth of the camps together," she says. "It so clearly showed that the SS only established camps within territory they politically controlled. Some historians already knew this, but to actually see relationships like that hits you between the eyes.'"

Ultimately, GIS animations like this could become a valuable tool for teaching future students about the events of the Holocaust, Knowles says. "The ability to tell the story of the Holocaust visually makes it very exciting for teachers," she says. "It gets across fundamental information about the dynamics of the Holocaust that is crucial for students to understand."

Some material already is available at the Stanford University spatial history lab website, as well as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website, she says.

Knowles worked with nine collaborators, an interdisciplinary team of historians and geographers who call themselves the Holocaust

Geographies Collaborative, with resource support provided by Holocaust museum. The National Science Foundation (NSF) funded the project with about $500,000. Last year the group published a book summarizing the first phase of their research, "The Geographies of the Holocaust."

Knowles plans to continue her studies with a recently awarded fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, which annually supports a diverse group of scholars, artists, and scientists chosen on the basis of prior achievement and exceptional promise.

Her Guggenheim project, Telling the Spatial Story of the Holocaust,will be a novella-length eBook that follows 10 people through the Holocaust (1933 – 1945), connecting their experiences to the spatial unfolding of the Holocaust as Nazi plans were implemented in one place after another. It will be equal parts research, new modes of geo-visual story-telling, and multi-dimensional narrative.

In the NSF-funded project, the Holocaust Geographies Collaborative focused on the different scales at which the Holocaust occurred across Europe, from the continental scale of the development of the SS camp system, to the regional scale, including attacks on civilian populations in Belarus and Lithuania, as well as the arrest and transport of Jews in Italy. The group also examined the urban scale of the Auschwitz camp and the Budapest ghetto, and the scale of individual experience in a study of Auschwitz survivor testimony from January, 1945.

"The Holocaust happened on every scale possible, including the planners in Berlin working with maps and deciding where to put the next concentration camp, making it easier for them to dehumanize the places and people they were planning to capture and obliterate," she says. ``But there also are the personal experiences, the intimate meaning of home, community, synagogue. We think of geography as both remote, abstract planning and intensely personal experiences in time and space.'"

By conducting a geographic analysis of a database of places where Italian Jews were arrested – and who arrested them – and where they were taken, it became clear "that Italian troops and police were every bit as involved as the Germans were," she says, which contradicted long-held assumptions that the Italians were not involved or not as culpable as the Germans were in the Italian Holocaust. "When you convert the information in a database into a map, you can see geographically what happens to these people and who arrested them - both Germans and Italians were deeply involved. It gives you a more nuanced sense of what was happening on the ground."

"This is what I find compelling about historical geography," she adds. "Asking questions about what is happening to people in their homes and in the streets makes it more real."

Another piece of the study – examining the database related to the assaults on civilians in Lithuania – revealed a short window of time when the attacks changed fundamentally. Initially, the Einsatzgruppen (specialized attack squads of German soldiers) in Lithuania went after men and boys. "But at the end of August, 1941, they started attacking all Jews – all ages, women and children and the elderly," she says."This is the moment of genocide, when they were trying to kill everyone.

"This is not brand new information, but by visualizing it, it makes this moment of genocide clear," she adds. "This is really important because there is no document in the historical record of anyone ever saying: 'Now is when we are going to start killing all the Jews.'"

The Holocaust Geographies Collaborative now is turning to new research on victims' experiences, applying GIS and other digital methods, such as corpus linguistics (the study of language as revealed in samples of"real world" text), to analyze video and written testimony.

Knowles points out, most importantly, that the work she and her collaborators are doing is not just history, or geography – but both. And they complement and enrich each other.

"We go back and forth," she says. "A map shows us something that raises historical questions. Then you go back and do historical research, which raises more geographical questions. This is the new way of doing Holocaust studies – and of doing history."

More information: "Geographies of the Holocaust." www.iupress.indiana.edu/produc … p?products_id=807169

Provided by National Science Foundation