

Cataclysm: Water and the Holocaust in Central Europe, 1933–1945

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The Holocaust was a profoundly human and environmental process. It took place over fifteen years of dictatorship, catastrophic warfare, and mass violence that marked the landscape of Europe. Harnessing the power of nature, conquering new lands, and controlling access to natural resources and humans were essential elements of the drive to achieve the racial, material, and political objectives of the National Socialist (Nazi; NSDAP) regime and its allies. But these broad goals had to contend with local specificities, evolving policy targets, and, after 1938, wartime necessity, empire-building, and forced population movements. The answer to the “Jewish Question” and, after 1941, its “Final Solution,” produced locally distinct hybrid ecologies of mass violence through the constant interaction between nature and different groups of human actors, and “Cataclysm” analyzes this process to understand the role of the natural world in shaping the ecologies and experience of genocide in Central Europe.

“Cataclysm” is a socio-environmental history of the Holocaust in Central Europe. It uses water as a meso-level framework to investigate the interrelationship between local socio-environmental contexts of the Holocaust and the macro-level environmental, political, military, and social processes in which they played a part. Water is an ideal organizing concept for this project because it takes multiple forms; plays an essential role in sustaining human and non-human life; and can be managed by humans in various ways for economic and social purposes, while simultaneously containing the potential to quickly become unmanageable. Water allows for the examination of different aspects of environmental history as it connects to Holocaust: different spaces of genocide and violence, different uses of natural resources, different experiences and periodizations of Holocaust and war, and different strategies for advancing or resisting the genocidal project. The management of drinking water, sewage and pollution involved camp and ghetto administrators, but also guards, local residents, and inmates themselves. Improper water management could poison and sicken neighboring communities, drawing local attention to mass murder. Improvised sources of drinking water could help imprisoned populations survive, and precipitation—rain and snow—could conceal escape routes and hiding places as well as reveal mass graves and former camps and

ghettos. Water flows could conceal or dissipate human remains, while water could be used to drown victims. The relationship between humans and nature was full of ambiguities and contradictions, and “Cataclysm” aims to capture the “second nature” of the Holocaust in Central Europe.

The project is guided by an overarching research question: *What role did the natural world and natural processes—such as biological decay, water flows, and weather—play in the perpetration of the Holocaust and in victims’ responses to genocide?* To answer this question, “Cataclysm” focuses on five core themes: the construction of spaces of mass violence including concentration camps and ghettos; forced and slave labor as related to industrial operations in camps and ghettos; mass killing operations; the role of nature in shaping Jewish victims’ strategies of adaptation, resistance, and survival; and finally, the role of nature in the physical, political, and symbolic-cultural afterlives of genocidal spaces. This project also develops these themes by concentrating primarily on five sites across Central and East-Central Europe: Buchenwald Concentration Camp in Germany, the Mauthausen Camp System in Austria; the Terezín Camp/Ghetto in the Czech Republic, Banks of the Danube in Hungary, and Sajmište Camp in present-day Serbia. In addition to these sites, “Cataclysm” will also integrate research on Dachau Concentration Camp, the Warsaw and Łódź Ghettos, the Babyn Yar massacre in Kyiv, and Auschwitz-Birkenau. These sites have been selected because of their roles within the Holocaust, their significance in shaping public memory, and the diversity of experiences of mass violence Jewish communities experienced in Nazi-controlled and allied territories.

Through its marriage of social, environmental, and comparative history, this project will shed light on the agency of humans and nature in new and important ways by revealing how nature constrained or expanded the realm of action for genocidal actors and their victims, as well revealing novel ways of understanding the intentional and improvisational nature of the Holocaust across different contexts. Perhaps most fundamentally, “Cataclysm” allows for deeper understanding of the lifecycle (birth, maturation, decline, death, and afterlife) of distinct but entangled Holocaust ecosystems.