

Teaching the History of the Bernburg Euthanasia Center Through Digital Biographical Storytelling and Data Visualization

1. Educational Introduction

The Bernburg memorial and education site in Germany employs historical documentation, testimonies, visual materials, and physical architectural remains to present the history of, and ideology behind the practice of euthanasia during the Nazi period [1].

In partnership with the Bernburg memorial, this case study offers tools of virtualization, digital storytelling, and digital education that allow users to interact with the memorial space and the various historical sources in new ways: especially, two different 3D models and a digital storytelling tool designed to teach the difficult history of the Bernburg killing center and the wider history of euthanasia in Nazi Germany.

Holocaust and euthanasia education follows the paradigm of placing the human experience and perspective at the center of its teaching [2]. Digital tools have the potential to realize this paradigm by adapting to users' individual needs, thereby meeting the highest standards of accessibility and inclusivity; this is particularly relevant at a memorial site that commemorates crimes against those who were maligned as physically and psychologically handicapped. In a similar vein, this case study focuses on the individual stories of the victims in order to contextualize and understand the history of mass murder and the mass atrocities of the Nazi euthanasia program [3].

From a methodological point of view, this case study proposes the use of digitized biographical information and 3D models as a means to reconstruct the multi-perspectival history of Bernburg. The goal is to create meaningful interactions with the historical materials through digital storytelling, along multiple perspectives and, at



the same time, to foster dialogue between the participants through group work sessions. Together, these methods deepen users' knowledge of the history of Bernburg and Nazi euthanasia by providing additional historical materials and texts. By inviting users to employ their newly acquired knowledge in discussions about the history of euthanasia and its commemoration today, this case study connects the past with the present in a way that is relevant for today and allows the participants to create their own stories to express their viewpoints and emotions.

This case study models how users can engage with visual and textual sources documenting stigmatization, exclusion, torture, forced sterilization, and mass murder during the Nazi period. In order to properly frame this difficult history, we provide methodological tools to help users reflect on the content from today's perspective. Most importantly, we emphasize that these events appeared entirely different to those who lived through them than they do today. Especially when approaching history through testimonies and a biographical approach, this kind of reflection and methodologically applied distance is essential to prevent users from over-identifying with any of the groups represented by the historical material. This is just as important for contextualizing the stories of the persecuted as it is for evaluating the actions and decisions of the perpetrators and the members of the perpetrator societies who witnessed or collaborated in the events.

The educational methods proposed here foster the analytical distance necessary to learn and interact with the heritage of Nazi persecution [4].



2. Contextualization of the Historical Sources

This case study includes various historical sources representing different and opposing perspectives: testimonies by the medical staff directly involved in planning and carrying out mass murder; the stories of the victims themselves, as conveyed through later biographies and testimony; and letters and other correspondence from the families of the victims to their relatives in the killing centers, reflecting their special role; and visual material.

Historical research has demonstrated that knowledge of Nazi euthanasia was widely spread among the civilian population, even though the crimes committed in the killing centers were supposed to be kept secret; the constant transfer of victims to the killing centers from different facilities, concentration camps, and prisons, as well as the smoke and smell of the crematoria provided clear evidence of these crimes. Even within the facilities from which the victims were deported to the killing centers, it was not only the doctors and nurses who knew of their fate.

Considerable administrative effort was invested in concealing the murders from victims' families and the general public. Administrators collected details of the families in order to send fabricated letters of "condolence" and to bill them for the costs of their relatives' care. Many of the letters were donated to the collection of the Bernburg memorial by relatives after the war [5].

These sources not only shed light on perpetrators' actions and decisions but also on the responses of the victims' relatives at the time and after the war. This makes the dynamic of mass murder visible and connects history to today.



2.1 Sources from the Perpetrator Perspective

A survey of the medical staff employed at the Bernburg killing center showed that most of the perpetrators who participated in the murder were neither sadistic nor fanatical adherents of the Nazi regime. Most were regular people who had joined Bernburg after a change in their career, out of military obligation, or as volunteers. Many only understood the true nature of their work once they had started their position – although only two employees refused to participate in the murders—a decision that had no consequences for them afterward [6].

When teaching about the perpetrator perspective, it is essential to focus on specific facts that can be derived from the historical documentation. The central question when approaching these sources is how ordinary people became able to murder and kill. This question can be addressed by considering the perpetrators' decisions and actions as they are revealed by the available source material. By contextualizing that information, we can understand more about the dynamics, structures, and human actions that made this mass murder possible [7].

Sources and biographies reflecting the actions and decisions of historical figures should only be compared to similar materials. In the specific case of perpetrator sources, we emphasize that the decisions and actions of a particular perpetrator should only be compared to those of other perpetrators or those in a similar social position within the Nazi regime. This kind of comparison illuminates what actual possibilities of action and worlds of choice existed for a certain individual.

It is obvious that perpetrator sources can only give us a partial and biased understanding of the victims. These sources are colored by the views that the perpetrators themselves had about the victims, which were refracted by the eugenic, racist, and antisemitic ideology of the Nazi period. This bias is essential in considering and incorporating into educators' approaches, despite the occasional utility of perpetrator sources for identifying victims or reconstructing how they were treated and killed.

The perpetrator sources used in this case study are based on testimonies given during police investigations or in the courtroom, either as witness reports or as testimonies of



defendants. Thus, the perpetrators whose testimonies have been preserved were highly motivated to distance themselves from the crimes and deflect their own responsibility in the hopes of avoiding legal consequences.

Only the upper echelon of Nazi doctors and medical professionals who were responsible for the planning and coordination of the euthanasia crimes were put on trial. Most of the staff members who carried out the murders were neither tried nor punished.

2.2 Sources from the Victim's Perspective

Between 1940 and 1945, around 200,000 to 300,000 victims were murdered in the so-called Euthanasia program in Nazi Germany and parts of German-occupied Europe. The victims, classified as physically and psychologically handicapped, included Jews, Sinti and Roma, alcoholics, people considered antisocial, and others deemed to be not racially pure "Volksgemeinschaft." The goal of the Nazi policy was the elimination of these victims and the hiding of evidence of the crime. Memorials commemorating this mass murder, the Bernburg memorial among them, have worked to collect biographies of the victims with the help of relatives and researchers [8].

In contrast with the testimonies of the perpetrators, the voices of the victims add an important historical source that gives the patients the humanity and agency that was systematically and ideologically denied by the perpetrators.

Moreover, victim sources highlight events not mentioned by the perpetrators which are important for learning about the genocidal dynamic and reinstating the humanity of the victims in our memory. Documents that provide us with biographical information about the persecuted, or even testimonies in which they directly represent themselves and their own stories, are especially valuable because they break the cycle of stigmatizing discourse about the victims and their families. A biographical approach incorporating the victim's perspective can foster empathy and even generate a sense of responsibility for the commemoration of this difficult history.





Bernburg Memorial
Educational Use Case

<https://memorise.sdu.dk/>
<https://memorise.sdu.dk/bernburgstudy/>



Gedenkstätte für Opfer der NS-"Euthanasie" Bernburg

<https://gedenkstaette-bernburg.sachsen-anhalt.de>

2.3 Sources Telling the Story of the Bernburg Killing Center

A wide variety of sources are used to reconstruct the events at the former Bernburg killing center. The entry and exit books of the psychiatric clinics and nursing homes serve as a reference point for the patient transfer routes, while patient files and letters between the medical facilities and relatives sometimes provide insight into the biography of a person affected. On the other hand, statements from perpetrators are available for the specific events on-site. Photographs taken after the end of the war provide information about the condition of the rooms.

However, even if these documents and statements represent a good basis for research and the expansion of knowledge, they are not without problems and must be scrutinized.

For example, the statements were made by perpetrators in the context of criminal prosecution. Some of the interviewees were themselves in the position of the accused and sometimes tried to present themselves in a more positive light, telling untruths or trivializing their role in the murder machinery or events on the ground. Statements must therefore be scrutinized strictly for their truthfulness and compared with other statements. Official documents, such as death certificates, are also not reliable sources. The killing center had its own registry office which falsified documents regarding the date and cause of death, sometimes even the place of death. For example, the dates of death were postponed two to three weeks to conceal the fact that people died on the day of arrival, and a natural cause of death concealed the violent death.



3. Examples of Related Digital Projects

3.1 History of Euthanasia

[„Geschichte inklusiv“ – Eine barrierearme Informationsressource über die Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Euthanasie-Verbrechen - GedenkstättenForum](#)

[Opfer der NS-Euthanasie | mit:forschen!](#)

[„Euthanasie“: Eine digitale Gedenkstätte - Eppendorfer](#)

3.2 Holocaust History

[Alfred Landecker | #LastSeen](#)

[Digital learning resources - Arolsen Archives](#)

[Keeping Memories](#)





4 Workshop

For the workshop information, please go to

https://memorise.sdu.dk/bernburgstudy/1_Text_documents/Workshop.pdf



References

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- [6] From quote Ute Hoffmann former director of Bernburg Memorial in: MDR.DE: Todesfabrik Bernburg – Tausende Menschen vergast. <https://www.mdr.de/geschichte/ns-zeit/politik-gesellschaft/euthanasie-nationalsozialismus-bernburg-gaskammmer-100.html> (last entered May 17th 2024)
- [7] Teaching About Perpetrators: A Case Study. Yad Vashem: <https://www.yadvashem.org/education/educational-videos/video-toolbox/hevt-perpetrators.html> (last entered May 17th 2024)
- [8] Memorial Gedenkhort T4: <https://gedenkhort-t4.eu/wissen/aktion-t4>.

