

EHRI Seminar "Documenting the War. Past and Present" (Lviv, online)

On October 3-7, 2022, the Center for Urban History co-organized the EHRI online seminar "[Documenting war. Past and Present](#)". Initially, the seminar was designed to focus on the history of the Lviv ghetto and public outreach approaches using digital mapping and storytelling tools. However, because of the new realities in Ukraine after the full-scale Russian invasion on February 24, 2022, we decided to change its framework. The seminar focused on the challenges of documenting, researching and teaching the history of the Holocaust and World War II against the background of living, witnessing, and documenting the Russian war against Ukraine.

The 10 participants from Ukraine, Germany, Poland, Italy, the USA, and Australia (representing five different time zones) met online to discuss current issues of Holocaust studies in Ukraine, emergency archiving at risk, collecting oral testimonies on war, and the context of places of memory.

The discussions focused on the practice of witnessing and documenting war. How can we draw on historical experiences and lessons from documenting experiences of violence and war? How does the ongoing Russian aggression in Ukraine change our understanding of the region's history and our practices of documenting the war?

On the first day of the seminar, Wolfgang Schellenbacher (VWI) presented the EHRI network, databases and the possibilities it offers Holocaust scholars. He mainly focused on the EHRI Document Blog which provides a digital space to share ideas about Holocaust-related archival documents, their presentation and interpretation; as well as EHRI Online Editions which serve as a repository for digital archival content. Afterward, seminar participants had an opportunity to present their current work and projects, ranging from educational initiatives on the Jewish history of Galician towns to mapping Holocaust landscapes and analyzing the concept of genocide in international criminal law. Despite the considerable diversity of topics, the presentation round was very vibrant, and the participants found many common points.

The second day of the seminar focused on the cityscape as a palimpsest "document" where traces of the past are preserved and erased. Discussing the architecture of Holocaust memory, we have referenced to the case of Lviv - the city which was initially supposed to be the location of the EHRI seminar. Oleh Rybchynskyi, Professor of Lviv Polytechnical University, presented his project on the conservation of XVII ct. building on 17 Virmenska Street. Located in the ancient Armenian quarter, the building captures the city's multilayered history in a nutshell. The unexpected discovery on the ground floor unraveled the history of a hiding place during the Holocaust. This place was thoroughly researched and documented by Natalia Romik (Memorial de la Shoah). She has presented her postdoctoral research project "Hideouts" – an architectural analysis of the secret infrastructure of Jewish survival during the Second World War. After the comments by Natalia Aleksion (University of Florida), the participants and the panelists discussed the challenges of preserving and commemorating places of hiding and survival for

future generations. The participants also talked about urban memory in digital space, learning about commemoration and public history projects on Jewish heritage and the Holocaust in Lviv by the Center for Urban History which was presented by Taras Nazaruk.

On the third day of the seminar, we focused on the fragility of archives on the frontline and the ephemeral nature of the historical pieces of evidence about current events. Archives of the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU), open to the public since 2015, provide essential documents for Holocaust researchers. At the same time, these institutions were among the first destroyed by the Russian special forces on the occupied Ukrainian lands and have also become military targets. Andrii Usach (Ukrainian Catholic University) and Gregory Aimaro-Parmut (Indiana University) have discussed their experience of working at the Chernihiv SBU archive, which was destroyed by the Russian missile attack in March 2022. They emphasized the devastating extinction of unique historical materials and discussed the ways to prevent such irreversible losses in the future. The main strategies include digitalization and cooperation between researchers. The discussion about the fragility and impermanence of documenting and preserving continued via the example of the current project by the Center for Urban history – the Telegram archive of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Oksana Avramenko presented the emergency archiving initiative, which aims to collect and organize information flows from Telegram chats after February 24 that may quickly disappear due to their short-lived digital nature.

The fourth day of the seminar was devoted to documenting human experiences of war – both past and contemporary. Anna Yatsenko (NGO "After Silence") presented the documentary 'Wordless' (2021), which was the outcome of field research into the Holocaust history in the Galician town of Turka. The movie became a good introduction to a broader discussion about Jewish heritage and the non-Jewish memory of the Holocaust in contemporary Ukraine and East-Central Europe. The challenges of ethical and empathic work with testimonies of war survivors and witnesses were further discussed by Anna Wylegala (IFIS PAN) and Natalia Otrischchenko (Center for Urban History). Both scholars have substantial experience in conducting oral history projects on WWII and are currently leading the initiative on gathering testimonies of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The project "24.02.2022, 5 am" was initiated by the Center for Urban History in Lviv and, apart from Ukraine, is now being implemented in Poland, Luxembourg and Scotland.

One of the recurrent topics throughout the EHRI seminar was the agency of researchers in the face of extreme circumstances. The concluding day of the seminar focused on the challenges the Ukrainian Holocaust scholars face in times of the current war. Tetiana Borodina (Ukrainian Judaica Institute), Natalia Ivchuk (Rivne State Humanities University), Yurii Kaparulin (Kherson State University), Albert Venger (Dnipro State University) and Yurii Radchenko (CIRREE) talked about their experience of continuing research and teaching on the Holocaust in the face of Russian aggression and hostilities. The panelists emphasized the importance of professional networks and solidarity that enables them to continue their work.

Feedback from a participant Ayelet Eva Herbst (Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich):

"I am writing to express my gratitude for your exceptional organization and (virtual) hospitality during the EHRI Seminar "Documenting the War. Past and Present". I was struck by the interesting content presented in the seminar, as well as by the high standards in which it was organized. Your performance was no less than admirable and I am grateful for the invitation to participate. Hopefully we will have the opportunity to exchange ideas and work with one another in the future, and soon could meet in Lviv during peaceful and quiet times."

The EHRI Seminar is followed up by a series of public events "[Source as a Choice](#)", which serves as a space to reflect on decisions and choices accompanying the process of production of historical sources in times of war and conflict.