

Holocaust Studies and Understanding Contemporary Humanitarian Crises

The Holocaust is frequently described as a unique historical event that fundamentally reshaped modern understandings of violence, bureaucracy, exclusion, and human rights. However, Holocaust Studies have increasingly demonstrated that the field is valuable not only for understanding the past but also for analysing present-day humanitarian crises. Rather than functioning solely as a historical discipline, Holocaust research has developed conceptual, ethical, and methodological tools that help interpret contemporary situations in which human life is rendered precarious through mechanisms of exclusion, displacement, and state violence.

The humanitarian crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border illustrates this potential particularly well. Work carried out by the *Researchers on the Border* network demonstrates that methods originally developed for studying Holocaust landscapes can illuminate the spatial, material, and ethical dimensions of contemporary border violence. The objective is not to compare the two events directly, nor to relativise the Holocaust, but to recognise that certain analytical approaches developed within Holocaust Studies remain highly relevant whenever people are systematically excluded from legal protection and forced to survive in hostile environments.

One of the most important contributions of Holocaust research is its understanding of landscape as an active historical archive. Traditional historiography relied primarily on written documents and official records. Research conducted over the past two decades has significantly expanded this perspective by demonstrating that forests, fields, roads, ruins, cemeteries, abandoned buildings, and everyday landscapes preserve traces of violence that often remain absent from official archives. Particularly in Eastern Europe, where countless murder sites were never formally documented, scholars increasingly learned to "read" landscapes as repositories of historical evidence.

This methodological shift has proved remarkably useful in studying the Polish-Belarusian border. The forests along the border are not merely natural environments but spaces profoundly transformed by humanitarian crisis. Temporary camps, abandoned shelters, objects left behind by migrants, humanitarian aid packages, military infrastructure, and border fortifications create what Natalia Judzińska and Inga Hajdarowicz describes as a new "borderscape" — a landscape whose material form records political decisions and human suffering simultaneously¹.

Their research demonstrates how this landscape has undergone rapid transformation since the declaration of the state of emergency in 2021 and especially following the Russian invasion of

¹ N. Judzińska, I. Hajdarowicz, *Walking Along the Borderscape: Borderwalk as a Method of Presenting and Collecting Data*, "Narodna umjetnost: Croatian Journal of Ethnology and Folklore Research" (Vol. 62, No. 2, 2025); on borderscapes see also: Rajaram, Prem Kumar and Carl Grundy-Warr. 2007. "Introduction". In *Borderscapes. Hidden Geographies and Politics at Territory's Edge*. Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr, eds. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, ix–xl.

Ukraine in February 2022. Militarisation, fortification of the border, exclusion zones, and changing public narratives have fundamentally altered both the physical environment and social perception of the region. At the same time, humanitarian aid networks, local communities, artists, and researchers have become active participants in documenting these transformations, recognising that the material traces of the crisis constitute important historical evidence.

A second methodological contribution concerns the study of materiality. Holocaust Studies have long demonstrated that seemingly ordinary objects can become crucial historical documents. Shoes, suitcases, clothing, children's toys, domestic utensils, prayer books, and personal belongings preserved after the Holocaust testify not only to the existence of victims but also to their individuality, everyday lives, and interrupted biographies.

Natalia Judzińska and Roma Sendyka explicitly build upon this tradition in their analysis of objects abandoned in temporary forest camps used by people attempting to cross the Polish-Belarusian border². Rather than treating these objects merely as evidence of migration routes, they analyse them as material witnesses that reveal experiences otherwise inaccessible because the people themselves often remain invisible, anonymous, or unreachable. Personal belongings such as documents, cosmetics, children's toys, medicines, clothing, food packaging, or sleeping equipment become fragments of interrupted biographies. They restore individuality where political discourse frequently reduces people to anonymous categories such as "migrants" or "illegal border crossers."

Importantly, the authors stress that this methodological borrowing does not imply an equation between the Holocaust and contemporary migration. Instead, they argue that Holocaust Studies developed particularly sophisticated approaches to interpreting objects after extreme violence. These approaches can now help researchers analyse humanitarian crises in ways that foreground human experience rather than abstract political narratives.

Another important lesson concerns the concept of absence. Holocaust research increasingly focuses not only on what survives but also on what has disappeared. Empty spaces, destroyed cemeteries, erased villages, unmarked graves, and missing communities all require interpretative methods capable of reading absence itself as historical evidence.

According to Judzińska and Sendyka, the border forests present a comparable challenge. Camps are frequently abandoned shortly after their occupants disappear—sometimes because they successfully continue their journey, sometimes because they are forcibly returned through illegal pushbacks, and sometimes because they die in the forest. Researchers therefore encounter landscapes from which people have vanished while their material traces remain. This creates what might be called an archaeology of the present: an attempt to reconstruct human experiences through the spatial distribution of objects, temporary shelters, disturbed vegetation, and other material remains.

² N. Judzińska, R. Sendyka, *The Crisis at the Polish-Belarusian Border: Sites and Things*, "Sprawy Narodowościowe: Seria Nowa, 2022 (54), Article 2845.

Judzińska and Sendyka developed an original typology of temporary camps - including stopover camps, overnight camps, station camps, pushback camps, and escape camps - which illustrates how careful analysis of spatial arrangements can reconstruct different stages of forced migration. The methodology resembles forensic approaches increasingly employed at Holocaust sites, where subtle material evidence allows researchers to reconstruct historical events without disturbing the sites themselves.

Holocaust Studies also contribute an important ethical framework for conducting research in contexts of ongoing violence. During the last two decades, scholars working on Holocaust landscapes have increasingly reflected on the responsibilities of researchers toward victims, descendants, local communities, and places themselves. Research is no longer understood as detached observation but as an ethical practice requiring sensitivity toward vulnerable individuals and difficult heritage.

This perspective strongly informs the work of the *Researchers on the Border* network. As Natalia Judzińska explains, the initiative combines academic research with humanitarian engagement, documentation, public education, and collaboration with local communities³. The researchers deliberately reject the traditional separation between scholarship and civic responsibility. Instead, they adopt an activist research approach grounded in feminist critical border studies, recognising that knowledge production inevitably carries ethical consequences.

The seminars organised by the network illustrate this methodology particularly well. Rather than limiting discussions to conference rooms, they include border walks, environmental walks through Białowieża Forest, meetings with local residents, collaborations with humanitarian activists, artistic interventions, and participatory workshops. Such embedded learning transforms the border itself into a site of knowledge production, where historical reflection, empirical observation, and ethical engagement become inseparable.

Perhaps the most important contribution of Holocaust Studies lies in recognising recurring mechanisms. Contemporary humanitarian crises differ fundamentally from the Holocaust in their historical contexts, political objectives, and scales of violence. Nevertheless, Holocaust scholarship has sensitised researchers to processes through which certain groups become progressively excluded from legal protection, rendered invisible within public discourse, and deprived of social recognition.

The Polish-Belarusian border crisis illustrates several such mechanisms. The establishment of exclusion zones limiting independent observation, the militarisation of humanitarian space, the criminalisation of assistance, and the transformation of vulnerable individuals into security threats all represent processes that require careful historical and ethical analysis. Holocaust Studies provide conceptual vocabulary for recognising how bureaucratic systems, spatial control, material infrastructures, and public narratives interact in producing vulnerability without reducing contemporary crises to historical analogies.

Equally significant is the field's emphasis on memory as an active social practice. Holocaust memory has demonstrated that documentation undertaken during ongoing crises frequently

³ Presentations delivered as part of ReActMem Stakeholders Meetings and events.

becomes indispensable historical evidence decades later. The Humanitarian Crisis Archive established by *Researchers on the Border* reflects precisely this understanding. By systematically collecting photographs, testimonies, objects, and documentation while events are still unfolding, the project creates future sources for historical research and public memory. In this respect, Holocaust research offers not only interpretative frameworks but also institutional models for documenting contemporary violence before its traces disappear.

Ultimately, the value of Holocaust Studies for understanding contemporary crises lies less in historical comparison than in methodological transfer. Research developed to investigate destroyed Jewish communities, hidden graves, abandoned objects, and fragmented landscapes has generated analytical tools capable of revealing dimensions of present-day violence that often remain invisible within conventional political or legal analyses.

The work of the *Researchers on the Border* demonstrates that Holocaust Studies continue to evolve beyond the study of the past. They provide ways of recognising vulnerable lives, interpreting material traces, documenting ongoing crises, and understanding landscapes not simply as settings of political events but as archives of human experience. In this sense, Holocaust research contributes not only to historical knowledge but also to contemporary democratic societies by strengthening their capacity to recognise exclusion, respond ethically to humanitarian crises, and preserve evidence for future generations.

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