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Value in Context: Material Culture and Treblinka

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Abstract

The complexity of the history of the Treblinka II Nazi German death camp (located in Poland) provides a unique opportunity to conduct a fine-grained examination of the concept of the value of material assemblages and how this can vary depending on temporal, historical, and societal context. Following its closure, the site transitioned from a razed camp, to a crime scene, to a potential treasure repository, to a memorial, and finally to an archaeological site. In this paper, we present the various ways in which the value attributed to objects present within the camp landscape evolved and how the terrible judicial and cultural tragedy that was the Holocaust means that many of these values were aggregated over time. By providing a contextualized discussion of value, we present trends that will be relevant to scholars engaged in the study of material culture from a wide range of epochs whilst also identifying those that are unique to assemblages pertaining to conflict and genocide.

Introduction

"Look at this [pocket watch]. It's worthless. Ten dollars from a vendor in the street. But I take it, I bury it in the sand for a thousand years, it becomes priceless." René Belloq in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

All archaeological sites – be they prehistoric or historic – tend to experience the same post-inhabitation fates: abandonment, plundering, oblivion, "rediscovery", and finally archaeological excavation. Interest in and demand for the material remains of these sites – and thus the "regimes of value" (Appaduri 1986; Comaroff and Comaroff 2005) they accrue – vary similarly. Depending on the pace of abandonment, the site's departing inhabitants will take the most precious and useful objects with them, leaving behind those items that are easily replaced, too time consuming to collect, too difficult to transport, or lost (Hurcombe 2007:47). Items at this stage that have what Marx (1974:4) termed use and exchange value will thus commonly be prioritized, along with those of individual and/or cultural symbolic value, if circumstances allow. If the site is readily accessible to other communities, some of the remaining artefacts (e.g., building materials or household items) may continue to be appropriated. This exploitation will decrease with time, however, as fewer and fewer useful objects remain. The site then enters the oblivion phase, when local inhabitants may know of its existence but rarely visit. This phase may be tempered if rumors of hidden hordes of precious objects persist, attracting looters. Finally, historians, heritage professionals, and archaeologists may become interested in the site to discover its origins, development, and abandonment; determine its place within local, regional, and distant networks; and "glimpse the

lives of everyday people through [the] analysis of [the] things they made and left behind" (Malloy and Kaupp 2008).

The fates of material remains of Holocaust sites – especially sites like Treblinka II that were specifically designed, constructed, and operated to murder entire communities – differ in three significant, yet interrelated, ways. The first difference is that the sites were not usually just abandoned but deliberately stripped of incriminating evidence and razed in attempts to conceal the atrocities committed. The second difference is that forensic teams were usually dispatched to these sites shortly after the war to search for whatever material evidence may have survived in order to build legal cases against the perpetrators of these horrific crimes. The final and most important difference is that the "rediscovery" phase for Holocaust sites predominantly coincided with the rise in international consciousness of the incomprehensible and unspeakable horror that was the Holocaust – particularly the death camps – and the struggle to come to terms with what Dan Diner (1988) termed a "rupture of civilization". As Primo Levi (1988:36-37) stated: "What we commonly mean by 'understand' coincides with 'simplify'....At the more or less unconscious level, [we] wanted winners and losers, which [we] identified with the good guys and the bad guys, respectively, because the good must prevail, otherwise the world would be subverted."

One result of attempting to come to terms with this history has been a proliferation of memorials to the victims and museums about the Holocaust, most of which have sought to obtain tangible evidence of what occurred and return the humanity to the millions of innocent people murdered (Ehrenreich and Klinger 2014:146). Another result has been the increasing number of archaeological projects at Holocaust sites that have sought to locate and document landscapes and the physical evidence therein. Almost all of these projects focus on acknowledging the experiences of the victims and the actions of the perpetrators, but the extent to which each is privileged – and by association the extent to which specific types of material culture have been valued – has depended upon the motivation behind the work. For example, whilst some investigations have provided evidence for legal proceedings (e.g. Bevan 1994; Wright 1995; Gross 2004) and thus favored objects of evidential value, others have sought either material for memorialisation projects (e.g. Hirte 2000; Kola 2000; Pawlicka-Nowak 2004; Theune 2010) or answers to research questions (e.g. Gilead et al 2010; Sturdy Colls 2012, 2015a; Schute 2013; see also the wide range of papers in Carr et al 2018). In the latter two cases, objects and human remains are often viewed as 'archives of touch and intimacy' that have pedagogic value and provide a tangible link to, and voice for, the murdered and the missing (Das 2017:313). Indeed, in recent years there has been a greater awareness concerning the need to address the experiences and suffering of victims of Nazi persecution evidenced by material culture (for examples, see Sturdy Colls 2015, Pollack 2016 and Bernbeck 2018).

A detailed, 10-year archaeological investigation of Treblinka II was conducted and documented by one of the authors of this paper, greatly expanding our knowledge of the functioning as well as the complex post-Holocaust history of sites specifically designed and constructed for the sole purpose of murdering and looting entire communities of people (Sturdy Colls 2012, 2014a, 2014b; Sturdy Colls and Colls 2013, 2017, in press; Sturdy Colls and Branthwaite 2018). Although various scholars have approached Treblinka from an historical perspective (e.g. Berger 2015; Wienert 2015; Webb and Chocholatý 2015; Arad 1999), this project employed an interdisciplinary approach (e.g., using oral histories, documents, photographs, airborne and terrestrial remote sensing methods, geophysical survey, and minimally invasive excavations). It was also framed by extensive research into the ethical issues surrounding the site, period, and communities affected in

order to locate and record a wide range of evidence connected to Nazi persecution in a way that respected Treblinka's significance as both a crime scene and a cemetery. The result was the discovery of the locations of the old and new gas chambers, killing sites, mass graves, camp boundaries, and objects belonging to both the victims and perpetrators, providing new information about the landscape and mechanisms of mass killing, illustrating the extent of the Nazis' efforts to hide their crimes, and providing new opportunities for commemoration and education.

As many of these results are presented elsewhere, this paper focuses on one aspect of Treblinka II's post-operational existence: the changes in demand for its various artefact types and thus the variations in the perceived value of different objects. In our analysis, we are of course indebted to seminal literature concerning the breadth of economic (e.g., Marx 1974; Baudrillard 1975; Appadurai 1986) and social values (e.g. Renfrew 1986; Darvill 1993; Carman 2005; Young 2013; Scarre and Coningham 2013) that might be assigned to material culture, and in particular those works that have already considered the evolving agency and values of material culture during and after epochs of genocide and conflict (e.g. Saunders 2002; González-Ruibal 2008; Auslander and Zahra 2018; Carr 2018). Building on these works, Treblinka II provides a unique opportunity to conduct a fine-grained examination of the concept of value and the multitudinous forms it may take depending on time, place, and social context. Unlike previous studies in which the value of a particular object is examined over time (e.g., Andrews 2018), this article discusses each phase in the post-inhabitation existence of Treblinka II and determines how the perceived value of the various artefacts vary temporally and within international, transnational, national, and local societal contexts. Since the material assemblage of just one site is examined, any variations in the historical, symbolic, or economic value of the artefacts over time must have resulted from changes in personal and societal attitudes as the site transitioned from a razed camp, to a crime scene, to a potential treasure repository, to a memorial, and finally to an archaeological site. Through the analysis of both historical and archaeological sources to identify what Hahn and Weiss (2013:7-8) refer to as object "itineraries", we evaluate how these shifts have influenced the survivability, integrity, and ownership of items from Treblinka II, with a view to identifying trends that will be relevant to other sites of atrocity, in particular those connected to the Holocaust. We duly acknowledge that our analysis – like all archaeological interpretations – is influenced by the fact that we are working with an incomplete assemblage that, as Hurcombe (2007:47) argues, is largely comprised of "the most common items...that people care about the least because they will not be recovered if they are lost or because they are thrown away".

Phase 0: Operation

Germany's system of over 44,000 concentration camps during the Nazi period (1933-1945) was central to its ambitions. As Geoffrey Megargee (forthcoming) states, "They were the tools that tied together and advanced all the Nazis' fundamental, overlapping goals for Germany: protecting the "Aryan" race; promoting the Volksgemeinschaft ("People's community"); conquering Lebensraum (living space); and defeating Germany's enemies, internal and external. The camps were the practical embodiment and instrument of Nazism."

Treblinka II is located approximately 50 miles northeast of Warsaw and a mile from the labor camp designated Treblinka I. Of the approximately 25 different types of camps in the system (Megargee forthcoming), Treblinka II was the third Operation Reinhard camp built specifically for the implementation of SS-Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler's order to murder the entire Jewish population of the German-controlled area of Poland (i.e., the Generalgouvernement) by 31 December 1942 (Figure 1). Construction of the SS death camp Treblinka II commenced in June,

1942, and Dr. Irmfried Eberl, its first commandant, reported on 7 July 1942 that the camp was ready to receive transports (Donat 1979). The first of these arrived at Treblinka II on 23 July 1942 from the Warsaw ghetto and District Radom (Central Commission 1982; Dean 2012). An estimated 5,000 to 7,000 victims were transported per day to Treblinka II thereafter, rising to 10,000 to 12,000 a day at its peak (Arad 1999). The total number of victims was in excess of 900,000 people (Berger 2013). Most of the victims were murdered within 20-30 minutes of arrival, with only a limited number of prisoners kept alive to fulfill such duties as unloading the victims from the trains, overseeing the collection of their belongings, disposing of the victims' remains, preparing the stolen goods for shipment to Germany, and cleaning the freight cars for return (Central Commission 1982; Sturdy Colls and Colls 2013).

Since Treblinka II was a death camp and did not include a major slave-labor component, the main economic benefit derived during its operation was the expropriation of Jewish possessions for eventual sale to the general German population or use in the war effort. The importance of the plundering and reselling of Jewish possessions during the Holocaust – and the role that the camp system played in this process – cannot be minimalized. As Dean, Goschler, and Ther (2007) state about the study of this aspect of Holocaust history, "The process of expropriating the Jews (and this also includes its 'legal' forms) has taken on a central importance, since it took place with much greater participation by, or at least was more clearly visible to, the population than their murder." One clear and disturbing example of this general participation is a letter from a student, Ernst Popp, to the Gestapo on 23 April 1942 requesting that a backpack belonging to a Jewish deportee be reserved for his purchase:

> "To the authorities of the State Police,
>
> As a colleague and fellow German in [Nazi] Party affairs, I permit myself to make the request to you; whether it might be possible at the time of the evacuation for me to get a backpack from the Jews at a good price. I have a certificate of need for this item; even the largest firms of the Reich are not in a position to deliver a backpack in response to an order from a local business. I would be happy to be able to wait for a positive response.
>
> Thank you in advance for your efforts.
>
> Heil Hitler,
>
> Popp Ernst"

The quantity of valuables stolen from victims at Treblinka II was enormous. Alexander Kudlik, a survivor of Treblinka, provided a sense of the scale of theft, "I spent about six months going through gold pens – ten hours a day, for six months, just sorting pens" (Auerbach 1979). Levin (2004) estimated that between 1,250 and 1,500 railway cars of valuables were transported to Germany during the camp's operation. As Auerbach (1979) states so candidly, "We must remember that *the killing of Jews was primarily a crime of robbery with murder*" (author's italics). The amount of labor expended to collect these items (pens ready for sale in this case), however, far exceeded the object's intrinsic financial value under normal circumstances. The brutal extremes that Nazi Germany went to collect these items and ship them back to Germany thus suggest a form of 'commodity fetishism', a constant cycle of production in which the labor expended was inconsequential to SS's fervency for robbing, exploiting, and killing the Jewish community of Europe (Marx 1974; Harrington 2005; 46-47).

The victims' already extensive experience with the complex official and black-market trade systems in the ghettos, during transport, or while trying to flee Nazi persecution made them acutely aware of the items of economic value needed in order to survive; and the SS exploited this knowledge to pacify the deportees, increase the probability that they would take with them whatever items of financial value they still possessed, and simplify the expropriation of their possessions:

> Jewish councils ensured that each deportee was equipped with blankets, washing utensils, and food. Although these provisions were often more detailed and exacting, the apparent care for deportees' welfare aimed to reassure them that such items would be needed during their journey and after their arrival. It was precisely these instructions that enabled the deportees' luggage to be moved directly into sorting factories in camps for redistribution and return to the Reich (Gigliotti 2009:45).

Oral testimonies of those forced to sort the belongings at the camp suggest that at least some of the victims believed the ruse, having brought domestic items as well as currency and jewelry with them (Willenberg 1989 and personal communication). The discovery of personal items that individuals smuggled all the way to the gas chambers also demonstrates that the sentimental value attributed to some objects was still of utmost importance, even in life or death scenarios (see Archaeology Phase below for further discussion). For a small number of prisoners kept alive to work in the camp (Sonderkommando), the use and exchange value of the belongings stolen from the victims on arrival also changed depending on a range of factors. For example, for Chil Rajchman a good pair of scissors were of considerable value because 'after five cuts the hair [of the women on their way to the gas chambers] must all be cut off' or else the barber faced punishment or death (Rajchman 2011). For Samuel Willenberg, the belongings he was required to sort through in the reception camp had value both because they could be used to bribe the Trawniki guards and because replacement coats and shoes could be acquired that would help him survive the harsh conditions in the camp (Willenberg 1995 and 1989).

The Holocaust thereby predicated a system in which the value of personal belongings was constantly shifting from commodities that could ensure survival; to instruments that could be sold or traded for food, water, and other items; to potential weapons; to the symbolic and back again to the mundane as personal circumstances shifted (Sturdy Colls 2015a; Carr 2018). Attempting to comprehend the value of objects during this period and in Treblinka II thus demands a 'heightened appreciation for the active materiality of things in motion" as their "social lives" took many forms in quick succession (Appadurai 1986; Foster 2013:286). It also requires acknowledgement of the brutal fact that body parts such as hair, teeth, and prosthetics also became commodities that were relentlessly sought and recovered by the Sonderkommando.

Phase I: Concealment and Abandonment

The razing of Treblinka II began in the fall of 1942 with the implementation of Aktion 1005 by SS-Standartenführer Paul Blobel, although transports continued to arrive throughout the following year. According to the affidavit for the Nuremberg trials given by SS-Hauptsturmführer Dieter Wisliceny, Adolf Eichmann's deputy in the Jewish Affairs Department of the Reich Security Main Office, Blobel "was specially assigned to remove all traces of the final solution (extermination) of the Jewish problem by Einsatz Groups and all other executions...after it first became apparent that Germany would not be able to hold all the territory occupied in the East and it was considered

necessary to remove all traces of the criminal executions that had been committed" (Wisliceny 1946). A special unit of Jewish prisoners, known as Sonderkommando 1005, was tasked with the process of exhuming the corpses still extant in Treblinka II's mass graves, cremating them on large pyres, and then grinding the remaining bones and teeth to dust in a machine specifically designed for this purpose (Angrick 2018; Wells 1999). Thus began the acknowledgement that these remains could have what Caple (2006:11) has termed 'proof value' in relation to the Nazis' crimes, a realization that escalated and was acted upon further when the camp was abandoned.

With most of the Jewish population in the Generalgouvernement having effectively been murdered by the spring of 1943, transports to Treblinka II began to decrease. This decline emboldened the prisoners to revolt on 2 August 1943, resulting in the killing of several camp personnel, the burning of barracks, the damaging of other camp buildings, and the escaping of approximately 200 prisoners, roughly 70 of whom survived and were later able to testify to what occurred (Chrostowski 2004; Sturdy Colls and Colls 2013). Even with these losses, the killing operations continued. The final victims gassed at Treblinka II arrived from the Bialystok ghetto on 21 August 1943 (Dean 2012). A reduced number of transports arrived after this date, with the victims being shot in the absence of the gas chambers.

The camp was finally demolished between mid-August and November 1943. The foundations of the gas chambers were concealed under piles of sand and rubble, in some places to a depth of at least 1.5m (Sturdy Colls and Colls 2013). The earthwork banks that surrounded the death camp area, which had been constructed to shield the site from view, were levelled over the camp remains, with additional sand brought in from a local quarry (Sturdy Colls and Colls 2013). Finally, pine trees and lupines were planted, and a farmhouse was built on top of the site as a ruse. A Ukrainian guard and his family were posted in the house to maintain the subterfuge and deter looting. They abandoned the site in 1944 with the arrival of Soviet troops in the region. The house was burned down by local residents shortly thereafter (Central Commission 1982; Sturdy Colls and Colls 2017). Soviet troops arrived during the last week of July 1944, shortly after the nearby labor camp was abandoned.

The cremation of the bodies, the razing of the site, and the construction of the farmhouse, discussed above, demonstrated Nazi Germany's attempt to eradicate all evidence of what the world would consider "criminal executions," per Wisliceny (1946), at the death camps. The objects preferentially removed from, destroyed on, or concealed within the site – and thus of greatest 'value' at the time of abandonment – were therefore those that could be used to prove the Nazi's murderous activities.

Since the impetus to examine the objects from Treblinka comes from a desire to understand both how they have been commodified and due to an "underlying concern with loss" as well as "consumption", the absence of particular artefacts is thus of equal interest (Buchli 2002:9). Of the over 1,500 artefacts recovered during the archaeological excavations at Treblinka II in 2013 and 2017, only one artefact (discovered during the 2013 fieldwalking survey of the wooded area identified as the location of the site's waste pit) could be definitively identified as belonging to a German camp: a gorget displaying a swastika and the words "LAGER POLIZEI" (Camp Police) (Sturdy Colls and Colls 2013). In comparison, a number of artefacts in the traditionally economic sense of value, such as jewelry and a large number of gold and silver fillings, were recovered from the excavations of the Old Gas Chamber (the first of two gas chambers built at Treblinka) and the fieldwalking surveys. Although it could be argued that looters may also have preferentially removed artefacts with Nazi insignia to sell, the fact that fewer such artefacts were recovered from

a Nazi SS camp that existed for over a year than monetarily valuable artefacts, which was the main lure for looters (discussed below), would suggest that their collection, removal, or destruction by Sonderkommando 1005 during the site's razing and abandonment in an attempt to conceal their crimes was of paramount importance to the Nazi SS administration.

The scale of Treblinka II should be borne in mind, however, when considering both the ability of the Nazis to remove incriminating evidence (particularly small objects) and looters to cleanse the site. The significance of many objects that remained in the camp (e.g., bricks, tiles, domestic items, and personal belongings) only becomes clear when examined in conjunction with witness testimonies and other documents. The lengths to which the Nazis went to kill witnesses, destroy documents, and raze and conceal the camp likely reduced their concerns regarding the discovery of such items, which is why – as will be discussed below – so many survived beneath ground-level.

Phase II: Forensics (1944-46)

The Central Commission for the Investigation of Nazi German Crimes in Poland (henceforth the Commission) conducted the only post-liberation forensic investigations of Treblinka II prior to 2010. Their work was driven by a commitment to document and publicize the extent and horror of the atrocities perpetrated at Treblinka II and elsewhere:

> "The recording of these crimes and their detailed reconstruction has been considered...as a duty, not only towards the Polish nation, but toward humanity. Not merely the present but also future generations ought to realize what deeds were performed by the Germans under the influence of national-socialistic ideology; what certain ideas and social myths lead to; and of what kind and range were the crimes committed by the Germans…." (Central Commission 1982).

Although their work primarily focused on collection of testimony from 13 surviving Jewish prisoners and the analysis of railway records, five days of limited excavations were conducted at Treblinka II starting on 9 November 1945 in the hope of recovering corroborating evidence (Central Commission 1982). The investigatory team comprised Judge Zdzislaw Lukaszkiewicz, Prosecutor Maciejewski, a licensed surveyor, local officials, four Treblinka II survivors, and Rachel Auerbach and Josef Kermisz of the Central Jewish Historical Commission (Sturdy Colls 2014). Four small test pits were excavated in the vicinity of the perceived location of the gas chambers and the Lazarett ("camp hospital"), which was actually a ruse "designed for the destruction of the sick, invalids, old people, and small children who were too weak to enter the gas-chambers by themselves" (Central Commission 1982).

The locations of the excavations would suggest that the team was searching for unassailable evidence of the existence and operation of the industrial methods employed to commit mass murder. Unfortunately, the foundations of the gas chambers and Lazarett were not discovered in any of the test pits, and only a few personal belongings and coins were recovered (discussed below). The discovery of such few remains partially resulted from the presence of the sand layer discussed above. Since – according to the Commission's report – Treblinka II "was placed in a sandy region" (Central Commission 1982), they thought they had reached virgin bed soil on reaching this sand layer and stopped excavating. The investigators thus missed the evidence they sought hidden below. The other small trenches were simply incorrectly positioned in relation to the locations of the structures sought.

Based on their limited investigation, the Central Commission team reported in an oddly paradoxical statement that the site was totally destroyed, even while copious quantities of artefacts, building foundations, and human remains were present:

> "At the present time no traces of [the camp] are left, except for the cellar passage with the protruding remains of burnt posts, the foundations of the administration building, and the old well. Here and there can also be traced the remains of burnt fence posts and pieces of barbed wire, and short sections of paved road….[T]he southwestern part of the campsite is covered with the remains of all kinds of aluminum, enamel, glass and porcelain vessels, kitchen utensils, trunks, rucksacks, and remnants of clothing" (Central Commission 1982).

Although the report states that mass graves were not discovered on the site, ample valuable evidence of the murders was also still extant: "in the northeastern part, over a surface covering about 2 ha. (5 acres), there are large quantities of ashes mixed with sand, among which are numerous human bones, often with the remains of decomposing tissues" (Central Commission 1982). Photographs in the report also show non-cremated human remains on the surface. Scientific analysis of the ash – the only scientific analysis conducted – confirmed that it was cremated human remains.

However, the investigation was abandoned on 13 November 1945 "in consideration of the oncoming autumn, the present rainfall, and the necessity of a rapid conclusion of the judicial preliminary investigations" (Wojczak 1975).

These seemingly contradictory allegations and the cessation of the search only make sense in light of the investigator's objectives and their limited interaction with the site. As stated above, the purpose of the forensic investigation was not to conduct a thorough examination but to locate tangible proof of the crimes committed. Photographic documentation of the remains was sufficient to achieve the Commission's aim of illustrating that large-scale crimes had been committed. Likewise, the only evidence that would have been of the "unquestioned evidential value" desired would have been intact gas chambers for killing at industrial scales and discernable mass graves of murder victims. The conclusions of the members of the Commission were thus biased by the paucity of evidential material from a purely legalistic perspective – material, as discussed above, that the SS considered similarly valuable (albeit for different reasons) and had deliberately tried to eradicate during the site's abandonment. The Commission deemed the preponderance of the artefacts littering the site to be simply the detritus of its destruction. They failed to see – as archaeologists and anthropologists do in modern times – that the "biography" (Kopytoff 1986) and "social lives" (Appadurai 1988) of objects could assist in corroborating both the magnitude and specificity of the Nazi atrocities committed at Treblinka II when considered alongside testimonies and other sources. The only artefacts mentioned in their report – and thus considered of value – were "a collection of coins, Polish, Soviet, German, Austrian, Czech, Greek, Belgian, French, and even American…[a] German-Jewish identity card issued at Gottingen, the remains of a Soviet passport, and a collection of Polish documents" (Central Commission 1982). The members of the Commission considered these artefacts of evidential value because they provided tangible proof of the range and diversity of populations that were potentially murdered there. Interestingly, shoes of victims, which were scattered in abundance across the former extermination camp area, were not knowingly assigned any type of value by the investigators, although they feature heavily in Rachel Auerbach's personal account and greatly impacted the survivors. This perspective contrasts starkly with shoes from other sites like Auschwitz-Birkenau, where the huge piles of shoes that were collected have become eternal symbols of the Holocaust; their value lying in their ability to

remind the world of the humanity of the victims and the scale of the crimes perpetrated (Carr 2018).

The forensic investigation was certainly hindered by the unprecedented nature of the crimes and the approach taken was not unique to Treblinka (Sturdy Colls 2015). No one had ever imagined, let alone built or operated, industrialized killing centers before the Holocaust. They were totally new, unknown, and unprecedented crime scenes for forensic investigators. Thus, this caused a tension that Victoria Barnett (2017) describes as "derived from the difficulty of understanding (and, in legal cases, addressing) a collective phenomenon through the lens of ethics and norms that apply to individual behavior." As the Central Commission itself stated:

> "The crimes that were committed in Poland cannot be treated as transgressions by individuals against laws, regulations, or orders. They are not merely the criminal acts of individual people, in breach of valid laws. They were planned and prepared for the chief German governmental authorities, who explicitly instructed offices and government officials as to the way in which they should be carried out." (Central Commission 1982)

The Central Commission's report succeeded in documenting and publicizing the history of and atrocities committed at Treblinka II, but its conclusion that the site had been totally obliterated by the SS also led scholars to believe that the camp had already been thoroughly examined and that no further work of this nature was necessary. From a legal and archaeological perspective, the site thus moved into the oblivion phase.

Phase III: Plundering (1944-Present)

According to Charnysh and Finkel (2017), "An inevitable feature of any large-scale killing and displacement of civilians is a transfer of wealth….The possessions of even the poorest can be of use to those who kill, expel, or simply stay put and survive." The mass killings at Treblinka II were no exception, and it, like all the death camps, was an economic boon as much for the local population as it was for Nazi Germany. Due to the futility of safeguarding such huge quantities of material, both German and non-German personnel were able to steal vast quantities of items and amass fortunes. While most of these commodities and profits from their sale were sent back to families, portions were spent in the local villages on liquor, food, and prostitutes. As a result of the exchange (in this case financial) value of the stolen items, the population within a 50 km radius significantly benefited from Treblinka II's existence (Charnysh and Finkel 2017).

The profiteering from Treblinka II did not end with its closing. Looting at the site began immediately upon cessation of operations in 1944 and was exacerbated by the societal and economic devastation wrought by World War II. This subsequent "subsistence digging" (Young 2002:32) was profitable precisely because of the sheer amount of material that was left behind, most of which was deemed of little value according to post-war investigators as already noted. Much of the local population knew that untapped riches still remained, as Auerbach (1979) states:

> "Those in the know are aware that not all the dead were cremated and that, aside from those who were buried naked, Jews in some places were buried fully dressed without their pockets being searched, their hidden valuables undiscovered–secret wealth, sewn into their clothes...And in fact there had been people lying in wait to dig in the soil for gold teeth, clothing and other treasures buried there…."

The remoteness of the site and the societal and economic collapse caused by the war and its conclusion also aided the looters (Dziuban 2015). Treblinka II was already littered with pits when

the Central Commission representatives arrived in November 1945. Although commonly depicted as haphazard and indiscriminate, the looting had many of the attributes of an organized goldrush: armed guards were posted as early as September 1945 to protect the site and even the looters, force was used by some to intimidate and rob others, and extensive trade networks for the sale of the looted material were established (Dziuban 2015). Charnysh and Finkel (2017) note that one of the local villages, Wolka Okraglik, is still known today as Golden Wolka (Zlota Wolka) because of the economic enhancements it gained from Treblinka's existence.

Although illegal, laws against looting were not enforced. Jan Gross based his 2012 volume on the infamous photo of looters and militia posing – and mostly smiling – behind a row of skulls and bones at the site of Treblinka II. As Gross (2012) notes, the photo ominously resembled contemporaneous pictures of happy peasants with their fall harvest. Dominik Kucharek was the only person indicted for looting, and he pled ignorance: "I didn't know that looking for gold and valuables at the site…was forbidden, because Soviet soldiers also went there….And they detonated explosives in places where they expected to find something." The case was eventually quashed and plundering continued unabated (Gross 2012).

The artefacts looted reflected the most primal fiscal appetites of the looters. The local population was only interested in items of monetary value that could be easily sold or traded. There was no symbolic, commemorative, or cultural value to the artefacts as remnants of the victims and no guilt associated with grave robbing (Carman 2005: 52). As Gross (2012) explained, Jews during the Holocaust were increasingly viewed as temporary custodians of "post-Jewish" property, so the local population saw themselves simply as claiming what was already rightfully theirs. Per Georg Simmel (1978: 67), acquiring property that was previously coveted but unattainable would also have only increased the item's value in the minds of the local population who sought it. Emanuel Ringelblum (1988) noted similar sentiments in the Warsaw ghetto, "The war had demoralized people who had been honest and decent all their lives; now they appropriated the Jews' possessions unscrupulously….The Jews were treated as 'the deceased on leave' about to die sooner or later." Dziuban (2015) postulates that the legacy of antisemitism in Poland and the 'normalization' of the persecution and mass murder of the Jewish population helped sanction the desecration of mass graves after the Holocaust. As she states (Dziuban 2015:159), "The continuity between the conscious participation in the plunder of victims of the camps when they were operational and the postwar lootings is, therefore, unquestionable." Even the local clergy of the time preached on the subject from the pulpit: "...since these were Jewish graves, dental gold and jewelry should not be left lying in the soil" (Dzuiban 2015:163).

Plundering at Treblinka and other killing sites continues to this day (Sturdy Colls and Colls 2013). Fresh pits can still be found at many mass graves. Greed remains the objective of looting, but the types of artifacts sought has expanded. Whereas only precious metals and jewels were previously of interest due to their aesthetic and financial value, individuals seeking their Eastern Europe heritage, collectors with a penchant for Nazi memorabilia and dark tourism, and museum representatives collecting items for exhibition have produced a market for Holocaust-related material. For example, acquisitions staff at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum are being increasingly approached by tourists and dealers with artefacts of dubious provenance (Jacek Nowakowski 2019: personal communication). In addition to items used by the camp guards, looters now also seek victims' personal items to sell to museum agents or at open markets to tourists. Newman et al's (2011:215-216) research regarding objects once owned by celebrities has parallels here in terms of the reasons why different people might want to own such items: (1)

"Objects that were once owned or touched by specific people remind us of those people", a factor that will be particularly prevalent amongst survivors and descendants in the context of the Holocaust; (2) prior ownership of objects by certain people might influence the value projected onto them by others; and (3) "contagion", or "the belief that a person's immaterial qualities or "essence" can be transferred to an object through physical contact". While (1) and (3) will likely increase the symbolic, sentimental, and historic value of items for survivors, descendants, and anyone wishing to feel a direct connection with the objects' former owners, all of these factors will increase the financial value of these remains for traders and collectors.

Although Newman et al (2011) argue that items owned by people who are hated should therefore have lower value, the value of perpetrator artefacts may actually be enhanced according to the severity of the crimes committed. The cognitive, symbolic, and financial value of items have similarly been shown to be greater when their provenance can be confirmed, and – in relation to the Holocaust – value is even further increased when objects originate from such well-known sites of atrocity as Auschwitz-Birkenau (Carr 2018). Since Treblinka II is second only to Auschwitz-Birkenau in terms of numbers of deaths, its materials are thus highly desirable to a wide range of audiences with a diverse range of motivations.

Phase IV: Memorialization (1959-Present)

Although there had been calls for the protection of Treblinka II since the time of the Central Commission's report (Gross 2012), the government in Poland did not approve the construction of a memorial at Treblinka II until 1958. The site was cleared, and the memorial was completed by 1961, irrevocably changing the location's landscape (Figure 2). The Muzeum Walki i Męczeństwa w Treblince (Museum of Fighting and Martyrdom) opened in 2010.

All museum exhibit artefacts to elucidate the stories they tell as well as the nature of the society, culture, and daily lives of the story's inhabitants. The use of artefacts in Holocaust exhibitions is more complicated, however. Victims' possessions are usually the only remnants left of these peoples' existence, and thus they have come to personify the Holocaust and "turn the huge numbers of victims back into individuals and return their humanity" (Ehrenreich and Klinger 2014:146). Their value therefore resides not only in their pedagogic importance but also in their symbolic status. As a result, their display must be carefully and respectfully curated in order to engage visitors "without feeding people's propensity to glorify war, stoking their macabre or voyeuristic fascination with terror, trivializing the event, and, above all, sacrificing the victim's dignity – essentially making them victims for a second time" (Ehrenreich and Klinger 2014: 113).

Displaying Holocaust artefacts is further complicated by the horrendous nature of the crime committed and the perpetrators' attempts to cover it up (Sturdy Colls and Branthwaite 2018). As Taylor (2014:151) explains in the context of the development of the Imperial War Museum's Holocaust exhibition, artefacts "not only have to tell a story, but also to act as evidence of a crime that the perpetrators had made strenuous efforts to conceal." The power and complex nature of Holocaust artefacts is encapsulated in the Object Cataloging Project page of the Museum's website:

> "The majority of the Museum's artifacts are collected and preserved because they are objects of memory. As testimonial objects, they offer a visible entry point into the story of their owner's experience during the Holocaust. Their physical presence quietly testifies: I was there. This happened. Do not forget." (USHMM Website 2018)

Although sites like Treblinka II should have an advantage over their international counterparts in the collecting and exhibiting of artefacts due to their location at actual Holocaust sites, smaller, deliberately razed sites like this one rarely have extensive collections. Prior to archaeological fieldwork conducted in 2013 (described below), Treblinka II's collection consisted mainly of surface finds discovered by museum staff or donated by the general public who either found them at the site or purchased them on the open market. The provenance of these items is thus questionable but they still have "museum value" (Carman 2005:122), which is arguably exacerbated because of their rarity (Brock 1968). Since well-provenanced collections were still extant at the Treblinka Labor Camp (Treblinka I) due to its being abandoned versus razed, the Museum of Struggle and Martyrdom's original exhibition primarily focused on Treblinka I and displayed some of its objects (Figure 3).

Many visitors to Treblinka II also do not tour the museum, privileging the visceral experience of visiting the sites and honoring the deceased. Visitors thus commonly bypass the museums due to a lack of time, an already considerable state of anguish over what they witnessed, or a desire to focus on the memorial aspects of their visit without the intrusion of institutional interpretation. Although understandable, this pursuit of a purer, more "authentic" engagement with the sites over the desire to visit the museums results in a lack of engagement with contextualized objects and the site's history. As Ziębińska-Witek (2014:267-268) states, "...exhibitions cannot be more important than the camp area and cannot obscure or dominate it by means of modern technology; on the contrary, they have to perform an ancillary role: they are meant only to help visitors read the history of the camp." The lack of in situ remains and the complete alteration of the landscape with the construction of the memorial, however, make it difficult for visitors to "read the history of the camp" (if this is what they wish to do) and understand Treblinka II's story without visiting the museum.

The 2013 archaeological field-season at Treblinka II changed the situation dramatically. Considerable evidence of the large-scale mass-murder that occurred at the site was recovered, including jewelry, hair clips, tools, pots, pans, and other domestic items (Sturdy Colls 2012, 2014a, 2014b, 2015a). As a result, a new exhibition was developed at the Museum of Struggle and Martyrdom by the lead archeologist and an artist that detailed Treblinka II's history and included a range of artefacts (Sturdy Colls and Branthwaite 2018) (Figure 4).

As noted, the use of Holocaust-era artefacts in exhibits, however, is a delicate balance: how can the former possessions of Holocaust victims be respectfully displayed without either embellishing their importance as surrogates for the victims or overshadowing the actual site (Sturdy Colls and Branthwaite 2018)? Caroline Sturdy Colls and Michael Branthwaite decided to divide the artefact collection of Treblinka II into three categories. The central case is a 1m x 1m display cube that reflects the 1m x 1m trench excavated in the center of the old gas chambers (Sturdy Colls and Branthwaite 2018) (Figure 4). Although a large number of artefacts were recovered in this small area, only a representative sample of items were displayed in the cube to increase the viewers' connection to the victims as people and avoid sensory overload. As Young (2009:59) argues for Auschwitz-Birkenau, "showing the items en masse can be effective in prompting visitors to contemplate the scale of Auschwitz's operations, but in this way it also distances visitors from the experiences of the individual prisoners." The extent and scale of the tragedy at Treblinka II is thus not transmitted by a mass of objects but by their condition and the visitors' ability to imagine what huge quantities of material must still be extant beneath the surface of the site if these artefacts are but a sample of those that were found in a 1m x 1m trench.

The second category constitutes a range of Treblinka II artefacts that represent “both the life and death of their owners” (Evans 2014:157; Sturdy Colls and Branthwaite 2018). Artefacts that personalize the victims include hair clips, scissors, a knife, a rose-shaped brooch, and a gold pendant; while the ultimate fate of these individuals is represented by a tile from the old gas chambers and shoes and bullets found in two mass graves south of the labor camp (Figure 4). Although these artefacts cannot be attributed to specific individuals, the use of quotations from survivors and witnesses in the panels lining the walls of the exhibition link these artefacts with the victims and allows the viewers to realize that these objects are all that remain of real people. Their value for the exhibit in part resides with their ability to provide opportunities to reflect on who the victims might have been, what they could have attained if not murdered, and what they may have experienced. The anonymity of the objects also demonstrates how the perpetrators progressively stripped these people of their possessions, their identities, and finally their lives during the extermination process.

The third category of artefacts consists of surface finds recovered during walkover surveys of the site. The items were selected in order to reinforce the extent and scale of the tragedy at Treblinka II and show the challenges of interpreting un-stratified items (Sturdy Colls and Branthwaite 2018) (Figure 4, foreground).

Holocaust artefacts have thus acquired a value far exceeding their materiality. An example of this situation is a metal pan that was recovered during a walkover survey of what is believed to be Treblinka II’s waste pit. As a surface find and because this particular type of pan has been in constant manufacture since World War II, the artefact’s provenance is unknown. It could have originated from the time of the site’s operation and discarded by guards or the Sonderkommandos, but it could also just as easily have been discarded by Soviet soldiers or looters after the razing of Treblinka II. A survivor visiting the museum during the processing of the artefact, however, averred that the pan must have belonged to a victim. He argued that this pan proved that they were sent to Treblinka believing that they actually were being transported “to the east” to start new lives, for why else would a person bring such a pan? As a presumed victim’s artefact, the pan thus acquired a significance far greater than just a surface find and raised several complex questions, including whether it should be displayed in an exhibition about the camp’s history and how to address the fact that the archaeological perspective conflicted with the survivor’s perspective (Sturdy Colls and Branthwaite 2018). These challenges were addressed via the inclusion of the pan in the exhibition, with accompanying detail demonstrating that it was a surface find, and the creation of an artwork that posed the difficult questions surrounding its provenance (for a detailed overview of the Finding Treblinka exhibition, see Sturdy Colls and Branthwaite 2018).

This increased value – almost to the point of sacred status (Carr 2018) – also raises many ethical issues in connection with collecting, storing, and researching such objects. Should such seemingly “priceless” objects be bought and sold on the open market? Should international museums remove such artefacts from their original contexts? What types of research can be conducted using such artefacts? Can and should large-scale, material-culture research focusing on artefact typologies be performed or only work that examines their imbued meaning? Whereas thefts of items from larger, well-guarded, and revered sites like Auschwitz can be and are prosecuted, what can be done for the smaller, remote Holocaust sites throughout Europe that are vulnerable to such scavenging without the perceived risk of prosecution (Carr 2018)? These are all important considerations for researchers and practitioners working within heritage and archaeological contexts (for further discussion, see editorial and papers in Carr et al 2018).

Phase V: Archaeology (2008-Present)

The significance of artefacts recovered from archaeological excavations is not only due to their intrinsic, judicial, or memorialization value but for the information that can be gleaned from their context within the archaeological record. The exact location of artefacts within an excavation, and their interrelation to other objects and features, reveal evidence of a site's architecture, organization, and function as well as the composition and configuration of its communities – permanent, intermediate, and transient. Looting is thus a double crime. Not only is it grave robbing at sites like Treblinka, but it also removes artefacts from their context, thus devaluing them in the interpretation of a site's history.

As discussed above, the Central Commission's investigation of Treblinka II led the site to be defined by absence, which discouraged further research. The discovery of an extensive assemblage from a minimally invasive 2013 archaeological excavation, however, not only compels scholars to revise the accepted narrative of Treblinka but also the role and value of material culture in the advancement of new, more accurate stories. The significant amount of physical evidence that actually survived can be used to tell and retell the site's history and victims' experiences as well as reveal spatial trends and insights into the camp's architecture and organization (Sturdy Colls and Branthwaite 2018). Selected examples will be discussed below that demonstrate the wealth of evidence contained in assemblages recovered from legitimate archaeological excavations and thus their value for pedagogy and commemoration.

The bricks, mortar, and tiles recovered from the bottom of the 1 m x 1 m trench (discussed above and located due to a prior geophysical survey) constituted part of the foundations and floor of the demolished structure identified through historic documentation and survivors' testimonies as the old gas chamber (Figure 5). The tiles were of the type commonly used in mikvahs (Jewish ritual baths) at the time, further supporting the evidence that this feature was the old gas chamber and that it had been disguised as a bathhouse in order to trick the victims into believing that they were going to take showers (Auerbach and Berenbaum 2007:126; Sturdy Colls and Colls 2013). These conclusions are further supported by scientific tests conducted on the remains. The burial of the tiles and bricks, which was intended to hide the crime, actually protected their surfaces from weathering and thus the evidence of the environment to which they were exposed during the gas chambers' operation. Gases naturally adhere to the surfaces of materials to form films via a process known as adsorption. The composition of these films can be determined using a technique called Thermal Programmed Desorption (TPD), which liberates these layers from the materials' surfaces through heating in an inert atmosphere and then identifying the molecules released. TPD results of the brick samples revealed elevated levels of carbon monoxide (CO) in comparison with reference samples, indicating that the bricks were extensively exposed to elevated CO levels, such as produced by automotive engines (Sturdy Colls and Colls 2013). The results of these tests thus further support the conclusions that (1) this feature was the remains of the old gas chamber; (2) the gas chamber was disguised as a bathhouse; and (3) the gas chambers used automotive-engine fumes to murder the victims.

The hair clips found in trenches in and around the old gas chamber also reveal additional information about the Treblinka II's operation (Figure 6). Survivor testimony and documentary evidence state that women went from the trains directly to the "changing room," where they were made to undress and hand over all their possessions. They were then force-marched naked to the "hairdressers," where their hair was shorn for use by German industry (Auerbach and Berenbaum 2007:126). Finally, the victims were violently driven the final 150 yards to the gas chambers along

what was known by the guards as the Himmelstrasse ("Way to Heaven"). The hair clips in the trench were thus a conundrum. Why would hair clips be found in the gas chambers if the women's hair was already cut off? A search of the documentary evidence revealed that the women's hair was shorn in the gas chambers when large numbers of transports arrived simultaneously (Sturdy Colls and Colls 2013). The presence of hair clips in the remains of the old gas chamber thus support the documentary evidence. Their presence also reveals how quickly women became victims after arriving in the camp and how horrible their last moments of life were (Sturdy Colls and Colls 2013).

The objects discussed reveal much of the speed and methods employed by the perpetrators, but they convey little about the victims themselves. The continued agency of the victims up to their final moments, however, can be seen in the recovery of jewelry such as a rose-shaped brooch and pendant in the excavations near the remains of the old gas chambers (Sturdy Colls and Colls 2013) (Figure 6). The victims somehow concealed these artefacts throughout the terrifying and violent destruction process and only discarded them within, or in the vicinity of, the gas chambers (Sturdy Colls and Branthwaite 2018:60-61). Similar to the wedding rings recovered from shooting sites in Ukraine, these objects were purposely retained and then discarded during their owners' last moments "in a last act of defiance rather than letting their murderers get their hands on them" (Ehrenreich and Klinger 2012:136). It is objects such as these that return the victims' humanity and turn them from faceless numbers back into real people.

The 299 objects recovered in 2017 from the waste pit located within the SS area of Treblinka II also reveal additional information about the perceived value of particular artefact types within the camp (Sturdy Colls and Colls 2017). Unsurprisingly, many of the items discovered were domestic items most likely used by the SS guards (e.g., pots, pans, cutlery, empty bottles [including beer and champagne drunk by the SS], and other glass items) and discarded once they had fulfilled their intended purpose. Many seemingly victim belongings were also recovered, however, often in the same stratigraphic layer as the non-military issued domestic items. The presence of these artefacts in this particular waste pit is surprising since such items were usually shipped to Germany (see above) or burnt or buried elsewhere in the camp (Sturdy Colls and Colls 2017). The objects recovered include suitcase fragments, dress accessories, buckles, shoes, hygiene and toilet sets, small medicine bottles, jewelry fragments, keys, and children's toys (Figure 7). These items provide further insights into the types of utilitarian and sentimental objects that victims thought necessary to carry with them to Treblinka, but their presence in the waste pit suggests that the SS did not deem them sufficiently valuable to ship to Germany. Some items also probably belonged to the Sonderkommandos, who lived in a fenced-off part of the SS area (Sturdy Colls and Colls 2017) and either brought with them to Treblinka or scavenged from the piles of victims' belongings that they were forced to sort in order to make their lives remotely bearable. Additional objects found their way into the top layers of the waste pit when the camp was demolished. The waste pit alone therefore provides a complex microcosm of the role and perceived value of objects in camp life and their differing lifespans before being discarded.

Artefact assemblages recovered from sites are thus invaluable indicators of the history and functioning of a site, as long as they are recovered in situ via legitimate archaeological fieldwork. The detritus of one era can thus literally be priceless in another. It can be argued that these objects have extrinsic cognitive value "because they might help solve problems in the world" (Young 2013:29) via the role they play in exhibitions, lectures, publications, and the like that aim to educate people about intolerance, racial hatred, and genocide. Whilst the importance of oral

testimonies and historical source material cannot be underestimated in this regard - particularly given the amount of attention the archaeological research has generated amongst educators and the public – the artefacts found at Treblinka "perform active metaphorical work in the world in a manner that words cannot" (Tilley 2002:25), thus complementing and supplementing established narratives. In the absence of legal investigations, the objects – and indeed the archaeological processes of discovering them – become a form of 'public truth' or 'forensis (Weizman 2014). As a final point, it should be noted that items have not yet played a role in the identification of individuals who were present at Treblinka, as have objects from other sites of genocide which bore names or personal details (Komar 2003; Schute 2013); a fact that may change should future excavations take place.

Conclusion

The evidence presented in this article reveals how the perceived value of an artefact can vary depending on temporal, historical, economic, and societal context. Although value in the cases presented here can be neatly classified temporally in terms of monetary, judicial, commemorative, or archaeological value, the seemingly inevitable, linear progression of development presented in this article belies that value is actually an aggregate of these four classifications as well as others (e.g., symbolic and cognitive). These artefacts actually embody many of these values simultaneously. For example, the value of a wedding ring recovered from a Holocaust site can encompass its monetary value, based on its weight in gold; its judicial value, based on its evidentiary utility in proving crimes and prosecuting perpetrators or looters; its commemorative value, based on its ability to humanize the victims of the Holocaust; and its archaeological value, based on what its context reveals about the Holocaust and the story to be told.

The very artefacts valued by different groups has similarly changed with time, and there is no basis on which these different values can be realistically compared. Can the gold wedding ring be considered more valuable for its gold content than for its commemorative or judicial value? Although looters were initially only interested in objects of obvious monetary value, such as gold and jewelry, USHMM staff collecting artefacts for the Museum's collections – as stated above – are now regularly proffered objects previously considered of no monetary value, such as shoes supposedly from Holocaust sites with dirt clinging to them. The commemorative and archaeological value acquired by these objects over time have thus turned them into items of monetary value to looters. As Andrews (2018 68) states, "...value and meaning, though often aligned, can follow separate trajectories." Thus, museums and tourists must be careful not to make a "market" for such artefacts that could lead to increased looting. Material culture of the Holocaust is also undervalued in many contexts, as seen in the judicial examples discussed above or even in current analyses of Holocaust history, as evidenced by its minimal usage use in most historical volumes and journals today. Ironically, it is this undervaluing that has led to the survival of many items for discovery and analysis by archaeologists. This fact – coupled with the considerable amount of information concerning material culture that resides within oral testimonies, photographs and other archive sources – means that there exists considerable potential for novel archaeological and anthropological research at sites like Treblinka in the future.

The variations in the perceived value of the different artefacts in Treblinka II's assemblage over the span of its post-abandonment history thus supports Dumont's theory (1981) that the concept of value varies according to societal context. Rarely does the assemblage of a single site represent all these different values, however. It is the terrible judicial and cultural tragedy that was the Holocaust – and other crimes against humanity – that make such a situation possible.

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Figure List

Figure 1: Maps showing the locations of Treblinka II death camp and Treblinka I labor camp (Copyright: Centre of Archaeology)

Figure 2: The memorial at Treblinka death camp (Copyright: Centre of Archaeology)

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Figure 5: Bricks, tiles and other building materials from the gas chambers at Treblinka death camp, found during archaeological excavations in 2013 (Copyright: Centre of Archaeology)

Figure 6: Personal belongings found during archaeological excavations at Treblinka II death camp in 2013, including a rose-shaped brooch, gold pendant, hairclips and other jewelry fragments (Copyright: Centre of Archaeology)

Figure 7: Items found in the waste pit at Treblinka II death camp in 2017, including a toothbrush, a suitcase handle and various domestic items (Copyright: Centre of Archaeology)