Entangled narratives of terror

Maly Trostenets and Blagovshchina forest in history and memory, 1937-2022

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Introduction

In the 1960s, the Institute for Jewish Affairs, an American Jewish organization involved with investigations into war crimes and restitution for victims of the Holocaust, was actively involved in various post-war trials in West Germany. In coordination with German prosecutors, they searched for survivors and tried to persuade them to testify in court cases. One of the letters from its archive is that of Oscar Karbach, the director of the Institute for Jewish Affairs. In a letter of March 1966, he described Maly Trostenets, a Nazi camp located on the outskirts of Minsk:

> In a technical sense it was not an extermination camp like Treblinka or Sobibor (Auschwitz was both an extermination and a labour camp), which meant it had no facilities, such as gas chambers, which were used for the planned mass extermination of countless people. However, most of those taken there perished, but not everyone.[1]

The camp Maly Trostenets was created on the site of a former kolkhoz, a Soviet collective farm. The farm included both cattle, as well as agriculture and was used by the local SS for their own food supply. The prisoners of Maly Trostenets were Soviet, Polish and deported western and central European Jews who were previously interned in the Minsk ghetto and other local Belarusian prisoners. From May 1942 onwards, sixteen trains with deported Jews from Theresienstadt ghetto, Vienna, Königsberg, Berlin and Cologne arrived nearby Minsk and Maly Trostenets. Only a small group of them ended up in the camp. However, most of these Jews were murdered upon arrival in the nearby Blagovshchina forest. Blagovshchina forest was also used to murder locally interned Jews from the Minsk ghetto. In late June 1944, Maly Trostenets was destroyed by the retreating Germans, who murdered everyone who was still in the camp at that time. Only a handful of prisoners managed to survive the camp: some were fortunate enough to escape the camp during the chaotic days prior to its destruction in June 1944 or were transported westwards to other camps in the fall of 1943.

Karbach's description of Maly Trostenets is important in multiple ways. First, it shows that in the 1960s, people seemed to have struggled to understand what Maly Trostenets was and therewith to understand what specifically happened here. It also shows that in the 1960s there

[1] Oscar Karbach, 'Letter Dr. Oscar Karbach to Mr. Schoen' 2 March 1966, World Jewish Congress Records, MS-361, Box C213, Folder 5, American Jewish Archives.

were people who were engaging with this history and, perhaps more importantly, tried to make sense of what happened *in order* to seek justice for the crimes that were committed. The efforts of the World Jewish Congress to keep the memory of Maly Trostenets alive, and to find justice for wrongdoings, show that after its destruction the camp was not forgotten. However, it did not become well-known until many years later. All this needs further explanation.

The urgency for this explanation is all the greater because the topic of Maly Trostenets is presently 'trending'. During the course of this PhD project, a total of three monuments and memorial sites were unveiled in Minsk, a traveling exhibition was shown in Minsk, Vienna, Basel, Grodno, Theresienstadt, Frankfurt and other German and Belarusian cities, and many memorial services were held, in Belarus, Austria, or elsewhere. In consequence, the history of Maly Trostenets is currently directly conveyed to a large audience through exhibitions, monuments and memorials, and newspaper articles, even though a solid historical enquiry is still lacking. This dissertation therefore scrutinizes both the history and the memorialisation of Maly Trostenets and Blagovshchina forest. This study centres around the question what Maly Trostenets and Blagovshchina were, what exactly happened there, and how this story has been told, in particular by its survivors.

Often Maly Trostenets is called either 'the Auschwitz of Austria' or the 'Auschwitz of Belarus'. In the first case, the 'Auschwitz of Austria' refers to the high number of Austrian victims who were murdered near Maly Trostenets–even higher than the number of Austrians murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau. In the second case, the 'Auschwitz of Belarus' refers to the high number of victims who were murdered near Maly Trostenets: Maly Trostenets is where the most people were killed in one site in Belarus by the Nazis. Referring to the Holocaust in general through the image of 'Auschwitz' renders histories such as that of Maly Trostenets misunderstood and misinterpreted: it turns the history into something that it is not. This is quite an alarming trend because this simplification even emerges in scholarly works where Maly Trostenets is also referred to as a killing centre, transfer camp, extermination camp or even also "the Auschwitz of Belarus".[2] The simplification of this history by referring to Maly Trostenets as 'an

[2] P. Kohl, *»Ich wundere mich, daß ich noch lebe« Sowjetischen Augenzeugen berichten* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag Mohn, 1990), 91; D. Gaunt and P.A. Levine, 'Introduction', in *Collaboration and Resistance during the Holocaust; Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania*, ed. D. Gaunt, P.A. Levine, and L. Palosuo (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), 16; P.A. Rudling, 'The Invisible Genocide; the Holocaust in Belarus', in *Bringing the Dark Past to Light: The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe*, ed. J. Himka and J.B. Michlic (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 62; D. Marples, *'Our Glorious Past': Lukashenka's Belarus and the Great Patriotic War* (Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2014), 77; S. Leydesdorff, *Sasha Pechersky: Holocaust Hero, Sobibor Resistance Leader, and Hostage of History* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 68; Andrej Angrick, *»Aktion*

Auschwitz' also means that the memory of the site takes over the actual history. It turns the history into something that is homogeneous, into a history that lacks a layer of complexity, a history with only one narrative.

As Karbach also underlined in his letter, Maly Trostenets was in many ways not similar to Auschwitz. It has its own narrative within the history and discourse of the Holocaust: On the one hand, the history of Maly Trostenets does not fit with the meaning that is attached in Western Europe to the word 'Auschwitz', the industrialised way of killing Jews in extermination camps and gas chambers such as Auschwitz Birkenau, Sobibor or Belzec. On the other hand, it also does not precisely match the history of the 'Holocaust by bullets'–the murder of Jews in forests, dunes or parks nearby their homes as happened in Eastern Europe–as the Holocaust in Eastern Europe is often referred to.[3] Maly Trostenets is actually a place where these two sides of the Holocaust intertwined.

A second aspect of the history of Maly Trostenets which makes its history more difficult to fit into simplified narratives is that it is a history of entanglement. It is not just a local history, a microhistory of the Holocaust in Minsk, but is also a transnational history, a mezzo history, of various social groups: for example, the lives of deported Jews from various corners of Europe intertwined with each other, while perpetrators coming from Hamburg, Vienna or Riga took part in the murder of these Jews, as well as local Soviet citizens in Minsk. On a macrolevel, the history of Maly Trostenets is entangled with the history of the Soviet repressions prior and after the occupation of Minsk. A still largely missing aspect in literature on the Holocaust in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union is that the both regimes interacted, interfered and became entangled with each other, often with enormous consequences for those who lived under both regimes. In the case of Maly Trostenets this meant that after prisoners managed to survive the camp, more than half of the German speaking survivors were subsequently incarcerated again, by a Soviet regime that viewed them as 'German agents'.

This makes the history of Maly Trostenets multi-layered and far from homogenous: there are multiple narratives and as a result, various memories of this site coexist, interconnect, diverge, substitute or compete with each other. This wide variety of memories of this site also has influenced the writing of its history. Because the memorialisation of Maly Trostenets

1005« Spurenbeseitigung von NS-Massenverbrechen 1942-1945, vol. Band 1 (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2018), 563.

[3] The term was coined by Father Patrick Desbois, who extensively researched the Holocaust in Eastern Europe with his NGO Yahad in Unum, among other things by conducting interviews with local citizens of locations where these mass murders took place. Patrick Desbois, *The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest's Journey to Uncover the Truth behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

coincided with historical research to the site, the former has influenced how the history has been written. This entanglement of history and memory, and possibly also the transition of history into memory and vice versa, shows the need for a historical study of both the history and the memory of Maly Trostenets. A history of how the memorialisation of Maly Trostenets has evolved, can make us aware of the pitfalls of memory in general, but will also provide for the possible existence of a more multi-layered narrative of the memory of Maly Trostenets. But in order to understand the memory of an event, it is important to return to the basis of this memory, its history.

The camp Maly Trostenets and the forest Blagovshchina are treated separately in this study, for both are part of entangled, but nevertheless distinct macro histories of the Holocaust and the German occupation of the Soviet Union. Although Maly Trostenets was functioning as a forced labour camp from April 1942 onwards and Blagovshina as a killing site from May 1942, the history of both sites began earlier.

In addition, the stories of Maly Trostenets and Blagovshchina do not end at the final days of the destruction. Because the sources are scarce, the inclusion of personal narratives is necessary–as personal testimonies are for some aspects of this history all that is left to understand what took place in Maly Trostenets. Although historians can possibly view the decades after the incarceration in Maly Trostenets as an aspect of the memory of the camp and Blagovshchina forest, for those who survived the events, it was an essential and important part of their active engagement with Maly Trostenets. Therefore, this study provides both a history of Maly Trostenets and Blagovshchina and a history of their memorialisation.

Chapter 1 sets out a methodological and historical framework. This chapter reflects on the history of both Maly Trostenets and Blagovshchina as histories of entanglement and considers the place of Maly Trostenets and Blagovshchina within the history of the Holocaust, the history of the occupation of Minsk and the Soviet Union, and the history of the pre- and post-war Soviet repressions. Furthermore, chapter 1 provides a historical context for understanding the environment in which these two sites could exist. In addition, the methodology and sources that are used in this dissertation are critically approached in order to justify their use and underline their relevance for the histories of both Maly Trostenets and Blagovshchina forest.

The subsequent ten chapters are divided into three parts. Part I, “Maly Trostenets: Camp and Labour” analyses the history of Maly Trostenets during the German occupation, part II “Blagovshchina: Forest as a killing site” analyses the history of Blagovshchina forest during the German occupation, and part III, “The present past: post-repression, witnessing and

memorialisation" analyses the history of the survivors following their incarceration in Maly Trostenets and how they have been influential on the present-day remembrance of this history. The separation of Maly Trostenets and Blagovshchina into two different parts makes clear the specifics of each place. However, this does have consequences for the chronology of this dissertation: part I and part II each start prior to the invasion of the Soviet Union by the Nazis and end with the final days of their occupation of Minsk. Part I and part II should thus be understood as parallel and chronological histories which are entangled.

Part I analyses the history of the camp Maly Trostenets and answers the question of how and why the camp was created and what took place inside the camp during its approximate 26-month existence. Chapter 2 covers the position of the camp during the first months of the occupation of Minsk by the Germans, in order to understand what the actual function of this site was to the German occupiers and, therefore how we should understand the camp within the history of the Holocaust and of the occupation of the Soviet Union. It addresses the question of how the camp was created, and identifies its prisoners and those who were in charge of the camp were. It also questions how many prisoners were interned in the camp and how many people survived. Chapter 3 analyses the conditions in the camp. It probes the existence of social structures and interpersonal relationships between the prisoners and how this contributed to their chances of survival. Furthermore, because Maly Trostenets was a forced labour camp, the type of work that was performed in the camp alongside the daily life which was characterised by arbitrary events of violence is analysed. Chapter 4 focuses on the prisoners who survived Maly Trostenets and questions how they were able to do so. It also analyses the escape of a significant group of Soviet and German-speaking Jews on the eve of the destruction of the camp by the retreating German forces, because these specific people became the ones who later on have told the history of Maly Trostenets. Their escape and survival became therefore also part of the history of Maly Trostenets.

Part II focuses on the history of Blagovshchina forest. The aim of this part is to answer the question where Blagovshchina stands within the history of the Holocaust and it argues that Blagovshchina as a site of mass destruction should also be viewed separately from the camp Maly Trostenets. This part is divided into four relatively short chapters. Chapter 5 focuses on the context of the German mass killings in Blagovshchina forest. Although it was possibly the largest mass grave in the surroundings of Minsk, it was by far the only one. This chapter first considers the function of Blagovshchina forest prior to the German occupation and the possible entanglement of the site with the pre-war repressions by the Soviet authorities. In order to show the importance of Blagovshchina within the Holocaust in Minsk and the occupied Soviet Union,

this chapter also focuses on the other massacres that took place in and around Minsk. By describing the other massacres, it becomes possible to see what made Blagovshchina stand out among them.

Chapters 6 and 7 analyses the actual use of the forest as a site of mass murder by the Germans. These two chapters aim to show how Blagovshchina was different from the other killing site in and around Minsk, but also how this site was connected to larger patterns within the Holocaust. First, in chapter 6 the systemic and almost weekly use of Blagovshchina as a site where deported Jews were murdered is analysed. Here, the different techniques by which people were murdered are considered as well in order to show how the murder techniques evolved and how Blagovshchina should be regarded within the context of the 'industrialised murders' of the Holocaust. Second, in chapter 7 the largest massacre in Blagovshchina forest of Jews from the Minsk ghetto is scrutinised. It shows how Blagovshchina was part of a broader context and larger patterns in which the Jews in *Generalgouvernement Ostland* were murdered *en masse* during the summer of 1942 and how Blagovshchina stands out because it was one of the very few places where western European Jews were also murdered in the 'Holocaust by bullets'.

Chapter 8 focuses on the final stage of the existence of Blagovshchina forest as a site of mass murder and as mass grave. It describes *Aktion 1005*, the Nazis' exhumation operation during which many of the mass graves on the territory of occupied Eastern Europe were exhumed, in Blagovshchina forest. Contrary to chapter 6 and 7, this chapter is more descriptive due to the lack of elaborate sources on this topic.

Part III focuses on the period after the Nazi occupation of Minsk, incarceration in Maly Trostenets and the murders in Blagovshchina forest. It follows individual narratives of the aftermath of these histories, simply because of the very few survivors of the camp. The overall aim of this part is to analyse how survivors of the camp Maly Trostenets have influenced processes of transitional justice and the memorialization of both histories. Unfortunately, due to a lack of sources on the eastern European survivors of the camp, the protagonists in this part are mostly the people who had been deported to Minsk from western and central Europe and survived Maly Trostenets. Chapter 9 analyses what happened to survivors once they survived the camp in order to return to where they had been deported from. It analyses how the history of Maly Trostenets after the war became again entangled with the history of the Soviet repressions. This aspect of Maly Trostenets has remained overlooked, even though it is an important aspect of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union. This chapter analyses how many of the

survivors of Maly Trostenets fell victim to a form of double victimization–being both victim of the Holocaust as well as the Soviet repressions.[4]

Chapter 10 analyses the influence of witnesses and survivors of Maly Trostenets on the road to justice and their role in prosecutions and investigations of the crimes committed in Maly Trostenets. The first part of this chapter considers the room some of the very early trials offered for the narrative of survivors of Maly Trostenets, and the very active attitude of survivors. The second part focuses on how this attitude changed over decades and how the role of organizations such as the Institute of Jewish Affairs of the World Jewish Congress in New York and the institute of Simon Wiesenthal in Vienna became important in persuading survivors to testify. In general it is considered if and how (western European) survivors of Maly Trostenets influenced the trials in western Europe against possible perpetrators. It analyses their actions, agency and options in the process of transitional justice in western Europe.

Chapter 11 analyses the recent memorialisation of Maly Trostenets. It focuses on how the site has become the centre of attention in German, Austrian and Belarusian memorialisation of the Second World War and the Holocaust. It analyses how the memory of Maly Trostenets has evolved during the last twenty years and how the change from local memory to a transnational memory of this place has influenced the narratives of victimhood and perpetration.

[4] 'Double victimization' differs from the theory of 'double genocide' in which the Stalinist repressions are equalised with the Holocaust, as will be discussed in chapter 1.