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A summary of the article "Is this proof?" Forensic Evidence and Ambiguous Material Culture at Treblinka Extermination Camp Based on the Finding Treblinka project By Caroline Sturdy Colls & Michael Branthwaite

Colls and Branthwaite wrote this article as an examination of the forensic archaeological evidence found at the German extermination camp in Treblinka (Poland). They pose the question "why have the atrocities that took place at Treblinka taken over 70 years to uncover?" (Colls and Branthwaite p1). This article states that between 800,000 and 1,000,000 people were killed by Nazis at Treblinka extermination camp from July 23 1942 to autumn 1943. By using emotive language e.g. mass murder, abhorrent and voluminous crimes (p1), Colls and Branthwaite set a dark and brutally direct tone for the article. Artist Michael Branthwaite and archaeologist Caroline Sturdy Colls joined together in order to meet the demands of the public to see the evidence brought to light by means of a permanent exhibition at the Museum of Struggle and Martyrdom at Treblinka in Poland.

In order to facilitate more efficient killing gas chambers were constructed, at first three then later ten more (Chrostowski 2004). The victims (mostly Jews and some Polish political prisoners) bodies were either burnt on cremation pyres or, more often, buried in mass graves dug by people whose bodies would soon follow. After the Holocaust the Nazis tried to destroy all of the physical evidence that remained at Treblinka. Making it difficult for archaeologists and forensic investigators to piece together the exact lay out of the extermination camp and horrific crimes that took place there. In 2007 forensic investigators and archaeologists were sent to Treblinka to gather and attempt to understand any remaining evidence. Non-invasive surveys were later taken in 2010 using a variety of new techniques then later an excavation in 2013 uncovered many personal items such as hair clips and jewelry. This was confirmation of the atrocities that took place at Treblinka during world war two. Evidence was uncovered that shows how the Nazis put the victims into a state false security by creating a fake hospital , there were even red tiles (indicative of Jewish ritual baths) found that are thought to have been on the floors of the gas chambers. A prisoner revolt on August 2nd 1943 led to the escape of around 200 prisoners, of which only 70 survived.

In 2010-2013 at the time of the archaeological investigation there was a small permanent exhibition at the Museum of Struggle and Martyrdom (only a handful of artifacts and information panels) as well as a memorial landscape constructed in 1960.

It seemed unlikely that these sparse remains were the only things left at Treblinka, the finding Treblinka project was launched to paint a more detailed picture of what happened there and the layout of the camp. A range of modern interdisciplinary methods were called upon, a thorough archive search was conducted including documentary, photographic, aerial reconnaissance and cartographic sources, there were also oral testimonies collected. Non-invasive methods such as LiDAR, differential GPS and topography were used to determine the topography of the site (79 objects found). In order to locate and record buried remains archaeologists and forensic investigators used a form of ground penetrating radar, after which localised excavations were carried out. Many items were found e.g. gold and silver teeth, dentures and human remains.

The collaboration of artists and archaeologists led to a much larger and more informative exhibition. Artists used some of the personal items found to create various pieces of art to demonstrate the desecration of thousands of victims. For example one of the artists (Jenny Steele) created a print depicting hair clips found in the trenches which she used to reupholster a period chair. This and many other art works allow the public to address the sensitive past of Treblinka in a beautiful and respectful way. As well as making the findings easier for the non academic to comprehend. The other artists involved in the project were Janine Goldsworthy, Dave Griffiths and Hilary Jack. Originally it was thought that all victims were completely stripped and often shaven before entering the gas chambers. However due to the large amount of personal items found, further archival evidence showed that some victims were sent in fully dressed when the camp had an influx of prisoners.

In order to cover up the deplorable acts committed at Treblinka the Nazis dug up many of the mass graves and burnt the bodies of the victims in February 1943. Artists needed to find the right type of representation for such horrible events in order to deter any macabre or voyeuristic behaviour from visitors. As well as maintaining the dignity of the victims and their lives. One of the ways they did this was by using quotes from prisoners and eyewitness accounts to relay the personal stories of the people to the public.

The article describes how some of the forensic evidence found is ambiguous because some of it can be dated back to the Holocaust era, the origins of others are not easily determined. This raised discussions about whether various items could be used in the exhibition or not when depicting the camp's history. As it is now archaeologists must focus on the evidence found on the surface rather than the buried remains, this is due to past neglect of the site. They do however want to pursue the excavations further in the future.

References

"This is Proof? Forensic Evidence and Ambiguous Material Culture at Treblinka Extermination Camp Caroline Sturdy Colls & Michael Branthwaite Published online: 20 July 2017 Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2017"

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