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Archaeologist reveals evidence of mass graves at Nazi death camp

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Caroline Sturdy Colls at Treblinka

Almost 70 years after the end of the Second World War a groundbreaking forensic archaeological study by the University has unearthed evidence of hidden burial sites at a former death camp where more than 800,000 Jews perished during the Holocaust.

It was widely believed that evidence of the extermination camp at Treblinka, in north-east Poland, was destroyed by the Nazis upon its abandonment in August 1943, however, these new findings suggest otherwise, revealing the location of deep pits – potential graves – and structural remains that witness accounts locate as gas chambers. It is likely that the Nazis simply levelled the ground to disguise evidence of the camp's existence instead of completely removing all traces.

Forensic archaeologist and research lead, Caroline Sturdy Colls, whose work at Treblinka is being followed in a forthcoming Radio 4 documentary, explains: "*These initial findings indicate that we still have a great deal to learn about the history of Treblinka. Traces of the camp clearly do survive below the ground and the use of archaeological methods has revealed structures, pits and other subtle traces of the camp's existence and layout. Most importantly, these findings can contribute to our knowledge about the nature of Nazi persecution and the treatment of the victims sent there.*"

Jewish Halacha law prohibits disturbance of human remains, necessitating the forensic archaeological team to employ geophysical survey methods in the first scientific examination of the death camp. Non-invasive survey methods were utilised to respect the historical and scientific potential of the site, as well as its religious and commemorative significance, meaning the ground was not disturbed during this investigation.

Instead, researchers utilised ground-penetrating radar and other geophysical methods to detect subsurface features, proving the existence of mass graves at the site and identifying other subtle markers in the landscape. Caroline adds: "*Multiple geophysical and topographic survey methods were utilised at the site, allowing various aspects of the landscape to be mapped. When this information was compared with archival material, such as aerial photographs and witness maps, the boundaries of the camp were identified and below-ground features were characterised.*"

These geophysical results are part of the first stage of Caroline's continuing research at Treblinka and for the first time, offer new insights into the physical evidence pertaining to the site, preserving the memory of the victims of the Holocaust.

Caroline's research will be explored further in a forthcoming BBC Radio 4 documentary, **The Hidden Graves of the Holocaust (http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b019rlns)** on Monday 23 January at 8pm. Listen more in **our interview (http://www.ideaslab.bham.ac.uk/MP3s/Caroline_Sturdy_Colls_Treblinka_podcast.mp3)** to Caroline on her research.

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