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Holocaust distortion and the creation of Schrödinger's mass graves: the precariousness of truth at sites of Holocaust heritage in Europe

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ABSTRACT

Holocaust distortion is a threat to Holocaust sites today. How does this manifest in practice, and can we always distinguish between those who operate in good faith on the one hand, and bad actors on the other? This paper explores its impact at European case studies of mass graves. The paper has three overall aims: first, to explore Holocaust distortion in Europe today; second, to discuss how Holocaust distortion impacts mass graves in particular, creating 'Schrödinger's mass graves.' Third, this paper questions the motives of 'good faith' actors, who reveal themselves as quite the opposite through their actions towards experts.

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Introduction: Schrödinger's mass graves, distortion and archaeology

Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger's tongue-in-cheek thought experiment of 1935 is well known today. He proposed the case of the cat in a steel chamber along with a flask of acid and a Geiger counter containing a radioactive substance. He suggested that if a single radioactive atom decays within the hour in which the experiment is running, then a hammer is released which shatters the flask, which in turn kills the cat, but if no atom has decayed then the cat still lives. Whether the cat is alive or dead, we cannot tell until we lift the lid of the box to look. Similarly, and applied to the subject matter of this paper, the bodies in a mass grave cannot be counted, identified, or even definitively proved to exist, without opening the grave and exhuming them. Circumventing this with geophysical survey may provide acceptable levels of proof to experts, but the general public sometimes demands higher levels of proof, as this paper will illustrate.

Because mass graves are sealed, making the existence of those who lie within them a matter of faith, the 'invisibility' of the dead makes them vulnerable to Holocaust distortion of different kinds. Such distortion is a particular problem at Holocaust sites. The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) Charter for Safeguarding Sites

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identifies the risk.¹ Article 2.1.5 states that ‘Deliberate and accidental distortion and / or denial, as well as (political) (mis)appropriation or national sensitivities leading to misleading narratives and silences’ is one among sixteen different threats to the significance of Holocaust sites and sites related to the crimes of the Nazis and their collaborators today.

As well as distortion itself, this paper also considers the motives behind it. In their foreword to the IHRA document *Recognizing and Countering Holocaust Distortion*, Robert Williams and Juliane Wetzel wrote that ‘It is notoriously difficult to ascertain the motives behind Holocaust distortion. Does distortion appear due to cynical or hateful reasons, or out of ignorance of the facts or sensitivities of the Holocaust? Regardless of the motive, excusing or making allowances for distortion erodes our understanding and respect for the Holocaust, and is an insult to the memories of Holocaust victims and survivors.’²

In (at least) one of the case studies considered in this paper, the distortion has been much in evidence online. With the rise of social media, online misinformation and AI, and the return of authoritarian and populist politics to Europe and the West in general, we are increasingly aware of the precarity of truth when it comes to communicating the history of what happened at Holocaust sites. This paper explores the nature of that distortion, online and otherwise, through the case studies of mass graves: the bodies inside a mass grave are hidden from view, and probably only a minority are marked by mounds or other tell-tale signs. As a category, they range from ‘overlooked, repressed and ignored’ non-sites of memory,³ which are unmarked by memorials, and the not-dissimilar ‘taboo heritage,’⁴ which is blocked from coming into being as a heritage site by the local community and / or officials and is therefore absent, to marked and highly contested sites.⁵ The case studies discussed here all fall within this range.

At these sites, dispute, denial, distortion and even silence can surround three key aspects of such places: the identity of the victims, the number of the victims, and the precise location and extent of the skeletal material, including in the form of scattered cremated remains. Whether there are any people buried in the grave at all is also liable to question: does the mass grave even exist? Unfortunately, by their nature, those who lie (or do not lie) inside mass graves cannot be accurately counted without opening the grave, which of course greatly facilitates the arguments of those who dispute what is known from archival sources and oral testimony. Indeed, the identity of the perpetrators is a fourth area of dispute at such sites, but this is something which can only be facilitated through the discovery, during exhumation, of particular objects at the scene of the crime, such as bullets.

Such disputes are not helped by the limited number of investigations throughout Europe that have sought to locate burial sites of Holocaust victims since the Second World War (notwithstanding the important work of organizations such as *Yahad-In Unum* and *Fundacja Zapomniane*), and few have used techniques now commonly used by forensic practitioners and archaeologists. This means that ‘questions remain about the fate of many victims and what exactly happened to their remains’ and that ‘thousands of burial sites are still unlocated and unmarked.’⁶ In fact, archaeologist Caroline Sturdy Colls characterizes it ‘an evidence paradox’ that, although millions of people are known to have died in the Holocaust, the remains of only some have been found.⁷ The number of complex reasons why this is so relates to attempts by the perpetrators to hide their crimes, the fact that not all sites of massacres were marked, and the effects of time.⁸ This ‘evidence paradox’ can be a gift to Holocaust distorters.

Within a Holocaust context, given that mass graves are highly likely to include Jewish dead, Halacha (Jewish religious law) means that exhumations or investigations are ‘forbidden, restricted or incomplete’ because in essence it ‘stipulates that the body of a deceased person is tied to a soul and, therefore, to disturb a grave is to disturb a soul.’⁹ Although different rabbis can give different rulings,¹⁰ one of the guiding principles of Halacha is to avoid disturbance of human remains as far as possible,¹¹ which is why the graves of millions of Jewish victims have remained unlocated or unexhumed. As Nazi victims of other religions and cultures were often buried in the same grave as Jews, there is a prohibition on disturbing the grave even if one body could be Jewish. Thus, it can be impossible to prove to the public through excavation what detailed archival research has shown to be an accurate reading of the past, especially in the face of opposing voices who do not respect Halacha and demand exhumation.

As an alternative to excavation, Sturdy Colls has pioneered remote sensing techniques at Holocaust sites which can be coupled with desk-based research. LiDAR survey can be used to collect elevation data to produce three-dimensional digital terrain models, and geophysical surveys such as Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR), resistance survey and magnetometry can be employed. As Sturdy Colls emphasizes, ‘these techniques do not find “bodies” but rather “anomalies”’ and the results ‘must be compared to information derived from desk-based and other in-field research to determine whether the “anomalies” suggest the presence of a grave.’¹² However, she cautions that none of these methods can ‘prove the existence of human remains to the same degree of certainty as excavation. We might also acknowledge the role of drones and satellite imagery to identify mass graves in countries where access is difficult due to conflict, such as Ukraine. Whilst it is possible to present a case for the existence of graves based on a wide range of evidence derived from these methods, only excavation can reveal the bodies themselves and facilitate their detailed examination.’¹³ Additionally, while non-invasive geophysical methods can provide details regarding the dimensions of potential mass graves, it cannot estimate or predict the number of bodies,¹⁴ so archaeologists carrying out such work should guard against their work being misused in a numbers war in sensitive parts of Europe.

My choice of nomenclature in this paper which invokes the work of Schrödinger reflects the contested nature of mass graves as both existing and not existing, and as containing certain numbers or identities of victims – or not – and is used as a way of identifying the problems caused by such contestations. This is not to say that the demand for a re-examination of historical sources is not legitimate, or that new technology should not be used to reassess evidence, but there is a recognized difference between work carried out by trained, qualified and experienced experts and those without such expertise. Without training, serious historical errors can be made, compounded by both a lack of source criticism and lack of knowledge of the wider historical context, as this paper will highlight. Some of the worst historical errors – or rather, deliberate distortion – can be found on social media.

Holocaust distortion and social media

Today, Holocaust distortion has its most virulent manifestation online. In 2022, UNESCO published its report *History Under Attack*, which looked at Holocaust denial

and distortion on social media, and why it had spread so far and so quickly ‘amidst growing antisemitism, ignorance and bigotry,’ as well as the ways in which social media had become ‘fertile ground for hate and prejudice.’ It defined Holocaust distortion as the significant and deliberate misrepresentation of its historical facts, including gross underestimation of victims; inflated numbers of helpers and rescuers; and omission of overlooking difficult parts of a country’s own national history, for example downplaying the role of collaborators and the widespread complicity of many ordinary people in the genocide.¹⁵

The report argued that ‘Holocaust denial and distortion can prevent society from reckoning with its past ... It is insulting to the victims and survivors of the Holocaust, and risks the rehabilitation of violent, antisemitic ideologies.’ It found that nearly one in five of all Holocaust-related public Twitter (now X) content during the period of study either denied or distorted history.¹⁶

Expressions of Holocaust distortion online are numerous and varied, and the UNESCO report identified a typology of distorting social media posts based upon the *IHRA Working Definition of Holocaust Denial and Distortion*: celebrating (statements that cast the Holocaust as a positive event), blaming (accusing Jews of causing their own genocide), delegitimizing (depicting Israel as a Nazi state), smearing (accusing Jews of seeking to benefit from the Holocaust), equating (equating the Holocaust to another event without regard to the integrity of the historical past) and omitting (distortions which omit aspects of the Holocaust too difficult to bear because their conflict with a sense of identity).¹⁷

Further below, this paper identifies a form of distortion that does not conform to any of these six types. Neither does it conform to any of the five types listed by IHRA in its working definition of Holocaust distortion, which refers, inter alia, to minimization of the number of victims in contradiction to reliable sources. This additional form of Holocaust distortion is, as I discuss below, not an effort to minimize the number of dead, but an effort to *increase* the number, but by a potentially plausible amount rather than through reference to the so-called ‘6 gorillion deaths’ in the Holocaust, where ‘million’ is replaced with the nonsensical word ‘gorillion’ to imply that the number of deaths is wildly exaggerated by the Jews.¹⁸ Inflation of the numbers of the dead by a ‘plausible’ amount is discussed in the case study of Alderney below.

Examples of Schrödinger’s mass graves

Below, I explore four case studies, giving us an overview of how Schrödinger’s mass graves are created in each case, and how they have played their part in Holocaust distortion. They provide a range of different actors in this arena, ranging from the antisemitic and far right through to those who facilitate the creation of Schrödinger’s mass graves through silence, and give an insight into those who may believe that they are acting in good faith, but who nonetheless are in some way hijacking the dead for their own ends, undermining the truth, and engaging in Holocaust distortion. Beginning with examples of Schrödinger’s mass graves in Jedwabne in Poland, Jasenovac in Croatia and Kaunas in Lithuania, sites I have visited on fieldwork over the last few years, I discuss how the dead at these sites have been contested, disputed, hijacked and erased in various ways by political forces and even the church in collusion with segments of

society. My fourth case study, in which I have played an active research role, considers Alderney in the Channel Islands, and how the dead in a former cemetery and mass graves on Longis Common in this small island have been hijacked, not by grand forces or political parties, but by a small group of individuals who have sought to challenge the work of experts for their own ends.

Jedwabne, Poland

The July 1941 pogroms at the Polish village of Jedwabne and others in the area were made known to a wider audience after the 2000 publication in Polish of Jan Gross' book *Neighbors*. Here, he presented clear evidence that the pogrom against the Polish Jews in the village had been carried out by their non-Jewish Polish neighbors, during which 1600 were murdered. This book caused a furore locally and nationally, with an assertion by Poles that the pogrom was actually carried out by the Nazis. The furore has not faded since the book's publication and seems to have only grown stronger.¹⁹ Gross claimed that the collective confusion over the identity of the perpetrators was 'due largely to the efforts of a posse of right-wing journalists cum historians who authored dozens of articles and several book-length publications.' Reading these texts made him feel like he was 'wading through a pool of dirty water, as if their authors did not understand what human tragedy they were talking about in a tone of sarcasm or ridicule.'²⁰ Had he been commenting on the reception of his book twenty years later, the 'pool of dirty water' would undoubtedly have been on social media, and a lot dirtier.

When I visited Jedwabne in 2025 on the anniversary of the events of 1941, large crowds had gathered in two locations: at the mass grave and at the site of a new rival memorial promoting a revisionist history of the pogrom. Red and white Polish flags were being carried by many in the crowd; people also clustered around book stalls selling revisionist books, and an outdoor cinema showed a full-volume documentary that argued that the Jews had not been killed by their Polish neighbors.

The new memorial boasted seven large stone boulders, on the front of which metal plates were screwed, each engraved with extensive text in Polish and English which made statements such as how Jews denounced 'Polish patriots who were then deported and murdered,' how Germans murdered Jews in Jedwabne, and how 'the final step that changed the way Polish history and identity was perceived was the globally promoted book by Jan Tomasz Gross, *Neighbors*, about the 'Polish crime' in Jedwabne, presented as a symbol of alleged Polish Nazism. A chance to challenge this false narrative came with the exhumation that began in 2001, but under pressure from Jewish groups, it was halted and never completed – until now.²¹ As Gross explained in the postscript of a later version of his book, Poland's Institute of National Memory (IPN) demanded an investigation that included exhumation of the mass grave. It was completed in just five days in June 2001, and the archaeologists uncovered the grave to the level where they reached the bones.²² 'The procedure was cut short in deference to the demands of religious Jews in Poland and Israel, who were against disturbing the remains of the dead' wrote Gross, and the excavation, such as it was, 'was also the source of a hastily produced estimate of "300–400" victims allegedly being buried in the mass grave.'²³ This number has been 'taken up now, entirely in bad faith, by extreme right-wing xenophobes who argue that the IPN

investigation was inconclusive, indeed wrong, and Poles would be exonerated had the exhumations not been interrupted at the request of Jews.²⁴

On that commemorative day when I was in Jedwabne, I approached the mass grave around which people were waiting for the ceremony to begin. I passed people standing against the low wall marking the site of the barn in which Jews were burned, and now demarcating the mass grave. They held up a banner which stated ‘We demand exhumation!!! We demand the truth!!!’ Another large banner proclaimed, ‘Enough of Jewish lies.’ (Figure 1)

The area of the mass grave itself comprised low-lying bushes and a memorial stela, around which people stood. Agitators mingled with those who had come to remember the dead. Protestors leant against the stone wall, shouted their slogans and held Polish flags and banners which read ‘Complete the exhumation. Stop the slander of pseudo-historians against Poles’ and ‘I am not sorry for Jedwabne. Let the perpetrators apologize. We want truth = exhumation.’ There was no respect or silence for the occasion.

When the Chief Rabbi of Poland, Michael Schudrich, arrived to lead the service, the protestors shouted louder. Police were present to maintain order. Schudrich was jostled afterwards as he led the crowd a short distance to the village’s Jewish cemetery for more prayers. Notorious far right politician Gzregorz Brown also showed up to make his presence felt and to drown out Michael Schudrich’s prayers, emboldening some in the crowd to shout ‘Michael Schudrich is a liar!’

At this site, the far right was present in force not just to question the historical truth, but to demand that it be revised to proclaim different perpetrators and different numbers of the dead. While the location of the mass grave was not challenged, the numbers killed and the identity of the perpetrators certainly were. Neither the location nor the dead were



Figure 1. The mass grave at Jedwabne. Copyright Gilly Carr, 2025.

treated with respect, and the work of the agitators has confirmed Jedwabne as a site of a Schrödinger's mass grave par excellence.

Kaunas, Lithuania

In 2023, I visited Kaunas on fieldwork with colleagues during research for the creation of the IHRA Charter. The city of Kaunas is ringed by a series of nineteenth century forts which were reused during the Second World War as killing sites and mass graves. The killings were carried out by Lithuanian armed military units, alongside the Nazis. At some of the forts, bodies were disinterred and cremated later in the war, with the ashes scattered over the area, meaning that the mass graves were now no longer bounded locations and sometimes unmarked, even if the original location of graves had been determined by geophysical survey.

Inside the Fourth Fort, we learned from an information board that, during the Second World War, it was 'used as a place for mass massacre of peaceful residents'; the rest of the information focused on the nineteenth century use of the fortress. Here, the location of the executions and mass grave were not marked, and neither the identity of the victims nor perpetrators was given.

At the Seventh Fort, information boards at the site stated that, as time passed after the war, the location of the mass grave was lost and the fort was filled with garbage. The site was tidied up in 2009 after it was sold to a non-profit organization of history enthusiasts, and human remains were accidentally discovered in 2010 during reconstruction work on the fort. In 2017, the suspected mass grave was investigated by an international team of archaeologists, who used GPR to successfully identify the area of the grave to protect the site from further disturbance.²⁵

A memorial stone in the shape of a Star of David was placed in the fort in 2016, presumably on the area of the mass grave. The number of those killed was not recorded at the time of the massacre and so no records exist to show their names, although the number is given on the information boards as 'no less than 3,000,' although 5,000 is also quoted in the adjacent museum inside the fort and in the *Holocaust Atlas of Lithuania* website. The perpetrators were not named on the memorial nor at the site of the mass grave; they were in fact the SS's Lithuanian auxiliaries.²⁶

At the Ninth Fort, the main Holocaust heritage site in the city, Lithuanian Jews, as well as Jews from Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, France, the USSR and Germany were murdered. When viewed in 2023, the museum exhibition stated that 'it is impossible to indicate a specific number of the people killed in the Ninth Fort and to mention all their names and surnames.' Despite this, names of 1344 people have been traced and listed in the exhibition, along with objects recovered from the mass grave such as pencils, combs, a shaving brush, a pipe, buttons, belt buckles – and bullets. Such items are also on display in the Seventh Fort and can be seen as 'evidential traces,'²⁷ relics of once living people, and proof that they were killed there.

Those murdered at the Ninth Fort were exhumed from mass graves in the Autumn of 1943, burned on large pyres, and their ashes and other remains spread across the area in the hope of covering up the evidence of the executions.²⁸ At the site of the mass grave at the time of my visit, there was no boundary marker showing the extent of the execution trenches, nor information about the area of scattered ashes, nor signs telling people to

keep off the grass. Instead, there was a line of memorial plaques along the edge of the grass dedicated, variously, to ‘victims of fascism,’ Soviet soldiers, and Jews from various nations and regions. An old sign still exists on the side of a crumbling fort wall, next to a ditch, stating that ‘near this wall Nazis shot and burned people in 1943 and 1944.’ Different memorial plaques give different numbers: one in Lithuanian, Russian and English commemorated ‘50,000 Russians, Jews, Lithuanians and others killed by the Nazis.’ Another listed 30,000 foreign Jews killed by ‘Nazis and their assistants’; another named the perpetrators as ‘the SS, German Sicherheitspolizei and their willing helpers.’

During my visit, I witnessed children playing on the grass (Figure 2), a parent pushing a baby in a buggy over the site, people jogging, dog walking and posing for a fashion shoot. It seemed unlikely that they knew that they were carrying on their daily life on top of an ash field. As far as any visitor could see, there was no longer anything there but memorials. The silence surrounding Lithuanian collaboration, which is a common feature in Lithuanian memorial culture,²⁹ has been complicit in the creation of this Schrödinger’s mass grave.

Jasenovac, Croatia

My third case study concerns the former concentration camp of Jasenovac, which operated from July 1941 to 1945, and at which the majority of the victims were Serbs, Roma



Figure 2. The ash field at the Ninth Fort, Kaunas. Copyright Gilly Carr, 2023.

and Jews, in that order. Jasenovac is recognized by the Serbs as a site of Serbian genocide at the hands of the Nazi-collaborating, pro-Fascist Ustaša movement in the Independent State of Croatia. During Slobodan Milošević's regime, his supporters 'endeavored to legitimise their territorial aspirations in Croatia and Bosnia through the claim that there is a direct link between the genocidal policies of the Ustashi regime and the actions of the newly created Republic of Croatia,' according to Jovan Byford.³⁰

The camp buildings of Jasenovac were demolished soon after the end of the Second World War, and the rubble of the camp was used by local residents to build new houses. Only in the 1960s did the site become a landscaped memorial,³¹ with graves marked by symbolic mounds.

Having visited Jasenovac Memorial on IHRA business twice in 2024, my eye was caught by a rather extraordinary Facebook post of a Serbian colleague. In September 2024, he had attended a Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) religious service dedicated to the Holy New Martyrs of Jasenovac. The 'New Serbian Martyrs' were a group of Serbian victims of Jasenovac who were canonized by the SOC in 2000.³² The ceremony, as far as I could see from the photograph, involved a group of bishops surrounded by many people, all standing on a symbolic burial mound, their hands on the shoulders of the person standing in front of them. On enquiring what was happening, I was informed that some years ago, the monks of the monastery in Jasenovac had found some bones on a mass grave in Donja Gradina, a killing site which was part of the camp but on the other side of the Sava River and now in Bosnia's Serb-dominated Republika Srpska entity. The monks had given the bones to Serbian Orthodox Bishop Jovan of Pakrac and Slavonia, who had reburied them in Jasenovac at the top of one of the symbolic mass graves. Since then, there had been an annual Serbian Orthodox service at this site, and the faithful had joined in to offer prayers.

Jovan Byford has explored the role of the Jasenovac Committee of the Synod of Bishops of the SOC, an institution involved in Holocaust memorialization in Serbia and Republika Srpska. The SOC is, he explained, one of the most influential institutions in Serbian society, a 'custodian of the nation's values and traditions and a key interpreter of its past' with strong links to the state.³³ Byford further explains that the three victim groups of 'Serbs, Jews and Roma' are taken as a triad of common suffering, their bones mixed together in mass graves, and with Jewish victimhood invoked only with and in relation to the history of Serbian martyrdom at Jasenovac. As Jovan points out, 'the claim about the equivalence between the fate of Serbs and Jews can only stand if the Jewish suffering is removed from the overall 'context' of the Holocaust. The perceived similarity between the victimhood of the two peoples requires the totality of the Holocaust and the historical specificity of its unique murderous dynamic to be sidelined.'³⁴ In Byford's view, the 'comparative memorialization of Serbian and Jewish history consistently undermines the distinctiveness and exceptionality of the Holocaust.'³⁵

My Serbian colleague explained to me that there while there was no assumption that the discovered bones were of a Serbian victim (they could have been Roma or Jewish), they were treated as symbolic of all victims – except, of course, that they had been co-opted by the SOC at this site. Because the site of Jasenovac is seen by the Serbs as a place of Serbian genocide, the number of Serbian dead at the site is a matter of great controversy (or 'prone to relentless manipulation,' as Goldstein puts it³⁶), with Croatian nationalists and revisionists minimizing the number of the dead, while Serbian

nationalists and revisionists continue to exaggerate the number.³⁷ At Donja Gradina, where many mass graves are located, large signs proclaim that 500,000 Serbs out of a total of 700,000 victims died at the site, figures repeated at the ceremony captured on Facebook by the President of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik.³⁸ (Figure 3)

Serb sources have continued to offer much higher estimates than the Jasenovac memorial site, and such high numbers have been repeated by Serbians since 1946, apparently originating from the death toll Yugoslavia reported to the Paris-based international commission for reparations in 1946, a figure later used as a basis for German reparations to Yugoslavia.³⁹ According to Goldstein, in the years after the war, ‘the number of 700,000 victims at Jasenovac, an eightfold increase of the actual number of victims, was sacrosanct and protected by the Yugoslav government until the end of the 1980s. No-one dare touch this number, not even to reexamine it through expert authentication ... [and] the inflated number of the victims of Jasenovac developed in time into the object of a malevolent polemic that dangerously poisoned interethnic relations in the former Yugoslavia.’⁴⁰ Rob van der Laarse agrees: ‘the discrepancy [in numbers] shows, in a nutshell, the poisoning combination of fragmentation, trivialization and relativization of war crimes produced by the explosive creation of new states from the former Yugoslavia, all of which are nationalizing, narrowing, ordering and purifying their ethnicised memory cultures.’⁴¹

In the museum at the memorial site of Jasenovac, the number of 46,685 Serbian victims (now 47,627) is given out of a total minimum number of stated dead of



Figure 3. Signs at Donja Gradina proclaiming the number of the dead. Copyright Gilly Carr, 2013.

81,998, a number which, since the exhibition was created, has increased to 83,145, according to the Memorial website. These calculations are based on lists of names, which of course show minimum – but reliable – numbers. This figure is not final, but Jasenovac Memorial believes that the total death toll is between 80,000 and 100,000 people.⁴² The museum exhibition at the Memorial explains that the figure of 700,000 was an outcome of ‘using Jasenovac for political purposes.’ Such political purposes – namely to reinforce the argument for a Serbian genocide – are still employed, but unfortunately such inflation of numbers for political purposes turns the mass graves at the site into Schrödinger’s mass graves, and attention becomes focused on the number war rather than the dead themselves.

Alderney, channel islands

Alderney is a tiny island of 3.5 miles long and 1.5 miles wide, with a population of around 2,000 people, and is the fourth largest of the British Channel Islands, all of which were occupied in WWII. The local population evacuated days before Nazi forces arrived, who then built multiple camps to which nearly 8,000 slave, forced and volunteer laborers were brought from nearly 30 different countries, and at least c.1,000 died.⁴³ The detractors in this case study are those who have operated in traditional print media and more toxically on social media, claiming prisoner and death numbers of an order of magnitude higher – a particular form of Holocaust distortion that receives further analysis below.

Alderney has been periodically in the spotlight in the UK news over the last decade because of discussions of the number of the dead, and mostly in ways that have created and then cumulatively reinforced the status of Schrödinger’s mass grave in the island. The size of the workforce brought to Alderney and the number who died was first discussed by Theodore Pantcheff, a war crimes investigator from British intelligence, who wrote reports on his findings (now held in The National Archives) and, decades later, in his book.⁴⁴

In May 1945, Pantcheff, along with British liberating soldiers, found a cemetery on Longis Common, with graves marked by wooden crosses (Figure 4). When discussing the number of dead in his book, he stated that ‘we may not with confidence be too mathematically precise ... but certain minimum conclusions can be safely made’ that ‘at least 389 died, 329 buried in the ‘Russian’ cemetery [on Longis Common] and 60 in the parish churchyard. This was out of a workforce which in its peak period, though not throughout, will have totaled over 3000.’⁴⁵ Pantcheff’s numbers of the dead came from the 1961 exhumations by the German War Graves Commission (*Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge*), who exhumed the bodies from the former cemetery on Longis Common and from a designated cemetery in St Anne’s churchyard, giving a total of 389 bodies, which were then moved to the Mont de Huisnes German war cemetery in France. This number stood as the official death toll of slave and forced laborers.

Charles Cruikshank repeated Pantcheff’s figures in his 1975 official history of the German occupation of the Channel Islands.⁴⁶ An outlier at this time was Israeli journalist and historian Solomon Steckoll, who in his 1982 book, *The Alderney Death Camp*, argued that around 4,000 people died in Alderney.⁴⁷ This was based upon ‘estimates’ by the Society of Former Prisoners of Alderney that, in Norderney, Borkum and Helgoland camps,



Figure 4. Longis Common in Alderney. Copyright Gilly Carr.

3000 Russians and 220 Jews and North Africans perished. At least 750 Sylt [camp] prisoners died or were put to death. I base this figure partly on evidence provided by the International Red Cross, who told me that at the time of the evacuation in June 1944 there were fewer than 500 survivors in Sylt as compared to over a thousand a year before ... To these figures must be added 200–250 French Jews who died on the night of 3–4 July 1944, when the ship on which they were being transported to the Continent was attacked by the Royal Navy.⁴⁸

We are not told the basis of the ‘estimates’ provided by the Society of Former Prisoners of Alderney, and neither does Steckoll allow for transports out of Alderney of Sylt prisoners before June 1944, which we know took place. His numbers no longer bear close scrutiny based on the sources of evidence available now. In any case, Steckoll’s claims have never been taken seriously by the mainstream, not least because his book was considered sensationalist and at odds with Pantcheff’s numbers.

Pantcheff’s figures were not questioned again until a generation later, when, in *The Model Occupation*, journalist Madeleine Bunting estimated that ‘at least 5,000 slave laborers were on Alderney between 1941 and 1944,’ and stated that ‘the rough consensus is that between twenty and twenty-five percent of the OT slave workers and SS prisoners on Alderney died, making a final death toll between 1000 and 1250 on this one island.’⁴⁹ It is worth noting that although Bunting made rough rather than exhaustive calculations, her figures were close to the mark.

In 2005, historian Paul Sanders considered that ‘the number of deaths in Sylt [camp] is almost as inscrutable a topic as the number of total deaths in Alderney’ (2005, 199), but

cited a peak work force of ‘around 4,000,’⁵⁰ and numbers of the dead as ‘a minimum of 750, perhaps even 1,000.’⁵¹ While Pantcheff’s numbers of the dead had effectively been tripled following the release of wartime records in The National Archives (which Bunting had seen in the state archives in Moscow and Sanders had seen in London), these records had not changed the number of dead by an order of magnitude, and conformed closely to more recent calculations.

Into this fairly uncontroversial backdrop of historical discussion of numbers came the FABLink project in 2016, which sought to build an underground electricity cable between France, Alderney and Britain. The cable would span Alderney and potentially cut through Longis Common, the site of a former cemetery of foreign laborers, and where bodies may still be buried in mass graves, as discussed below.

The FABLink project was highly controversial and triggered a tsunami of media articles. The past was reawakened by the threat of disturbing the former cemetery, sparking questions about how many bodies may or may not be there, what nationality they were, and whether they were Jewish. It acted as a ‘memory event’ of a past that had been selectively remembered in Alderney.⁵² The Occupation memory in Alderney has not dwelt in the sites of the concentration camp and slave labor camps, which have not been treated as heritage sites. Nor has it been one in which any mass grave was considered to still exist. Rather, for people in Alderney, their wartime experience was one in which they left the island with little notice as evacuees in 1940 to spend the war years in the UK, returning in December 1945 to find their island devastated. Slave and forced laborers once returned for annual ceremonies to honor their dead comrades; this took place at the Hammond Memorial, built by a local family in the 1960s to laborers of all nationalities, but not placed in an authentic site of memory. People in Alderney were (and are) aware that terrible things happened in their island in their absence, but memory has resided in their imagination and in the heads of the visiting former prisoners. It has not resided in the authentic sites – until, that is, the FABLink project threatened to unearth a site that nobody wanted to face.

There had been some minor rumblings in the island in 2015 triggered by the work of Caroline Sturdy Colls, who had called for the remaining traces of SS Lager Sylt in Alderney to be placed on the register of historic buildings to protect it from development (quoted on *BBC Guernsey* website, 10 March 2015). Also that year, she published the monograph of her doctoral thesis, *Holocaust Archaeologies*, in which she discussed how she used resistance survey to relocate the cemetery and two potential mass graves on Longis Common,⁵³ and argued that the cemetery found by liberating soldiers and war crimes investigators had been a ‘show cemetery,’ the boundaries of which did not incorporate all graves.⁵⁴

The death toll and number of forced and slave laborers brought to Alderney quickly became the focus of speculation in the media. In a series of articles in May 2017 for the British tabloid newspaper *The Daily Mail*, military men Richard Kemp and Alderney resident John Weigold claimed that they had ‘uncovered incontrovertible evidence’ that Alderney was used to construct a launcher site for V1 missiles armed with chemical warheads, likely containing nerve gas Sarin. Further, they suggested that ‘at least 40,000 [people] and possibly many, many more’ had ‘lost their lives in the most brutal way,’ ‘helping Hitler and his henchmen pursue their evil master-plan.’⁵⁵ They dismissed Steckoll’s figure of 4,000 dead as ‘hokum’ and a ‘historic lie,’ and, using a calculation based on

the volume of concrete and extent of the fortifications in Alderney, claimed that between 40,000 and 70,000 died.⁵⁶

A local historian in Alderney was quoted on the BBC Guernsey news website for May 9, 2017, as saying that these figures were ‘utter nonsense,’ a sentiment shared by many at the time. However, the director of Northamptonshire-based Jewish travel company *JTrails*, Marcus Roberts, aligned himself with these numbers. On the ‘Alderney Holocaust and Slave Labor Trail’ on the *JTrails* website, he wrote that ‘Weigold and Kemp are now arguing even higher numbers of up to 70,000 which could ... have justification. I would favor a figure of some 40,000.’ He was quoted on the BBC Guernsey news website on October 20, 2017, as claiming that ‘about 10,000’ French Jews were among the forced laborers in Alderney. Interviewed in *The Times of Israel*, Roberts was quoted as saying that ‘the bodies of nearly 2,000 prisoners – and potentially many more – may remain at Longis Common,’ and that ‘the prisoner workforce probably exceeded 30,000’ and that ‘9,000 may be a more realistic figure’ for the number of Jews present.⁵⁷ Other journalists got involved in the discussion: in his article on the FABLink project, Gabriel Poggrund referred in the *Sunday Times* to ‘up to 40,000 Russian, French and Jewish slave laborers’ who had been murdered in Alderney.⁵⁸ Although these numbers invariably sold newspapers, they were not substantiated in the archival records.

By 2019, the speculation over what happened in Alderney was not abating. Sturdy Colls’ Smithsonian Channel documentary *Adolf Island* was released three years before her 2022 book of the same name. In the documentary, Sturdy Colls revealed survey results of the area of the former cemetery on Longis Common. She demonstrated that there were very likely mass graves present which could still contain bodies. She calculated that at least 700 people were likely to have died. The documentary was met with damaging allegations made by Marcus Roberts about her work and motives, none of which were upheld by her university.⁵⁹

In the 2022 book, Caroline Sturdy Colls and Kevin Colls provided forensic examination of archival records relating to Alderney coupled with non-invasive survey. They revealed that providing identities and the number of the dead was a complex if not now impossible task, complicated by missing, incomplete or scattered records across European archives, and the destruction of records by the occupiers. However, their work built on earlier studies, brought together extant sources, added newly released records, and sourced new archival material from Russia and Ukraine. They also created a new list of the dead by name. Such a task was far from easy, made harder by the transliteration of names from the Cyrillic. This, coupled with wartime misspellings and problems with partial and contradictory records, often leave the researcher unable to decide with confidence whether two similar names represent one person or two. The difficult situation is intensified by the thousands of names of prisoners from across Europe to contend with. Prisoner numbers and death tolls supplemented by eye-witness accounts means that any count of the total number of prisoners or the dead cannot be given as a precise number and can only be given as a range. A list of the dead by name is important in providing a minimum number of the dead and helps to guard against exaggerated numbers which lack any sure foundation. Sturdy Colls and Colls found that ‘the *minimum* number of deaths on Alderney needed to be revised to a figure of between 701 and 986 deaths.’⁶⁰ While a range as opposed to a specific number is understood and even expected by a specialist academic audience,

the same cannot be said for a popular audience, for whom a range might provide ready space for potential exploitation.

Focusing on Longis Common, we see that, to British investigators arriving in 1945, the cemetery was fenced off and appeared organized, with graves in neat rows. Sturdy Colls and Colls show that closer inspection of reports and images reveal that the cemetery was in fact haphazard in nature and even chaotic, with the bodies of eight Jews buried separately to the south side.⁶¹ Examination of a series of wartime aerial photographs revealed additional areas of disturbed ground both within and outside the area of the cemetery. When coupled with geophysical survey, Sturdy Colls and Colls suggest that some ‘human remains are still in situ,’ but that ‘excavation of the cemetery would be the only way to confirm whether human remains still exist.’⁶²

Media intrusion continued for the people of Alderney.⁶³ Journalist Guy Walters reported on what he referred to as the ‘battle for Alderney’s wartime past,’ observing that,

this is an island that is involved in the most extraordinarily bitter fight between residents, historians, and politicians, concerning exactly what happened there during the Second World War when the Nazis occupied it from 1940 to 1945 ... And the fight is not only between residents and historians, but it is also pitting resident against resident and historian against historian. In short, it would be fair to say it is an island once more at war.⁶⁴

Walters also noted that there was ‘much heat’ between Marcus Roberts and Caroline Sturdy Colls, and that the meticulous and detailed calculations based on archival records, prisoner statements and archaeological research provided in *Adolf Island* gave figures that are ‘hotly disputed’ by Roberts. Roberts implied that Sturdy Colls was deliberately undercounting the numbers of the dead, claiming that ‘What [she] won’t do is to come out and say that thousands died. This restrictive metric of counting is a form of unwitting Holocaust denial. And in certain Eastern European countries this means of counting is used to deny the Holocaust.’⁶⁵

Walters revealed Roberts’ method of counting, quoting him as saying that ‘If the standing labor force was between 4,000 and 7,000, over the three-year period – with slaves replaced as they died – there would therefore have been at least 2,000–3,500 Jews present at any one time. Over the occupation, some 6,000–9,000 Jews would probably have passed through the camps – and with an average 83% death rate – then it is quite possible that around 5,000 Jews are likely to have perished on Alderney.’⁶⁶ This method of counting is based on multiple assumptions about the standing labor force, replacement rates, the number of Jews present and the death rate, and has no archival basis.

Resolution for Alderney was becoming increasingly important, and the press intrusion for local people was becoming intolerable. In response, in July 2023, Lord Eric Pickles, who at the time was the UK’s post-Holocaust issues special envoy, announced a review into the number of people brought to Alderney during WWII as slave, forced, conscripted and volunteer laborers, and the number of people who died. At the launch of the review, he was quoted in a government press release of July 27, 2023, as saying:

Numbers matter because the truth matters. The dead deserve the dignity of the truth; the residents of Alderney deserve accurate numbers to free them from the distortion of conspiracy theorists. Exaggerating the numbers of the dead, or even minimising them, is in itself a

form of Holocaust distortion and a critical threat to Holocaust memory and to fostering a world without genocide ... I hope this review will put to rest conspiracy theories on numbers and provide lasting dignity to the dead and some peace to the residents of Alderney.

The Lord Pickles Alderney Expert Review (hereafter LPAER) panel comprised 13 experts, including the author (who coordinated the Review), from different international universities and organizations, appointed for their extensive prior experience and expertise either in the German occupation of the Channel Islands and relevant archives, and / or archives relevant to the prisoners and laborers brought to Alderney, and / or the Holocaust. The panel had extensive collections of relevant records from their previous decades of research, and they recruited additional researchers tasked with collecting records from various European archives for the team to study, as well as seeking further records from UK and Channel Islands' archives.

As the LPAER team began work, Marcus Roberts' numbers continued to plummet. He was quoted by journalist Martin Bright as claiming that 'between 15,000 and 30,000 people died on the island, with at least 1,000 being Jewish.'⁶⁷ This very broad range, this time of lower figures, continued to hint at an absence of methodology for making calculations.

In May 2024, the LPAER panel published their final report.⁶⁸ In the foreword, Lord Pickles wrote:

Unlike the other Channel Islands, Alderney was evacuated of most of its residents. Alderney, therefore, does not have the record of occupation that Jersey or Guernsey has. This led to an assumption by the unscrupulous and the careless that Alderney was a plain canvas on which any fantasy could be painted. Claims of mass murder that anywhere else would be checked carefully have been accepted at face value ... Third- or fourth-hand testimonies of atrocities, without any supporting evidence, are given as a fact. Anyone having the temerity to question such assertions is accused of being part of a 'cover-up' ... As the UK's Special Envoy on Post Holocaust Issues, I have encountered many arguments over numbers. Nothing compares to the virulence or personal nature of arguments over numbers in Alderney. At a time when parts of Europe are seeking to rinse their history through the Holocaust, the British Isles must tell the unvarnished truth.⁶⁹

The LPAER panel found that a total of 7,608–7,812 people were brought to Alderney over the course of the occupation,⁷⁰ and that the number of deaths in the island was unlikely to have exceeded 1,134 people, with a more likely range of between 641 and 1,027.⁷¹ While there is no suggestion that every single of these people had been buried in Longis Common, the assumption is that some of them may have been and may yet still be there.

The review's findings were welcomed by the UK's Chief Rabbi, Ephraim Mirvis, who was quoted in the *Guardian* as saying that 'Having an authoritative account of this harrowing element of the island's history is vital. It enables us to accurately remember the individuals who so tragically suffered and died on British soil. Marking the relevant sites will now be an appropriate step to take to ensure that this information is widely available.'⁷² The results were also warmly welcomed by the Alderney and Guernsey governments. And yet, eighteen months on (at the time of writing) from the report's launch, social media harassment and cyber-bullying surrounding the findings of the LPAER panel, by some of the men identified and interviewed by many of the journalists cited above, continues almost as fervently as it has since the review's launch in 2023.

Discussion

The four case studies considered in this article have revealed a range of different actors with different motives who have created Schrödinger's mass graves through their actions. While far-right nationalists and antisemites in Poland are rejecting the stain on their country's honor, in Lithuania, the silence can be attributed to shame at collaboration with the Nazis. The role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in promoting the case for Serbian victimhood and genocide has come at the expense of the particular Jewish experience in the Holocaust, as discussed. But what is the motive for claiming a wartime version of Alderney where ten times as many people were brought to the island and died? Several suggestions can be posited, such as attention-seeking, ego, narcissism, increasing the number of social media followers, or some sense of achieving 'one-upmanship' on the experts. One might also propose that Alderney is a very tiny outlier when it comes to the Holocaust and has hitherto occupied barely a footnote in history. By making claims that cannot be supported archivally, those invested in the island and its history are seeking the spotlight, wishing to be perceived as part of something big and 'important.' It is noticeable, for example, that they have been particularly keen to claim the title of 'little Auschwitz' for what happened in the island, as can be seen by the titles chosen by some journalists.⁷³ This has been shown to be a false claim,⁷⁴ but their invocation of what is arguably the most well-known site of the Holocaust in Europe is telling. Sometimes disputes can become personal, the result of grudges, professional jealousy, or misogyny,⁷⁵ and the impact of this can go way beyond the small number of individuals involved because of the subject matter. The victims soon become forgotten and are the first casualty of online flame wars.

The players in this game often see things differently. They do not see their beliefs as distorting the facts. In fact, they often assert, as they have on social media in the case of Alderney, that it is 'the experts' who are lying, colluding with governments, deliberately distorting their research to sell more books, or to receive some kind of financial reward for their 'lies.' Whether they honestly believe such assertions is unclear, but if we give them the benefit of the doubt, what lies behind these false beliefs?

One of the issues that lies at the heart of what we might describe as 'alternative views' (perhaps akin to 'alternative facts') is archival research, how to carry it out properly, and how to count the dead. To be sure, such calculations, whether of the dead or of a prisoner population, especially if internationally diverse, is a difficult task, and not something that a scholar would likely calculate for themselves for the first time until conducting graduate level research. Such calculations do not adhere to any set methodology or rule book, and are done in different ways in different places, depending on the sources available. It draws on records as diverse as population census data and oral testimony, on transport and ration lists, on war crimes interviews and employment lists, on names found in prisoner graffiti at forced labor sites, and in lists from survivor associations, to give a small selection. Bringing these together is lengthy, difficult and skilled work, requiring source criticism, a detailed knowledge of the trajectory of prisoners or victims, both into and away from a site, and how to trace those trajectories. It means understanding the relative weighting and value to give to contemporary eye-witness interviews versus the memory of those interviewed many years later. It involves understanding that a survivor may not have had a panoptical overview of the prisoner population, even within their

own cohort. It also means questioning how an eye-witness knew what they knew, not accepting information at face value, and not being afraid to question testimonies that might otherwise be viewed as ‘sacrosanct.’ It also involves an understanding that, when calculating lists of the dead at a particular site (assuming that one is not exhuming those in a mass grave and counting bodies), a reliable method is to create a list of names, which will result in a minimum established number, which may not be a final count. It also involves understanding that not all documents survive, that some have disappeared from the archives, and that access to archives can be denied. This finds resonance with Dziuban’s reading of Yael Navaro’s ‘negative methodology,’ which is sensitive to ‘the need to acknowledge the curtailments encountered in the research on mass political violence’ and its aftermath, and to remain ‘attentive to the (im)possibilities and constraints that result as much from destruction ... and erasure inherent to the dynamics of any violent conflict ...’⁷⁶ Crucially, the acknowledgement of ‘curtailments’ in research in the form of missing files involves understanding that this is beyond the control of experts, who are not colluding in a conspiracy to hide the truth.

In short, making such calculations is highly specialized and unlikely to be done with success by someone without a great deal of experience and training, not to mention access to international archives, a knowledge of how to use the records, and an understanding of what kinds of records to look at from where, and how. It is perhaps not surprising that those who do not have such training and expertise do not make accurate calculations. It is equally understandable that resentment might be felt towards those with these skills and expertise. Knowledge is, in this situation, power.

Given the difficult task of archival research and calculations, the advantages of finding other (faster) methods are clear. In the absence of a quick and easy rule book on ‘how to do it properly,’ the appeal of short cuts, of reliance on gut feelings, and of drawing on alternative expertise already possessed, are obvious, even if the precise *modus operandi* and sums are not made public. There can be other perhaps more honest mistakes based on what might (at first glance) appear ‘legitimate’ or ‘reasonable’ methods in making rival calculations. Perhaps taking the death rate of Auschwitz (or a well-known site of choice) and applying it to your site might work? Or what about considering the relative size of your site compared with a well-known site and working out the number of dead that way? Can we really call such people ‘bad actors’ when they operate in apparently good faith? Are they Holocaust distorters? Perhaps not in their intention, but how we classify them can *also* depend on how they operate. We cannot expect members of the public to know *how* to do the work of experts, but it seems that, these days, it can be difficult to encourage members of the public to even *believe* the work of experts, and this can be at least partially due to those with ‘alternative views’ who have made ‘alternative calculations,’ and how they go about disseminating these views and challenging the work of experts.

Questions which establish whether such operators are genuinely acting in good faith might include:

- How do such operators behave on social media? Do they, for example, undermine, misrepresent and belittle the reputations of experts and their calculations?
- After the publication of careful calculations and sources of evidence from experts, do they continue to question and undermine acceptance of those calculations in the eyes of the public?

- Do they publish their own calculations and sources of evidence in a systematic and verifiable way, sharing calculations with experts for checking?

We can, therefore, suggest a spectrum of operators when it comes to Holocaust distortion. On one side are bad faith actors whose motives are clear: antisemites, nationalists and far-right activists. As we travel along the spectrum, we might encounter those who, on the face of it, might plausibly be seen by some as good faith actors, because of their apparently sincere belief in flawed calculations and uncritical use of (sometimes illegitimate) sources. And yet, when we observe their modus operandi, the ‘good faith’ mask slips. Such claims cannot be maintained if their actions are judged against the list of questions above and found wanting. The actions of such operators also have consequences, as IHRA has outlined in its #ProtectTheFacts social media campaign. This campaign explained how Holocaust distortion damages democracy. ‘Like other forms of disinformation,’ explains the post, ‘Holocaust distortion creates a world where facts become debateable. When citizens cannot agree on facts, trust in public institutions starts to break down. When trust is eroded, societies can become polarized. And in these polarized societies, it is easier for hate to grow. Our best tribute to the victims and survivors of the Holocaust is to work together to create a world where we #ProtectTheFacts. The truth of the Holocaust isn’t up for debate.’ (Figure 5)

The ability to post with seeming impunity on social media platforms such as X, mean that online debates quickly descend into flame wars. Education on methodologies for calculating the dead via online posts, with restricted numbers of words per post, is not an easy or even useful strategy. Experts can quickly find themselves and their work being the subject of cyber-bullying, misrepresentation, defamation, and even activity that would be classed as against the law. This is where actors who believe they operate in good faith and with good intentions can betray their real intentions. Whether it is their intention or not, through their modus operandi they turn mass graves into Schrödinger’s mass graves.

Conclusion

Rob van der Laarse cautioned that ‘playing with the dead is never an innocent game ... human remains ... are by far the most tabooed, politicized and signified ‘evidence’ of Europe’s ‘Age of Extremes’ ... Revealing ‘hidden truths’ to people who are completely unaware of their violent pasts could easily set frozen conflicts back on fire.’⁷⁷ While the revelation of Alderney’s past is unlikely to reawaken hatred for Germans, it can certainly cause conflict between experts and other actors.

The examples discussed in this paper have clearly illustrated that one of the major threats to Holocaust sites today, in our so-called ‘post-facts’ world, can be ordinary men (and, no doubt, women) who make truth-claims, declaring that academics are part of a cover-up and are nothing more than ‘pseudo-historians.’

The UNESCO report on Holocaust distortion and denial on social media made a number of important recommendations for dealing with this problem,⁷⁸ and all of them would work well in Alderney. However, it is less clear how one deals with what journalists perceive as a ‘dispute between historians,’ which gives equal validity to unsubstantiated theories and calculations. While the UNESCO report recommends that



International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance

7,548 followers
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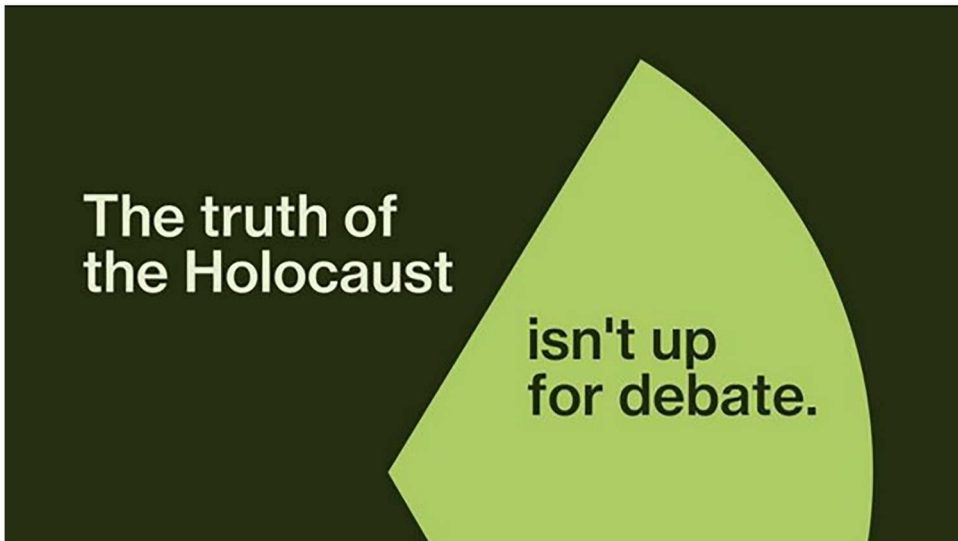


Figure 5. IHRA social media post on LinkedIn from 10 October 2025. Copyright: the IHRA.

‘Holocaust education is the best defence against denial and distortion, and it should be further integrated into the curricula,’ this does little to help those who are no longer at school. Further, the report recommends that ‘existing programs that educate people about the Holocaust should renew their efforts to develop historical literacy skills that promote critical thinking and epistemic understanding about the Holocaust, through the evaluation of historical evidence and expert analysis in cooperation with archives, museums and historians.’⁷⁹ Unfortunately, the kinds of evaluation of historical evidence necessary for calculating lists of prisoners and the dead is far more specialized than can be taught in the school classroom.

Numbers remain important; it has always been vital to make sure that we account for all victims and omit nobody. As Lord Pickles was quoted as saying at the outset of the Alderney Review, ‘numbers matter because the truth matters.’⁸⁰ A collection of names is one way to be sure that one has at least an accurate minimum count, as demonstrated at Alderney, the Ninth Fort at Kaunas, and Jasenovac. One might be forgiven for thinking that we have arrived at an impasse. If we do not have all of the names 80 years after the war, then we are not going to find them now. The LPAER showed that this assumption is incorrect and there are still records in archives across Europe being opened, discovered or collated for the first time.

At the same time, in some places, records were not even made in the first place, so nothing existed to survive or not; we do not always know whether what we are looking for exists now or ever existed. We must add to this the fact that we cannot resort to excavation as far as Jewish bodies are concerned. Excavation would not end the argument because bad actors would claim that photos (even if it was ethical to publish photos of the dead) were edited or deepfakes generated by AI. Even if we were reliably able to estimate the number of bodies in a mass grave based on its size, this situation can be greatly complicated if victims were cremated and their ashes scattered. While non-invasive survey can show the location of graves and sometimes their extent, academics know well that their work cannot always reveal a final concrete answer, and the reasons for this are highly complex and not easily able to be reduced to a single number, social media post, or documentary sound bite. We can only continue to educate using rigorous, facts-based research, and to publish our work and our methodologies. We must remember that we are working on behalf of the memory of the victims, who are always the casualty when Schrödinger’s mass graves are created.

Notes

1. The IHRA Charter For Safeguarding Sites.
2. Williams and Wetzel, “Foreword,” 11.
3. Sendyka, “Sites of Violence and their Communities.”
4. Carr and Sturdy Colls, “Taboo and Sensitive Heritage.”
5. E.g. Sturdy Colls and Colls, “Holocaust Victims, Jewish Law.”
6. Sturdy Colls, “Earth Conceal not My Blood,” 164.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 165–6.
9. Schudrich, “Jewish Law and Exhumation,” 79; Sturdy Colls, “Earth Conceal not My Blood,” 169.
10. see Deutsch, “Exhumations in Post-war Rabbinical Responsas.”
11. see the IHRA Recommendations for Archaeologists and Building Conservation Practitioners.
12. Ibid., 177.
13. Sturdy Colls, “Holocaust Victims, Jewish Law,” 27.
14. Ibid., 29.
15. UNESCO, *History Under Attack*, 22.
16. Ibid., 11–12.
17. Ibid., 18.
18. Thue, “Antisemitism in Serbia and Croatia,” 236; see also Finkelstein, Blackmer and Rubin, “Holocaust Denial on the Web,” 76–7.
19. See Polonsky and Michlic, *The Neighbours Respond*.

20. Ibid., 176.
21. Text seen on fieldwork, 10 July 2025.
22. Schudrich, "Jewish Law and Exhumation," 83.
23. Gross, *Neighbours*, 179.
24. Ibid., 180.
25. Burds et al., "Holocaust Archaeology."
26. Winstone, *The Holocaust Sites of Europe*, 320.
27. Crossland, "Of Clues and Signs."
28. Beck et al., "Searching for Nazi Mass Execution Trenches."
29. Suziedelis, "The Perception of the Holocaust."
30. Byford, "When I say 'the Holocaust', I mean 'Jasenovac,'" 58.
31. Giergiel and Taczynska, "... Everything Creaks ... Because of Water."
32. Byford, "When I say 'the Holocaust', I mean 'Jasenovac,'" 61.
33. Ibid., 56.
34. Ibid., 62.
35. Ibid., 66.
36. Goldstein, "Croatia and Yugoslavia," 95.
37. Benčić Kužnar and Pavlaković, "Exhibiting Jasenovac."
38. Vukićević, "Holy new Martyrs of Jasenovac."
39. Milekic, "Croatia's Jasenovac Death Toll."
40. Goldstein, "Croatia and Yugoslavia," 96–7.
41. Van der Laarse, "Bones Never Lie?," 152.
42. Milekic, "Croatia's Jasenovac Death Toll."
43. Sanders et al., *The Lord Pickles Alderney Expert Review*.
44. Pantcheff, *Alderney Fortress Island*.
45. Ibid., 73.
46. Cruikshank, *The German Occupation of the Channel Islands*, 213–5, n59.
47. Steckoll, *The Alderney Death Camp*, 103.
48. Ibid., 104.
49. Bunting, *The Model Occupation*, 291.
50. Sanders, "The British Channel Islands," 194.
51. Ibid., 221.
52. Etkind, "Mapping Memory Events," 4–5.
53. Sturdy Colls, *Holocaust Archaeologies*, 175–6.
54. Ibid., 252.
55. Kemp and Wiegold, "Hitler's British Death Island."
56. Kemp and Weigold, "Posing Outside Lloyd's Bank."
57. Philpott, "In Nazi-occupied Britain."
58. Poggrund, "Channel Islands."
59. Sugarman, "Historian Accused"; Cockerell, "The Nazi Concentration Camps."
60. Sturdy Colls and Colls, *Adolf Island*, 340–1.
61. Ibid., 275.
62. Ibid., 289, 291.
63. E.g. Diebel, "A Nazi Concentration Camp"; Cockerell, "The Nazi Concentration Camps"; Walters, "The Battle for Alderney's wartime past"; Panovka, "The Holocaust Angle."
64. Walters, "The battle for Alderney's Wartime Past."
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid.
67. Bright, "Britain's Holocaust Island."
68. Sanders et al., *The Lord Pickles Alderney Expert Review*.
69. Ibid., 1.
70. Ibid., 5.
71. Sturdy Colls, Colls & Cherkaska, "Alderney Slave Workers," 34.
72. Sherwood, "More than 1,000."

73. Philpott, “In Nazi-occupied Britain”; Pogrund, “Channel Islands.”
74. Sanders et al., *The Lord Pickles Alderney Expert Review*, 14.
75. A 2025 report by UN Women has noted that women in public life are among the most at risk of digital abuse and technology-facilitated violence.
76. Dziuban, “Discordant Necropolitics.”
77. Van der Laarse, “Bones Never Lie?,” 168.
78. UNESCO, *History Under Attack*, 62–4.
79. *Ibid.*, 64.
80. Owen, “Alderney WWII Deaths Review.”

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