

Sobibór and the Reality of Graves since 1944

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After the Germans left Sobibór in early 1944, what remained were large ash pits in a clearing in the forest. How various conflicting and competing actors related to this central Shoah site will be explored in this paper covering the period 1944 – 2018. The fundamental conflict has always been between the Jewish and a variety of non-Jewish perspectives on Sobibór. As early as 1947, the Central Committee of Jews in Poland (CKŻwP) declared Shoah mass graves to be Jewish cemeteries. According to Jewish religious laws and traditions, cemeteries are of an eternal nature, which calls into question the assumption that mass grave sites merely raise questions related to memory culture or design. It also undermines the notion that the Shoah ended once the killings had stopped. On the contrary, engaging with and relating to the mass grave sites should be regarded as part of the historical process now called the Shoah. The case of Sobibór illuminates this conflict in other respects, as well. Despite the fact that survivors were active in giving testimony and documenting the crimes from very early on, and despite the fact that the Socio-Cultural Association of Jews in Poland (TSKŻ) made a substantial financial contribution to the first monument erected on site in 1965, the views of representatives of Polish Jews were never decisive. Other narratives always took precedence, such as the Cold War or a Polish national story in the 1960s, and an universalist European theme in the 2010s.

The paper will examine the marginalisation of the perspective of Polish Jews as an integral part of these narratives, and it will argue that memory culture under such conditions reflects the radical and genocidal exclusion of the victims of the Shoah.