

The Holocaust Ghettos Project: Extending Research Paradigms with Digital Methods

This panel will present the first substantive findings of the Holocaust Ghettos Project, a major initiative funded by a Digital Humanities Advancement Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The four papers will explain the project's main goal – to seek a more integrated Holocaust history by studying ghettoization as a geographical phenomenon. In every place declared to be a ghetto, persecution of Jews was implemented in specific ways by particular people. Jewish lives were changed profoundly by these actions, as were the places that for many had been their homes. By putting the loci of events at the center of historical analysis, it becomes possible to integrate evidence from accounts by victims and perpetrators and better understand the dynamics and effects of ghettoization.

The project is attempting to do this by building an historical GIS of ghettos in German-occupied Eastern Europe (Knowles and Hillebrand's paper) and by developing methods to analyze the spatial and experiential information contained in a sample corpus of 1,800 English-language interviews with Holocaust survivors (Walke, Miller, and Westerveld). Two detailed case studies of ghettoization in Budapest (Cole) and Distrikt Krakow (Jaskot and Duffy) will demonstrate how we are beginning to weave together close analysis (or close reading) of individual, localized sources with broader analysis at the scale of the city and region, made possible by the digital infrastructure that the project is building.

All four papers will highlight the vital role of iterative, exploratory data visualization as a research methodology that can test or confirm existing historiography while raising new research questions and producing new insights.

Lastly, all four papers will discuss how the project team is addressing the apparent mismatch between historical ambiguity and the rigidity of database structures, and the challenge of conducting digital research with the ethical sensitivity that Holocaust Studies demands.