
The EHRI Project: building an online archive for European Holocaust research

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On 16 November 2010 the European Union launched one of the most ambitious Holocaust research projects to date. The European Holocaust Research Infrastructure (or EHRI) is a four-year project whose main objective is to support the European Holocaust research community by opening up a portal providing online access to dispersed sources relating to the Holocaust all over Europe and Israel, and by encouraging collaborative research through the development of tools. To achieve this by 2014, twenty organisations – research institutions, libraries, archives, museums and memorial sites – from thirteen countries will work together to build the infrastructure and populate the portal. The EHRI Project is led by the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies in the Netherlands.

In the UK the Centre for e-Research (CeRch) at King's College London will play a key role in the design and implementation of the research infrastructure that will bring together Holocaust archives from around Europe and elsewhere. The

aim is to create a cohesive body of integrated research materials to be made available online to researchers and the public. CeRch will lead on the overall development of EHRI's digital research infrastructure, and on the strategic work packages, researcher requirements and the technical development of a virtual research environment (VRE), which will offer online access to the archives.

RESEARCH AND REMEMBRANCE

According to the British historian Tony Judt, the Second World War has finally become history in Europe. In order to keep remembering why it was judged so important to build a new Europe 'out of the crematoria of Auschwitz', the 'vital link' between Europe's past and Europe's present must be taught over and over again; historical and archival material provide that link in both the scholarly domain and the public imagination. To be able to teach and understand Europe's past, the historical research needs to become truly European and to transcend national borders. But even now it is still difficult to conduct real international research.

It is here that the virtual environment will be critical to the success of the project – in the main because it will help researchers overcome one of the hallmark challenges in Holocaust research: the distributed and dispersed nature of the research materials. Holocaust studies rely on a huge variety of archives – more than many other fields of research. Holocaust archives tend to be fragmented and scattered all over the world, making access complicated, if not impossible, and very time-consuming. The fragmentation of sources not only results from the fact that the Holocaust was not restricted to one place or country, but also from the Nazi attempts to destroy the evidence and the migration after the Second World War of Holocaust survivors. In recent decades specific collections have been established, especially in regional centres, and Eastern European archives have opened up. However, there is little uniformity in the cataloguing and description of the materials held in these archives and many different languages are used in the original documents and cataloguing systems. Finally, one of the major challenges for every scholar of the Holocaust is to avoid the domination of the perpetrators' sources over the voices of persecuted Jews. The documents of Jews and their organisations often followed the fate of their owners: they were in many cases destroyed or dispersed.

Although many organisations throughout Europe and Israel have already done excellent work in collecting and saving documents, objects, photos, film and art related to the Holocaust, it is now possible to bring all these sources together and take the research into this area several steps further. To this end, the VRE will offer online access to a wide variety of dispersed Holocaust archives and to a number of tools to work with them. Building on integration programmes undertaken over the past decades by the twenty partners in the consortium and a large network of associate partners, EHRI sets out to transform the data available for Holocaust research around Europe and elsewhere into a cohesive body of resources.

The challenges, however, are mirrored in the digital realm – simply digitising the materials is not enough to overcome the fragmented nature of the collections. ‘The greatest technical challenge is to bring together such heterogeneous datasets while at the same time presenting tools and services that make them useful for Holocaust research’, explains Dr Tobias Blanke, project lead for King’s College London and part of the EHRI executive management team. ‘It is not at all clear how such a VRE should look and it needs a careful coordination of identification, standardisation and requirement activities.’

AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

In the coming four years historians, archivists and research infrastructure experts will come together not only to build the unique resource but also to find the best ways of opening the materials up to as many users as possible. Special attention will be paid to education and outreach by ensuring the online availability and maximum open access to the material.

An important condition for making a success of EHRI is having an interdisciplinary structure. The scholars involved in EHRI are not only historians but also archivists and digital research infrastructure specialists. The collaboration between these specialists is crucial to EHRI’s ambition. EHRI will be an example and forerunner for digital research in a wide range of new disciplines in historical research and archival practices.

One of the greatest challenges in building the project will be managing the different methodologies, vocabularies and scholarly activities that shape the interactions in the different disciplines. ‘The technical challenge is also a social challenge of convincing people to contribute data and services,

or in this case of trying to harmonise the languages of participants,’ explains Dr Blanke. ‘In the preparation phase, we have identified a number of primitives that represent scholarly activities across disciplines. We used these to analyse and represent the research processes that we aim to support by means of our infrastructure.’

An important component of this is the work already being undertaken at CeRch on user requirements and research methodologies. In order to identify, model and formalise the requirements of EHRI users, the team is currently identifying the key stakeholders in the field, analysing scholarly research practices and the use of archival materials in the area of Holocaust studies and comparing these methods with scholarly research practices in the digital domain in order to establish how these might support and enhance research in Holocaust studies.

To support the formulation of these user requirements, a great deal of bibliographic research is being undertaken at CeRch to create a comprehensive bibliography. This bibliography provides a broad overview of current scholarship on the Holocaust including key research areas, topics, approaches and stakeholders. As such it acts as an important reference point for the user requirement analysis.

Although EHRI is primarily geared to the needs of scholarly communities, the online availability and open access to reliable Holocaust material, set in the proper context, is relevant to and important for the general public as well. A European approach is essential to achieve a better understanding of the Holocaust as a European phenomenon, so that the ‘vital link’ between Europe’s past and present can indeed be taught over and over again.

For more information, see the EHRI website at www.ehri-project.eu or contact Tobias Blanke at tobias.blanke@kcl.ac.uk