Seeing History in the Present

Reflections on the Concept of "Contaminated Landscapes"

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Abstract: This essay takes the book *Contaminated Landscapes*, published in 2014 by the Austrian journalist and writer Martin Pollack, as an opportunity to explore relationships between landscapes, (marked) places and memory. In considering the relationship between the metaphorical (literary) image of contaminated landscapes and the actual crime scenes, I focus on the mass shootings of Jews by the German Nazis and their local supporters in the former Soviet Union. These specific crime scenes are used to explore the limits and problems of Pollack's metaphor. With the help of seven photographs, central cases in the argument are also presented using concrete examples.

Keywords: (post-)Holocaust landscapes; memory; space

The following essay[1] takes the 2014 book *Kontaminierte Landschaften* [Contaminated Landscapes] by the Austrian journalist and author Martin Pollack (Pollack, 2014), as an opportunity to explore relationships between landscapes, (marked) places and memory. Pollack's publication combines the search for traces of crimes scenes with questions about the visibility and recognition of memory. He concentrates on Central and Eastern European mass graves from the first half of the 20th century that have not been designated as memorial sites. His analysis, which does not distinguish between historical contexts, equates victims and perpetrators in an unreflective, almost irritating manner.

In order to gauge the limits and problems of Pollack's metaphor with reference to specific sites, my reflections on the relationship between the metaphoric (literary) image of contaminated landscapes and the actual crime scenes focus on the mass shootings of Jews by the German National Socialists and their respective local supporters in Eastern Europe, particularly in the former Soviet Union. This essay neither claims to be a review of Pollack's work nor does it address contradictions in its arguments that may emerge when reflecting on its content.

1 Reflections in the essay result, on the one hand, from travels to the post-Holocaust landscapes in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Belarus, and Ukraine, undertaken between 2013 and 2018, during which I accompanied Prof. Konrad Kwiet and David Simons. The possibility of documenting these places and the resulting joint discussions have been invaluable. The text is also a result of many intense conversations with Annika Wienert, Janine Fubel, and Cordula Gdaniec. I would like to take the opportunity to thank them very much.

I

In 1937, the German National Socialists established the Buchenwald concentration camp on Ettersberg. The hill was a popular getaway destination for the inhabitants of the nearby city of Weimar, among others, and remained so even after the establishment of the camp, though it became less frequented. The camp was located on the summit of the Ettersberg and grew steadily over the following years. Therefore, it was possible to see far into the surrounding area from several locations within the camp (Fig. 1). Visitors to the memorial, which was established here in 1953, still stand on the former roll call grounds and take in the same views stretching beyond the former barracks of the concentration camp prisoners. Visitors to the camp are usually perturbed by the immediate juxtaposition between a place they associate with a narrative of terror or violence and the "beautiful landscape" of the surrounding forest. Such consternation further intensifies when visits take place on hot summer days; the camp seems more easily imaginable as a place of suffering for the prisoners during icy winters.

Fig. 1. Buchenwald Memorial Site, view northward from the former roll call area over the site where the concentration camp prisoners' service and housing barracks were located until May 1945.
Photo: Hannes Richter, ca. 2016

The roll call area, where the concentration camp prisoners had to line up twice a day, directly bordered the camp gate building. Both were located at the highest point in the area. However, the view shown in the picture only became visible after the demolition of the barracks in 1945; when the camps were still in use, the buildings did not allow for such a broad view.

In contrast to other former camp sites, large parts of the Buchenwald site, including the former roll call area and the location of the prisoners' quarters, were already a subject of presentation when the memorial opened in 1953. The floor plans of the wooden and stone barracks can still be traced today with the help of remaining walls and cinder fields.

Places and memories have a complex relationship with each other. The feeling that *it happened here* can more easily be connected to architecture than to landscapes that consist of mountains, trees, meadows or fields alone. The narratives of the events that took place at the sites of former concentration camps – and thus also their memory – are linked to concrete places and structures through their design and its actors. At Buchenwald, locations of barracks that no longer exist are indicated, individual buildings, sometimes including the crematoria, have been preserved, the area of the prisoners' quarters is enclosed by reconstructed fences and the mass graves of the camp dead are marked and designated as memorial sites. Historical events and their protagonists are directly linked to individual locations; the visitors can orient themselves in the space of a structured narrative. The design of the site can help link the crimes of the National Socialists to a clearly defined space. The surrounding "beautiful landscape" is noticeably distinguished from the camp. This relationship is visually defined by borders, entry ways and information and/or notice boards (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Buchenwald Memorial Site, "Visitor Rules" information plaque in the passageway of the former camp gate. Photo: Alexandra Klei, June 12, 2008

This plaque points out to visitors the importance of the site as a "place of remembrance" and then lists various rules of conduct, including "no smoking, no eating or drinking", "no touching of objects", and "no use of media equipment with loudspeakers on the camp grounds". In addition to the remains of the former camp fence and entrances, such signs mark the area that is supposed to be perceived as the (actual) memorial. These signs can only be found in the passageways to the area where the vast majority of the concentration camp prisoners were housed until May 1945. In this sense, this area is distinguished from other parts of the camp, such as the locations where concentration camp prisoners were compelled to perform forced labor for various companies or from the area where the SS officers lived. Comparable markings were missing in these latter locations.

II

Particularly in German-occupied Poland and in the former Soviet Union, completely different conditions apply to the relationship between places and memory at the sites where the Germans and their helpers shot Jews. Today, the exact or even an approximate number of these types of execution sites and mass graves cannot be determined. The Berlin exhibition *Massenerschießungen. Der Holocaust zwischen Ostsee und Schwarzem Meer 1941–1944* [Mass Shootings. The Holocaust from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea 1941–1944] presented a map of the former Soviet Union with 573 locations where 500 or more Jewish women, men and children were shot by the Einsatzgruppen of the Security Police, SD, SS and Wehrmacht units, and their respective local helpers. The total number of victims is estimated to amount to 1.52 million.[2] Even though the map already shows a dense network of these sites, it does not show the actual extent of what took place because it does not show locations with fewer than 500 victims. This is indicated by the reference to over 1,000 Jewish communities that fell "victim to the National Socialist extermination policy" (*Massenerschießungen*, 2016, p. 35). Additionally, there was sometimes a number of shootings at different points in time and in different locations within a single city or community. Perhaps one must write more accurately, albeit vaguely, that in each and every village in the German-occupied Soviet Union in which Jews lived, they were murdered in the immediate vicinity. Their number cannot be quantified. There were also shooting sites in Poland, as well as shooting sites for communists, the Roma, patients from psychiatric clinics and Jews deported from Germany, Austria and other European countries to meet their deaths in the Soviet Union.

The sites of the mass murders and mass graves are more difficult to define and mark than the spaces of the current memorial sites at the former camps. They are located in forests, ravines and pits, in meadows, fields and beaches in and outside of cities and towns. If the crimes are not linked to any form of architecture or to a sign of remembrance that helps the viewer to connect the historical events with the space, there is a lack of opportunity to locate the crime scene within that space (at least at first glance) and to reconstruct the sequence of events that happened there. A shooting in the marketplace next to the fountain can be more concretely conveyed and can be visualized more clearly within the space and within the narrative than a shooting "in the woods" that remained without any commemorative markers (Fig. 3).

2 The exhibition was shown from September 28, 2016 to March 19, 2017 at Topography of Terror documentation center in Berlin. For the map, see the catalogue: *Massenerschießungen*, 2016, pp. 32–33.

Fig. 3. Blagovshchina Forest near Minsk, Belarus. Photo: Alexandra Klei, September 22, 2016

Between May 1942 and October 1943, several thousand Jews were murdered in the Blagovshchina Forest. In the initial months of these murders, the Germans brought their victims directly from the Minsk Ghetto to Blagovshchina. Starting in August 1942, the trains first arrived at a temporary station near the Maly Trostinec camp. After the selection took place, the victims needed to hand over their belongings, then they would either walk to the forest a few kilometers away or be brought there by trucks. Here, they had to strip down to their underwear, hand over their last valuables, and stand at the edge of 60-meter-long and 3-meter-deep pits, where they were murdered with shots to the neck by up to 100 members of Police Battalion 322, the Security Police and/or other SS units, with the assistance of local collaborators. Russian forced laborers had previously been made to dig the pits. Afterward, the Russian prisoners covered the pits filled with corpses and filled them with dirt. Bulldozers and tractors levelled the area. Occasionally, the Germans also used gas vans to murder their victims. Between late October and December 1943, members of Sonderkommando 1005-Mitte forced Soviet prisoners to reopen mass graves, pile up the dead into pyres, and burn them. The prisoners then had to search the ashes for valuables once more before they themselves were murdered in a gas truck and their corpses were burned. An exact number of victims cannot be determined, but it is generally estimated at 40,000 to 60,000 today. The murdered Jews came primarily from Minsk/the Minsk Ghetto or had been deported by the Germans to Minsk/Maly Trostinec from Vienna, Berlin, Bremen, Brünn, Cologne, Hamburg, Frankfurt am Main, Konigsberg, and the Theresienstadt Ghetto.

The area where the shootings took place and where the ashes of the victims remained was overgrown and indistinguishable from the surrounding forest until the establishment of a memorial (inaugurated in June 2018), which, among other things, marked the locations of the graves in this area. Previously, there was only one memorial for the Jews from Austria in the area, but it did not make any reference to the specific sites of their execution. Even today, the nearby Maly Tronstinec camp is still considered the primary extermination site, although the victims in fact never entered it.

The location of the historical events is not the sole decisive factor in the placement of the monuments which were erected both before and after 1989/1990. While they are generally intended to commemorate the victims – before 1989, usually subsumed under the term “Soviet citizens”, and after 1990, concretely referred to as murdered Jews – and they do refer to historical events, they often neglect to directly reference the concrete sites of the mass executions and graves. This is done for the sake of greater

visibility: the monuments are placed in squares or along roadsides or streets. In other words, they are placed in locations where they can be noticed by random passersby (Fig. 4). However, neither the marking of a crime scene, nor the architecture at a site where a historical event took place is the sole basis for not forgetting. Reports and photographs by the perpetrators exist and there are stories from the village and city inhabitants who directly and indirectly witnessed and heard about the crimes. Survivors and/or their descendants returned/return, bringing stories with them. Excavations through these landscapes show that today's residents can still locate these sites (and still expect to find the remains of those murdered there).

Fig. 4. Yablonovchina Forest near Mir, Belarus. Photo: Alexandra Klei, September 25, 2017

This monument was erected near a path and is, therefore, immediately visible upon entering the forest. The actual execution site of about 560 Jews from the nearby town of Mir is not marked. Since there is a sloping and overgrown embankment a few meters south of the monument, it is possible that the Germans and their local helpers murdered people there. However, the execution site could also lie deeper in the forest.

The memorial commemorates the last large-scale shooting by the Germans in/near Mir. A total of well over 2,000 Jews were murdered, many of them on November 9, 1941, directly on the central market square and its adjacent streets. In addition to the monument in the photograph, there are three others, two of which are located within today's city limits.

III

The desire to commemorate victims is generally connected to a demand for tangible symbols of remembrance. When converting former concentration camps into memorial sites, making the events that took place there comprehensible within the space is a central concern. The conversion of former crime scenes into memorial sites that convey what *was* pushes the limits of representability. The site as a narrative, piece of architecture, and landscape was used sporadically right after the liberation of the camps but has become a central aspect of all conceptions of concentration camp memorials in the Federal Republic of Germany since the beginning of the 1990s. These sites gain their importance through their "authenticity" but are sacralized by it, as well. This is also demonstrated by the fact that over the past three decades, artistic works, primarily using photography, have repeatedly developed a visual approach towards concentration and extermination camps as historical sites based on their present-day materiality and landscape. Consequently, the concrete location and its material signs of memory are transferred into visual media that can exist independently of it.

Questions of representability in the relationship between historical events, narratives and locations have been intensively discussed since the end of National Socialism. While all these discussions, the attendant markings – and the knowledge that results from them about the history of the crimes of the National Socialists in Germany – relate, above all, to the locations of former concentration and extermination camps, the crimes of the mass shootings are still largely excluded from German memory today. This not only means that the scope of the crimes is unknown but also that even today – with the exception of a few exhibitions and the occasional memorials on stumbling stones marking individual execution sites – the murdered have yet to be commemorated in a physical way.

When people look for sites of mass shootings, they encounter a discrepancy resulting from the illegibility of the crimes committed within a "landscape". Martin Pollack's book can be read as an attempt to use the concept of contaminated landscapes as a metaphor for this gap and/or for the perplexities that arise when the image of a place/landscape perceived as beautiful is altered by the knowledge of the crimes committed there. Thereby, the term "contaminated" implies that the landscape is dirty, unclean, poisoned, infested and/or tainted. Such a contamination can sometimes be detected in a landscape, sometimes not, but *to contaminate* a landscape is – even outside of the context of crimes like murder – already a criminal action. A tension already arises when connecting both words.

Pollack did not write a theoretical treatise here; his renunciation of an analysis of historical events and their consequences makes it possible to construct a suggestive image of the crimes. Unlike the term "Holocaust by bullets" coined by Patrick Desbois,

which pertains to the historical events of the mass shootings themselves and differentiates these from the mass murders through gassings in the extermination camps, "contaminated landscapes" relate to the perception of places in the present. Pollack has written a book that includes the question of the representability of the crimes and, as such, forms part of the debate surrounding memory. Since there have only been a few studies and (artistic or academic) debates to date which deal with the sites of mass shootings and their representation/representability, Pollack's book is particularly significant.

Landscape as a term for a confined space is subjective in its aesthetic perception and is generally defined by (mostly positive) experiences. It is a term that hardly points to an actual location, but creates an image that includes nature and the idea of the untouched. Here, "landscapes" presupposes a (distanced) viewer, and the ability to notice a discrepancy or an irritation at the location presupposes an external view. Since the people who live in neighborhoods near mass graves are aware of their existence and integrate this fact into their everyday lives, they are integrated through the gaze of outsiders in the latter's approach to the landscape and their knowledge of it. This can be seen in the experience and behaviors of the farmers who find bone fragments while cultivating fields, or the residents who dig for gold and property belonging to the murdered.

Creating an image of "contaminated landscapes" provides an outlet for the changed perspective of the space, which seems not to reveal its history at first. It is an almost beguiling image of the reverberation and presence of a seemingly invisible event springing into the present, and of a glimpse into a landscape that promises to reveal nothing about the events that took place there. However, traces of history have remained in the soil as an unspecified poison that develops a harmful, destructive effect over time. Here, the historical location disappears behind the metaphorical image and, unlike in the actual contaminated landscapes of the nuclear reactor catastrophes in Chernobyl and Fukushima, the extent of contamination is immeasurable.

In his book, Pollack does not give much of a definition or motivation behind the linguistic image of contaminated landscapes, but rather, at first, merely restricts them to "landscapes that were places of mass killings committed covertly and out of plain sight, often under strict secrecy. […] The graves are hidden, they are camouflaged" (Pollack, 2014, p. 20). This concealment is a central and recurring motif in Pollack's work. On the one hand, he only follows the actions of the perpetrators; he sees their intentions to cover up their crimes as successful. On the other hand, he ignores his own and other people's knowledge of these crimes, which in itself contradicts this assumption.

Moreover, the image painted by Pollack absolves us from the need to deal with the crimes, as it does the following generations, as well. The inscription on the book cover already says – what we could not see, we could not punish. And, one would conclude, we could not remember, either. This is perhaps how it works: speaking of the "complicity" of the landscape (Pollack, 2014, p. 40) amounts to the construction of a literary image that forgets the murdered and the crimes committed. However, it conceals and

distracts from the fact that it was solely the decisions of the perpetrators, encouraged and supported by the German and Austrian postwar society, which masked the Nazi crimes.

The concept of contaminated landscapes does not serve as an object and a method of examination of concrete spaces and the sequences of crimes that can be traced in them, but rather as the description of a state in which there are no differences between the historical and cultural contexts in which the crimes were committed. The overall result is an indistinguishable mixture within a space – which is perhaps part of the aesthetic characteristics of a landscape but not a result of an analysis of the actual events that took place there and their consequences. In effect, such omissions do not only make the understanding of history impossible but also imply the desire for a commemoration that befits the murdered Jews in Ukraine just as much as it does the murdered members of the fascist Croatian Ustaša movement.

Who and what contaminated the landscape remains undefined: Is it the actions of the perpetrators who left mass graves in the ground? The bodies and the ashes of the murdered? Is it the crimes committed against the Jews that caused grain to stop growing and the cows to die on a field in Rohatyn (Pollack, 2014, p. 95)? Or is it the buried Jews themselves, as a wide-spread antisemitic belief in Austria suggests (Pollack, 2014, p. 96)? The image of contaminated landscapes as earth that has been spoiled, poisoned, contaminated, polluted (by the blood of murdered Jews) and is, thus, no longer usable, it appears to be a distorted reflection of an antisemitic idea. Within this context, the question of its relationship to the blood-and-soil ideas of the National Socialists must also be raised.

IV

A location can be the starting point for an examination of and narration about different historical events. A depiction that aims at more than just stating that countless mass graves can be found in Europe must entail integrating the space and the landscape used in the description of the historical events with the concrete sequence of the crimes that took place, the actions of the perpetrators and the consequences for the victims. When referencing the mass executions by Germans in occupied Poland and in the Soviet Union, for example, one could note that the execution of larger groups of Jews could not take place *anywhere*; this does away with the idea of ambiguous indistinguishability. The perpetrators needed places that met certain requirements. They had to be easy to reach via paths and access roads but, at the same time, not easily visible to anyone uninvolved in the crime. They needed a monitored area for those awaiting their execution (sometimes overnight), and they needed large open spaces for shoot-

ings. The areas with topographies that provided depression pits and sloping embankments were particularly useful for the murders. These can often still be seen in the terrain today, and the perpetrators' actions can, therefore, be traced (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5. Forest near Sabile, Latvia. Photo: Alexandra Klei, September 30, 2017

On August 6, 1941, the Germans and their Latvian helpers shot at least 240 Jews in a forest around 5 kilometers outside the city. The perpetrators chose an area that was located only a few meters from the road and had various natural depressions. Two memorial stones commemorate the crime but (here, too) without marking the concrete locations of the shootings or a mass grave. Certain assumptions can only be made based on the condition of the soil here. The picture shows a long, directly adjacent ditch, which is much higher on the side facing the road. The Germans planned to shoot around 300 Roma living in the city here. They are alleged to have already been standing at the edge of the pit when the mayor at the time, Mārtiņš Bērziņš, prevented their murder. The reports on how he did this differ. The trench, which is preserved until today, shows how the topography of the area was utilized to construct an execution site. It is also still possible to see here how the Germans planned and carried out their shootings. The victims were forced to stand on the ridge where the perpetrators shot them in the neck with revolvers, causing them to fall into the pit.

Anyone who studies these murders and the actions of the murderers will discover that in order to find such sites, the perpetrators needed the help of the local population. One will also find that these actions left traces elsewhere that contradict the Germans' apparent intentions of "secrecy". Not all shootings took place on the outskirts or away from villages. Moreover, many of those that were not seen could be heard from great distances. Often, there were witnesses among the local population and helpers, as well as among members of Nazi organizations who did not take part in the shootings themselves, such as Wehrmacht soldiers, in particular. They took photographs of varying moments in the process of the murders (Fig. 6).

Fig. 6. Path to the beach in Liepāja, Latvia. Photo: Alexandra Klei, October 1, 2017

Shortly after their arrival in the city in late June 1941, the Germans began shooting Jews, members of the Red Army, and communists. Several executions of Jews took place near the beach next to a fish processing plant between July and early October 1941. The exact number of those murdered there is unknown today, as is the location of the pits and of the possibly still existing mass graves that can no longer be reconstructed. For example, it is possible that they were/are located beneath the concrete road pictured here or the adjacent sports field (to the left, outside the frame).

One of the executions was documented on film by a Wehrmacht soldier. There is also a written report by another Wehrmacht soldier, who witnessed a mass shooting on July 15, 1941, on his way back from the beach to the city. Both documents, as well as the location of the execution sites, make it clear that such murders also took place in public and that there were spectators. Two memorial plaques attached to the wall on the right side of the picture commemorate these events and their victims.

Individually as well as in groups, Jews were humiliated, robbed, tortured and/or murdered in public spaces immediately after the Germans arrived. Starting in 1942, the German perpetrators returned to the sites of mass graves, primarily in Ukraine and in Poland, and forced Sonderkommando 1005 to dig up and burn the bodies. In other places, after the Germans withdrew, the Soviet authorities arranged for the burial of the dead in cemeteries. The murders also created a void in the villages and towns that could not be entirely filled by the non-Jewish population. Even when they appropriated Jewish homes and stores, synagogues, schools, mikvot, and cemeteries, what remained were buildings and places that bore witness to the former presence of their Jewish inhabitants (Fig. 7).

Fig. 7. Former synagogues in Mir, Belarus. Photo: Alexandra Klei, September 27, 2018

This photograph shows three preserved former synagogues in the center of Mir, in close proximity to the market square and a church, among other sites. The building on the left of the picture has been used as a workshop for many years. The building in the middle, which used to be the largest synagogue in the village, is now used as a hotel, and the building on the right is a restaurant. No commemorative markers indicating the former function of the buildings could be found here until at least September 2019. Between November 1941 and May 1942, the apartment buildings visible in the background were used by the Germans as the ghetto for the approximately 800 Jews still living there at the time.

Not seen in the picture, behind the former synagogues, is the almost completely preserved Mir Yeshiva, which was founded in 1815 and included two school buildings. More than 500 students from Europe, the US, Australia and South Africa studied here until 1939. The Mir Yeshiva was reopened in Jerusalem in 1944 and is the largest in the world, with about 8,500 students.

Today, knowledge and vision have become requirements for understanding and reconstructing history in its connection to specific places and, therefore, to developing an understanding of German crimes. Only the knowledge of these events and their sequences makes the landscapes legible and only the legibility of the landscapes makes the knowledge and understanding of the sequences of these events possible.

Translated from the German by Olivia Feldman

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Die Geschichte in der Gegenwart sehen. Überlegungen zum Begriff der „kontaminierten Landschaften“

Zusammenfassung: Der folgende Essay nimmt das 2014 von dem österreichischen Journalisten und Schriftsteller Martin Pollack veröffentlichte Buch *Kontaminierte Landschaften* [Residenz Verlag in Salzburg/Wien] zum Anlass, Beziehungen zwischen Landschaften, (gekennzeichneten) Orten und Erinnerung nachzugehen. Meine Überlegungen zur Beziehung zwischen dem metaphorischem (literarischen) Bild der kontaminierten Landschaften und tatsächlichen Verbrechensorten konzentrieren sich auf die Massenerschießungen von Juden/Jüdinnen durch die deutschen Nationalsozialisten und ihre jeweiligen lokalen Unterstützer/innen in Osteuropa, besonders in der damaligen Sowjetunion, um anhand dieser spezifischen Tatorte die Grenzen und Problematiken der Pollackschen Metapher auszuloten.

Schlüsselwörter: (Post-)Holocaust Landschaften; Erinnerung; (gekennzeichnete) Orte

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