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Roadside Lessons of Historicity. The Roles and the Meanings of the Material Points of References to The Great War and in Shaping Historical Sensitivity and Awareness

Human remains, mounds, graves, cemeteries, landscapes marked by scars left by warfare (such as tranches, dugouts or mine galleries and tunnels), traces and findings related to those living hundred years ago (and among them to those who were fighting) may prove handy in transforming the “history of people” into “history for the people.” It may, however, be worth considering what makes only some of them indispensable as conditions facilitating *e.g.*: various forms of interest in the past or the need for “epistemological re-enactment” of the past—whereas others, despite their palpably great potential, remain neglected, unnoticed and forgotten. From the perspective of archaeologist and historian, who observes and takes into consideration ethical, historiographic and pragmatic dimensions surrounding the recognition, recovery and commemoration of the multinational painful heritage, some issues, outlined below, seems to be vital.

The first one, is THE COMPLEXITY OF MECHANISMS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE FACT THAT MATERIAL RELICS OF WORLD WAR I A) ARE TREATED, B) MAY BE TREATED, OR C) ARE NOT TREATED AS CRUCIAL OR AT LEAST HANDY IN THE PROCESSES OF SHAPING HISTORICAL SENSITIVITY AND AWARENESS. ON SPECIAL INTEREST ARE HERE THE MECHANISMS WHICH ENGAGE CARRIERS OF MATERIAL MEMORIES IN THE PROCESSES OF TRANSFORMING “NON-HISTORIES” (THE “BLANK PAGES” OF A HISTORICAL NARRATIVES, THE “OMISSIONS” IN HISTORIOGRAPHY, A BLACK HOLES WITHIN COLLECTED AND COLLECTIVE MEMORIES) INTO (LIVING) HISTORY AND COMMUNICATIVE MEMORY. Some of such mechanisms can be observed *via* the battlefield landscapes and unique material traces left by the situation from the nearly 100 years ago. At that time, after many bloody attacks of heavy artillery (including “German siege artillery—210 mm mortars and the monster Austrian 30,5 Škoda mortars”) on Russians, which

ended with heavy losses on both sides—Germans decided to use poisonous gases and lachrymatory agents close to the Rawka and Bzura Rivers (Poland, Mazovia, Łódzkie Province, Bolimów vicinity).¹ The use of poison gas, which caused maximum suffering and anxiety for the price of minimum own losses is till today seen as something worse than death, as the endless agony in the ocean of suffering.²

The gas attack, for which location was chosen carefully between Wola Szydłowiecka i Zakrzew, that was 12 kilometers flat and lacking in dense forest, was the first successful use of poisonous gas on the eastern front. The gas was released at 2:45 in the morning from 12,000 cylinders filled with liquid chlorine by *Pionier Regiment nr 36*—the “gas unit” organized by Fritz Haber and led by Colonel Gosliche.³ Russian losses were significant, however so far never precisely defined. Despite Russians losses (between 1100–1183 dead on the battlefield and between 7800–9038 soldiers poisoned by gas), the terrain was not gained by Germans. We only know, that the German trenches were not sufficiently secure since they were less than one meter deep, so they would flood, while the Russian positions were dug deep into ground due to the low water table and that Russians also transformed local villages into field fortress. All of that stopped Germans on their way to Warsaw.⁴

That is how the *Gasscape* on the eastern front was established.⁵ The date 31st May 1915—indicated here as the “birth day”⁶ for the eastern

¹ It made it conceivable that poison gas would provide a weapon capable of forcing soldiers out of their positions otherwise unassailable with conventional weaponry; *vide p.* Kaliński, *Ataki gazowe w bitwie pozycyjnej 9 Armii Niemieckiej nad Rawką i Bzurą 1914–1915*, Wydawnictwo Fort, Przemyśl 2010, p. 182–185; J. Pajewski, *Pierwsza Wojna Światowa 1914–1918*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2004, p. 227, 281–286.

² J. Lee, *The Gas Attacks Ypres 1915*, Pen & Sword Military, Barnsley 2009, pp. 4–10.

³ S. Kaliński, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 79–87.

⁵ I first publicly presented the concept of *Gasscapes* in the lecture: *Gasscapes (1915–2015). The retrospective and prospective views on two battlefields (Ypres & Bolimów)*, at the 18 European Association of Archaeologists during the session: *The Archaeology of 20th century Terrorscape: How to Proceed?* Invaluable assistance in researching the issue of *Gasscapes* were for me, particularly the following works: the first comprehensive monograph about *Gas attacks in the positional Battle of German 9th Army on Rawka and Bzura 1914–1915*, by p. Kaliński, 2010 and O. Lepick, *La grande guerre chimique 1914–1918*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1998; p. Jones and R. Hook, *World War I Gas Warfare Tactics and Equipment*, Osprey Publishing (UK) 2008; *Gaz! Gaz! Gaz! La Guerre Chimique 1914–1918*, ed. by S. Audoin-Rouzeau and L. Maggioni, 5 Continents Editions, Milan, Italie 2010 and Y. Buffetaut, *Ypres April 22nd 1915. The first Gas Attack*, trans. by C. Cook (2008).

⁶ By using that metaphor, I am expressing my openness for the perspective suggested by *Landscape Biography strategy*, *vide* Roymans Nico, Gerritsen Fokke, van Der Heijden Cor,

Gasscape—points neither the initial use of the chemical weapon in that area (that happened on 31 January 1915⁷) nor the single act on Eastern front (the other gas attacks can be also listed: on 12th of June and 6th of July 1915, close to Bolimów as well; and then on 24th July 1915 close to Osowiec; on 24th October 1915 close to Baranowicze (by the Szczara River) and on 25th September 1916, close to Ryga).⁸ But that is the painful clash from 31st May, which is called “the Battle of Ypres of the Eastern Front”⁹ or “Polish Verdun.”¹⁰ I define *Gasscape* broadly: through reference to the “primary reality” which I perceive, after Michael Fleischer,¹¹ as physical reality (i.e. as all material remains of the events of a century ago which may, but do not have to, be subject to modern (re)interpretation; and through reference to “secondary reality,” i.e. the world of historiography and of social beliefs and attitudes which currently determine mostly social awareness of deployment of chemical weaponry in 1915. I have decided to diagnose also the elements of the “tertiary reality,” i.e. elements that extracts from the secondary reality phenomena, which can be characterised by a particular “mobility” (singularity) and which, because of their unstable and occasional character, constitute only a extemporaneous extension of “secondary reality.” As the manifestation of the tertiary reality where “stereotypes about analyzed situations and figures emerge and disappear kaleidoscopically.”¹² I perceive all fugitive events and communicates somehow connected to the *Gasscape*. Alongside several *bottom up* initiatives aimed at conducting quasi-archaeological research close to the Rawka and Bzura Rivers, also—to some extent accidental (without cognitive expectations to find IWW relics) and fleeting (not released to the

Bosma Koos, Kolen Jan, *Landscape Biography as Research Strategy: The Case of the South Netherlands Project*, “Landscape Research,” Vol. 34, No. 3, June 2009, pp. 337-359.

⁷ It should be added here that the *Gasscape* established on 31st January 1915, close to Bolimów (often with the involvement and full conviction is called, especially by Poles “the first gas attack during the First World War,” but not only, see for example: N. Stone, *The Eastern Front 1914–1917*, Penguin, New York 1975, p. 112) did not engaged the chlorine gas and additionally, was seen by Germans as the failure. The attack went wrong and gas blew back on the Germans while the cold weather ensured that it would in any case be effective.

⁸ So far I am not familiar with other gas attacks on the eastern front in which chlorine gas was used.

⁹ S. Kaliński, *op. cit.*, pp. 3, 181.

¹⁰ A. Sergio, *Bolimów 1915. Polskie Verdun*, „Polska Zbrojna,” No. 26-27/2011, pp. 44-49.

¹¹ M. Fleischer, *Zarys ogólnej teorii komunikacji*, [in:] *Mechanizmy perswazji i manipulacji. Zagadnienia ogólne*, ed. G. Habrajska, Łask 2007, p. 52 ff.; *vide*: A. Zalewska, *Spółeczne wytwarzanie przeszłości. Archeologia materii reaktywowanej*, „Sensus Historiae”, vol. II, 2011, pp. 67-70.

¹² A. Awdiejew, *Konstruowanie trzeciej rzeczywistości*, [in:] *Mechanizmy perswazji i manipulacji. Zagadnienia ogólne*, ed. G. Habrajska, O.W. „Leksem”, Łask 2007, p. 100.

public but simultaneously changing the state of research)—results of rescue excavations, are treated here as such.¹³

There is not much research and reflections related to the eastern European *Gasscape* while the famous Belgian *Gasscape* is widely described. The gas attacks in Eastern Front usually are mentioned in just 2-3 lines in western literature. However, since it is claimed, that if chemical warfare, in its most lethal form, had not seen the light in Ypres in the form of a German attack, we can safely assume that it would have broken out in some other place, slightly later, at the hands of Germany's enemies¹⁴—also the western historiography seems to hide many understatements. The question is, if closer studies of material relics and their potential can constructively influence the *status quo*.

The second, seen here as crucial, is THE PROBLEM OF DETERMINING WHAT IT IS THAT DEFINES ARCHAEOLOGY'S ABILITY OR INABILITY TO EFFECTIVELY DEMONSTRATE ITS SOCIAL UTILITY IN REVITALIZING THE MEMORY OF EVENT THAT TOOK PLACE A HUNDRED YEARS AGO. In relation to the case studies signalized here I am also asking specifically, to what extent archaeology in Poland is willing to contribute to a fuller story about the I World War—related past by presenting a view “from the underground.” The assumptions pertaining to the circumstances and current results of specific grassroots (*bottom up*) initiative of the members of *Bolimów Region Lovers' Society* and on behalf of already registered *Museum of Military and Applied Technology in Bolimów* to uncover (with the assistance of archaeologist(s)), to retrieve and to exhibit World War I relics which are non-absent in the area of Bolimów—provides the suitable backdrop and pretext to analyse the relationships, circumstances and reasons due to which material points of reference to the past, although capable of becoming “roadside history lessons” and facilitating the awakening of historical sensitivity and awareness, find it difficult to perform this particular task. Additionally, the comparison between the history and current condition of the landscapes surrounding Ypres (Belgium, Flanders) and Bolimów (Poland, Mazovia) provided this analysis with a basis for the reflection on potential of alternative, extracurricular forms of historical education as well as on the

¹³ I coined the term *Gasscape* to relate to the discussed phenomenon when approaching, for the first time, the question of what stance 20th century archaeology can and should take on “terrascapes.” I have asked than, how archaeology should cope with the context of post-gas sites and especially with their palimpsestic character and long-time “biographies” (1915–2015).

¹⁴ Even if the modern world wishes to conclude that the Germans initiated the use of chemical weaponry, we must observe that the thesis is not entirely accurate. On the other hand, the development of chemical warfare was a result of parallel and independent works of each of the sides eager to use the new type of weaponry. After all, they were all motivated by the same tactically hopeless situation (being stuck in the trenches) to seek new strategies that would allow them to break the frontline in a relatively short time *vide*: O. Lepick, *op. cit.*

role and implication of archaeological studies of the past in the process of reviving memory.

When outlining the observed incidences of reactivation and deactivation of the material remains of WWI, I also try to emphasize how vast is the number of elements that jointly constitute the contemporary variety, character and significance of the memory of a place and memory about a place which can be treated as the element (next to the exhibits at museum collections, heirlooms, souvenirs and many other material stimulants of senses and sensitivities)¹⁵ of interesting roadside lessons of history and historicity.

Diffused (material) memory of the I WW

Almost 100 hundred years ago Poland was the arena for a dramatic struggles. It was one of many atrocious elements of the Great War of 1914–1918—the conflict which left not only political changes (*i.e.* three conservative monarchies collapsed, the bourgeois democracy prevailed, Poles and Czechs gained independence), but also resulted in countless individuals suffering and in millions of dead (not all of them gained a decent burial and many of them were buried as the unknown in the fraternal graves). The Great War, pointed as the first break at the continuity of civilization, which in Europe (and the world) paved the way for totalitarian ideologies and led to the alienation of “Europe of our ancestors”¹⁶—left also billions of material objects. Those “things,” previously functioning within the technological and practical net of killing and surviving, are today approached as neat, captioned exhibits, cherished mementoes, commercially valued items for sale in militaries fairs and in virtual marketplaces or as tones of rubble and scrap (decaying and decomposed by natural and anthropogenic post-depositional processes).

Through death and destruction, the First World war created new landscapes infused with new meanings.¹⁷ Those new meanings conflicted with previously familiar ones. For example, for those villagers whose houses were turned into elements of defense line during the war—the prewar rural stability was cut and sectioned by trenches and dugouts, industrialized by high explosive and transformed into wastelands of putrefaction, matériel,

¹⁵ We often remember that, which is tangible and visible (e.g. ruins, remains of Przemyśl Fortress) and do not pay attention to that which, due to its material frailty and fragility, is not typically on the minds of local residents and of authorities.

¹⁶ K. Pomian, *Europa i jej narody, słowo/obraz terytoria*, Gdańsk 2009, p. 141.

¹⁷ N.J. Saunders, *Excavating Memories: archaeology and the Great War*, “Antiquity,” Vol. 76, 2002, pp. 101-108.

the dead and the living.¹⁸ It was described aptly, by the stirring voice from behind:

... there is hardly an inch of ground where a soldier's shovel would not dig its trenches straight into the fields and lands of our fathers and grandfathers, where it would not disturb our ancestral graves and disturb our forefathers' sleep, where it would not cut through some ancient barrow, where the hand reaching for a fistful of dirt would not toss away with it, onto the meadows and fields, forests and steppes, so many memories ... so many, dear God! Well may this scar of trenches, as if by a giant's plough, sever off a sizeable portion of the Russian empire, but it is like carving through living flesh ... my God, through the flesh of Polish Zigmunts and Batorys.¹⁹

The (material) aftermaths of the total war (which left the scars of battles, still prevalent today in the form of constantly and gradually disappearing traces of trenches, mine craters and dugouts) at western Europe are already seen as the “multi vocal landscapes”²⁰: an industrialized slaughter house, a vast tomb for “The Missing,” as the landscape for memorialization and pilgrimage, as the chance for the cultural developments and resource for cultural, melancholic tourism, and finally as the location for the archaeological investigation. While it can be easily noticed, that in the eastern Europe in general, and in Poland (as it will be illustrated at the second part of that article) specifically—the potential of material remains from the Total War as the handy material for history lessons, or at least for the spontaneous roadside lessons that do not require the sophisticated didactic infrastructure but only good will and sensitivity is still taciturn and ignored.

Some claim that Bolimów is not functioning in social memory because of „lack of decent promotion.”²¹ In my opinion that “mental shortcut” does not exhaust the problem and even leads thoughts astray. As the alternative way for understanding the reasons for the oblivion of the eastern *Gasscape* I would rather point the assumption that the events from the Total War are not well represented by what there is to be seen above the ground. The insufficiency of material points of support for our knowledge, thinking and imagining the WW I's eastern front is pointed here, as one (of many—I do not even suggest

¹⁸ N.J. Saunders, *Matter and Memory in the Landscapes of Conflict: The Western Front 1914–1999*, [in:] *Contested Landscapes: Movement, Exile and Place*, eds. B. Bender, M. Winter, Oxford 2001, pp. 38-40. See also H. Clout, *After the Ruins: Restoring the Countryside of Northern France after the Great War*, University of Exeter Press, Exeter 1996.

¹⁹ Jankowski, *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, [Weekly Illustrated] of 15 April, 1916, p. 185.

²⁰ N.J. Saunders, *Matter and Memory...*, p. 106.

²¹ A. Sergio, *op. cit.*

that crucial) of the significant obstacles also in remembering the first bloody gas attack at the eastern front.

It is worth to stressing here, that the today's *Gasscapes* consists of—not only the scars left on the areas where the chemical warfare was used hundred years ago (including the physical elements of landforms such as hills and rivers; living elements of land cover including indigenous vegetation and animals such as rats and dogs; human elements including different forms of land use such as tranches, dugouts or mine canals; and transitory elements such as weather conditions or the direction of wind which was extremely important in analyzed cases). The *Gasscapes* also consists of the traces and symptoms of the secondary exploitation of that landscape. So, I suggest that material carriers of memory as well as verbal and visual symptoms of the long process of memorizing the past as such should be treated by the Archaeology of 20th-century as potentially informative, too.

The material dimension of *Gasscapes* encourages to consider how the relations between modern world and First World War (the material relicts) are manifested. Viewing material traces in a way not limited to their roles in political history, in processes and dynamics of memorization or in legacy processes (i.e. archaeological finds from the western *Gasscape* are currently functioning as “tender sheets” in planning projects—e.g. route of the local highway in Flanders was changed due to the fact, that some graves, trenches and other relics of WWI were uncovered during pre-investment excavations carried out before the commencement of road construction)—but also as such—is seen here as informative aspect of second degree archaeology.²²

A juxtaposition of the long-term material consequences of the first deployment of chemical weaponry in the western and eastern front should prove to be helpful in our attempt to answer the question of whether and to what extent does the drive towards reviving the presence of that which is “hidden” results from the character of the remains themselves, and to what degree it is related to the multifarious argumentative power attributed to them *post factum*. From the perspective assumed in these deliberations, movable and immovable archaeological relics related to the sites of gas attacks were seen as elements of primary importance. AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL RELIC IS DEFINED AS ANY TRACE OF HUMAN ACTIVITY, FOUND UNDERGROUND OR UNDER WATER, WHOSE PRESERVATION IS A MATTER OF SOCIAL IMPORTANCE DUE TO ITS HISTORICAL, ARTISTIC OR SCIENTIFIC VALUE. IT SHOULD BE EMPHASIZED HERE THAT NONE OF THE DEFINITIONS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL RELICS PRESENTLY APPLIED IN POLAND INCLUDES ANY FORM OF A TEMPORAL

²² For details see: A. Zalewska, *op. cit.*; *eadem*, *Archeologia studiowaniem terażniejszej przeszłości*, [in:] *Przeszłość społeczna. Próba konceptualizacji*, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, Poznań 2012, pp. 1116-1117.

CAESURA.²³ Therefore, it can (must!) be assumed that such relics include, in the context of post-gas landscapes, all movable items related to the military activity and the everyday life of soldiers and civilians during WWI, as well as all immovable objects (related to the military actions, such as graves, cemeteries, remains of trenches, frontline dugouts, *etc.*) along with the surrounding stratigraphic (soil) formations and the movable relics found within. Notably, what seems evident in the light of *The Historical Monuments Preservation Law*²⁴ stands in direct contradiction to practices observed on an everyday basis, especially where there is significant reluctance to perceive these relatively “fresh” relics as objects of archaeological interest.

Some remarks on the eve of the great anniversary

The somewhat obscure status of WWI in today’s Poland, despite the obvious sacrifice of about 3 millions of Poles who between 1914- 1918 were involved as a soldiers at that conflict can be said to have long-term and complex reasons and far-reaching consequences, which are worth more detailed and further analyzes also in connections to their material dimension. Here I just mention, that the ambivalent treatment of the “affiliation” of wartime events with the Polish nation and Polish land(scape) could have been observed even in the earliest commentaries shaping the memory of this traumatic space. In 15 April, 1916 one could read:

The Russians call it the western front; the Germans the eastern front... But what should we call it? I say we call it Our Front. Because... because we, here, in Poland, see the giant battle lines of Russia and Germany, and Russia and Austria with entirely different eyes, we watch it spread its blood-soaked trenches from the Gulf of Riga to the borders of Romania with eyes unlike those of a Frenchman, a German, a Russian or an Englishman...²⁵

The historiographic consequences of the conflict became a palimpsest of further more important events- overlapping with the memory of WWI mentally and physically. The Polish-Russian war (and the Battle of Warsaw of 1920) was “ours” and victorious, thus providing far more stimuli to commemorate the splendour of freedom, while the trauma of WWII painfully

²³The same was also emphasized on the official website of the National Heritage Board of Poland, whose goal is to return heritage to its rightful place in social life in accordance with the principle of sustainable development provided by the Constitution and the basis of any modern system of heritage management in the world.

²⁴*Ustawa o ochronie zabytków i opiece nad zabytkami*, of 23 July 2003, art. 3.1.2.

²⁵Jankowski, *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* [Weekly Illustrated] of 15 April, 1916 1916, p. 185.

but seamlessly rushed away any memory of the previous world conflict. This can be illustrated with a reference to the sepulchral space in a village of Joachimów Mogiły, located in the district of Łódź, commune of Bolimów, on the river Rawka, within the borders of Bolimów landscape Park where some of the victims of gas attack from 1915 were buried. In the 1930s, when the Germans were building mausoleums in Złota and Humin, the construction of a mausoleum in Joachimów also begun. Bodies of soldiers from the IWW from nearby cemeteries were transported there. Among several cemeteries liquidated at the time, was also one earlier clearly visible from the Rawka River:

Today those gassed soldiers are lying at the 2nd WW cemetery (!) and only thanks to the initiative of the 70-year-old individual, the local patriot, who marked the affiliation of the cemetery to the WWI by placing a piece of cement with the handwritten inscription at the central part of today monument—it is clear that something wrong is going on here.²⁶



Photos 1, 2: Joachimów Mogiły: On the left: the small concrete plaque placed by the individual (local citizen interested in preserving the memory of WW I) with the engraved by hand inscription: „Cemetery of War 1915.” This is the only direct indication referring to the context of initial establishing the cemetery and its almost a century-old metrics if one do not count the ambiguous and laconic inscription on the official metal plaque from the 90s. (on the right): „For their memory and for the victims of all wars” (Photographer: A. Zalewska—25 VII. 2012).

Currently the cemetery houses the resting places of Russian and German soldiers killed in the fighting and poison gas attacks of WW I, as well as German soldiers killed during WW II. In 1990, Joachimów Mogiły cemetery accepted the remains of 2566 German soldiers killed in second world war and exhumed from the Military Cemetery in Powązki in Warsaw during the construction of Home Army Avenue. There are people for whom the current WW II and Nazi affiliation of the place makes it particularly difficult to treat

²⁶ Personal communication PM (Bolimów VIII, 2012). Interestingly, at the leaflet titled *Main Tourist Attractions in the City and Region of Łódź* the cemetery is described just as “war cemetery” (*sic!*) *vide* <http://www.google.pl/webhp?sourceid=toolbar-instant&hl=pl&ion=1&q=srl=1&rlz=1T4SMSN>.

the cemetery as a WW I site. Especially since the authorities made sure not to emphasise that initially the cemetery was a German WWI cemetery. What is also crucial from the proposed perspective of second degree archaeology, in the close vicinity of the cemetery some relics of old trenches from Total War can still be easily found, while there is neither mental, nor material traces of the second world war.

There is few more roadside lessons to catch up at the Bolimów vicinity. The current state of military cemeteries from the period calls for immediate renovation efforts. After years of neglect, many cemetery sections are in a dramatic condition. Tombs which were not used in the difficult post-war period as building material by the local residents, are often cracked and covered with moss. It is becoming increasingly difficult to decipher the inscriptions and scarce surviving epitaphs. Even cemeteries which were fortunate enough to receive some care do not seem to hold an adequate place in local memory. Acts of vandalism and incessant thefts of tombstones and crosses are common. Only 5 kilometres in a straight line from Joachimów Mogiły, there is cemetery in Bolimowska Wieś. Right there, on the stone tablet placed on the chapel a vandal wrote onto one of the epitaphs a vulgar message.²⁷ I am fully aware of the incidental character of that communicate. The problem is that even such fugitive expression of “tertiary reality” shapes the “secondary reality” and destroys “first reality,” which especially if combined with the awareness of natural decomposition of the WWI material traces can not be ignored or trivialised. Archaeology can construct a different remembrance of the conflict: a war which appears to have played such pivotal role in the history of the twentieth century despite being on the verge of slipping memory can still impact upon contemporary societies. The lasting pain and trauma of that Total War and the memory of the soldiers who fought in the world’s first industrialized war conflict are already diagnosed and expressed (also *via* the material re-representations) in Western Europe.²⁸

²⁷The complicated faith of German cemeteries from the I WW was and still is problematic both in different Polish regions and in Western Europe *vide*: J.E. Szczepański, *Organizacja grobownictwa wojennego*, [in:] *idem*, *Landszturm w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie warszawskim, 1915–1918*, Oficyna Wydawnicza „Ajaks”, Warszawa 2012, pp. 188-211; C. Pépin, *Ich hatte eine Kamaraden: niemieckie cmentarze Wielkiej Wojny w krajobrazie francusko-belgijskim*, [in:] *Inscenizacje Pamięci*, eds. I. Skórzyńska, Ch. Lavrence, C. Pépina, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, Poznań 2007, pp. 235-247; A. Daszyński, *Cmentarz wojenny w Gadce Starej, Studium antropologiczno-historyczne*, [in:] *Operacja Łódzka. Zapomniany fakt I wojny światowej*, ed. J.A. Daszyńska, Polskie Towarzystwo Historyczne – Oddział w Łodzi, Łódź 2011, pp. 61-76.

²⁸R. Wilson, *Archaeology on the Battlefields: An Ethnography of the Western Front*, “Assamblage,” Vol. 11/ 2011, pp. 1-14; *vide* S. Audoin-Rouzen, A. Becker, *1914–1918. Understanding the Great War*, transl. by C. Temerson, Profile Books, London 2002, p. 6.



Photos 3, 4: Bolimowska Wieś. Currently quite well maintained (despite the condition of concrete plaques lying on the grass) German Cemetery where vandal wrote onto one of the epitaphs “fuck the Germans,” creating the fugitive roadside history lesson with a sad moral (photographer: A. Zalewska—15 IX. 2012).

Can the culprit be blamed?—of course (s)he can. Are their “impulses” understandable?—unfortunately to some extent also yes. One of the reasons for this state of affairs is the fact that the Great War has never really been treated in Poland as one of “our wars,” it has always been perceived as a struggle between Germany and Russia and the awareness of the fact that Polish soldiers fought and died in all armies involved has never been widespread. Could this unfortunate situation be changed by uncovering WWI relics, unearthing trenches, visualising the presence of former frontlines in the landscape? As aptly concluded by one WWI enthusiast:

It makes me want to cry. This amuck of amateur digging can only be stopped by a regular and consistent involvement of care and understanding in war related matters. For example, the sudden interest in Tannenberg and Bieszczady has lead to a situation that for PLN 30 you can buy a Russian buckle from an online auction. And if you actually go to the area, only the graveyards testify to these events ever taking place. Otherwise there are no traces, maybe a shallow shell crater here and there. It’s all very sad. (Anonymous)

In my opinion it is the other face of our (archaeological) passiveness. This is to some extent the consequence of archaeology’s disinterest in World War I, which leads to destruction. Any moment now and there simply won’t be anything left to find and dig out. It is indeed sad, but is it really irreversible?

Drawing on a comparative analysis of several aspects illustrating the current condition of the Total War’s battlefields, i.e. their present existence, the ways in which they are used today, their reception and symbolic features—I attempt to identify the elements that so far have had a significant influence on their perception, social status, and function of material depositories of memory about the events of a century ago. It brings us to the question: How

are conceptualized scientific and public frameworks for the research and preservation of material remains of the traumatized sites from the Great War at the local, national and international levels?

It is said, that the nature of the Great War made it archaeologically a special case. Of course, all battles leave physical traces, but the unprecedented degree to which troops “dug in” and lived their lives essentially below ground level, and stayed for long periods in one spot, means that their archaeological traces are (potentially) much more substantial and widespread than those of other conflicts.²⁹ That is why, especially in France, Belgium and England the First World War Archeology passed his infancy, and can be seen as the advanced field of studies (fully equipped methodologically and methodically), which can transform not only our view on the past (1914–1918)³⁰ but also our understanding of differences between historical awareness and sensitivity of contemporary Europeans. The examples of Ypres and Bolimów clearly illustrate the value of archaeological involvement in awakening the interest in important and not really all that distant events—which are nonetheless, at least in the case of Bolimów, nearly completely forgotten.

I do not venture here to question the fact that it remains the responsibility of archaeologists to ensure proper retrieval of traces of the past and their incorporation into the existing network of associations, meanings and goals. However, various social, cultural and market related changes have resulted in a situation where the responsibility no longer belongs solely to them. We can observe a growing tendency to treat archaeological knowledge as an object of “palimpsestic reading,” which means that its recipients begin to realise the complexity of its message, they engage in premeditated inquiry into that which is not immediately apparent and assume anteriority, thus acknowledging the dynamics/variability of meanings attributed to a given vehicle of information, e.g. a remnant of the past. Undoubtedly, key importance in this context must be attributed to the circumstances under which archaeologists create the vision of the past while at the same time transforming the present into another present. In fact, I feel I should take the argument even further and claim that it is the decision of archaeologists to withhold, for whatever reasons, their involvement in the our modern

²⁹ A. Robertshaw and D. Kenyon, *What is Great War Archaeology?*, [in:] *Digging the Trenches: The Archaeology of the Western Front*, eds. A. Robertshaw, D. Kenyo, Pen & Sword Books Ltd., Oxford 2010, pp. 35-39.

³⁰ N.J. Saunders, *Trench Art: Materialities and Memories of War*, Berg, Oxford 2003; N.J. Saunders, P. Cornish (eds.), *Contested objects; material memories of the Great War*, Routledge, Abingdon 2009; N.J. Saunders, *Killing Time: Archaeology and the First World War*, The History Press, New York 2010; *Digging the Trenches: The Archaeology of the Western Front*, eds. A. Robertshaw, D. Kenyo, Pen & Sword Books Ltd., Oxford 2010; N.J. Saunders, *Trench Art...*

and highly technological world³¹—that invites the actions of people illegally plundering the material remains of the war. Also in Poland, similarly to the situation at the western European battlefields from WWI, serious minded, but sill informal amateurs groups, as well as the battlefields scavengers describe their activities as exploratory research or even as archaeological—though their actions had little to do with archaeology. In result, the reputation of the more serious-minded and accountable amateurs continuously suffer by sharing this designation with the looters.³²

Although we have long been reminded that nothing is ever the primary or original principle, and that any discourse, including a scientific or philosophical one, can only provide one perspective among many, it still seems that as a professional group (archaeologists, or wider those interested in material dimension of the world around) we remain impervious to the fact that traditional or modernist philosophy can no longer provide sufficient grounds for a scientific discipline, especially one as obscure in its simultaneously natural and humanistic aspirations as archaeology. Therefore, since the existing trends are unable to legitimise its metaphysical, historical or epistemological narrations, one might feel tempted to allow the possibility of assuming a somewhat more radical stance and postulating a “humanistic” archaeology. Turning to the humanities as the *Alma Mater* would allow archaeology to seek “solidarity” rather than “objectivity” and inquire into how people construct their “past worlds,” how they strive to convince others that they are telling “the truth,” and how they defend own truth. In doing that archaeology (be it only in its rudimentary form of “second degree” archaeology which by definition constitutes a certain complementation of archaeology as such) would be able to attribute value to the views of various “stakeholders” as it would focus its attention on how and why certain opinions about the past are voiced, rather than whether said opinions are indeed true.³³

The proposed perspective by exposing the instances of secondary exploitation of material traces of the past, archaeological knowledge, as well as the “memory of matter” and its “agency,” does not concern itself with absolute truths. It investigates the temporary and transitory attempts to

³¹ So called “democratisation of archaeology” (resulting from: availability of equipment [e.g. metal detectors, geo-radars]) and the speed of information transfer unheard of 10 years ago (e.g. films [instructions] from illegal dig sites posted on the Internet) which must make any archaeologist think. It is high time it was also used to stimulate action.

³² N.J. Saunders, *Killing Time...*, p. 11.

³³ A. Zalewska, *Archeologiczny „palimpsest” jako specyficzna postać interakcji terażniejszości z...*, [in:] *Współczesne oblicza przeszłości*, (eds.) A. Marciniak, D. Minta-Tworzowska, M. Pawleta, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, Poznań 2011, pp. 128-129.

come in contact with the “matter of the past” made by people striving to add meaning and colour to their life (with regard to the first, second and third realities). Such “archaeology of reactivated matter” gives the chance to highlight the socialising potentials of objects, of things, of material carriers of memory. They could naturally be listed without end, but what seems the most important is to emphasize the fact, that the role of material carriers as means of humanisation in the above mentioned sense does not belong (or more cautiously, belong not only) to objects which can be referred to as directly didactic or which were created primarily to convey information on the values, ideas and norms prevalent in a given community, but rather, to those of lesser rank, to mundane items steeped in the material context of everyday life. Therefore, my position is that in Poland, despite many obstacles and almost completely dried up stream of (historical) consciousness of (and sensitivity to) the importance of first industrial, massive and total war can be enriched, socialised and awoken by the confrontation with the properly and adequately exposed and re-presented material points of references.

Theoretically, that “oblivion” and „lack of decent promotion” is going to be changed by the activities undertaken and stimulated by the round anniversary of the outbreak of Total War: “By 2014 the tourist trail of I WW will be completed”!³⁴ Among others, cemeteries, remains of trenches and other *Gasscape’s* material traces were pointed as worth attention (in)tangible reference points for diffused memory.

In my opinion it is worth to test also on our (eastern) *Gascares* if contact with mess tins, camp shovels, pocketknives (scissors), cutlery, or cigarette boxes, exposed *in situ* relics of trenches or dugouts used on our land by the soldiers (also Poles) hundred years ago, would not be more efficient—than occasional flags, chilly history books and one-time anniversary military parades—in shaping our historicity.

Some conclusion

Despite radically different ways in which the western and eastern European *Gasscares* were maintained since 1915 and as the result, as they are functioning today within social *milieu*—both of them, also from the archaeological perspective—must be seen as something far more significant than just

³⁴ *Vide* <http://wiadomosci.onet.pl/regionalne/lodz/powstanie-turystyczny-szlak-i-wojny-swiatowej,1,4981837,wiadomosc.html>. The WWI route is a part of a nationwide programme (the south-eastern section of the route). It is a project whose integral part is also to communicate the history of the chemical weaponry deployment. So far, it has not contributed to the revitalisation and re-memorisation of the *Gasscape*.

the sources of one century-old material remains. They are also more than the impulses for deepening our knowledge about the past. Since the First World War was the first of the wars of *matériel* which blighted the twentieth century- the material culture studies can also open a way into the minds of our forebears allowing us to understand their patriotism, their religiosity, their sense of social deference, their pleasures and their pains. Also, thinking in more “practical” than “scientific” direction³⁵ about it, the reflection on the *Gasscapes*’ remains (mental and material) offer the opportunity to renegotiate the ways in which contemporary people view the war, especially war suffering. It can hopefully help to oppose to the process of trivialization of the war images and to stop sometimes mindless playing in the war.

I suggest here, that the *Gasscapes* can be perceived as far more than just the historical backdrops to the extraordinary military event which initiated the wide violation of international rules. Those two outlined above traumascapes, possibly hold the key (one of the keys) to our ability to find the (more) proper way of presenting the senselessness of war suffering and of stressing the today significances of material war remains. Material remains from the first massive gas attacks, either those already socially causative (exposed in Belgium, France, England, Canada, *etc.* and many other already created western museums and arousing noble willingness to protect them, but also nefarious desires to understand them, to appreciate their steadfast endurance or even to poses them) or those so far almost completely powerless- should be perceived as peculiarities worthy of consideration. The proposed perspective of more humanistic (?) than scientific archaeology is built on a desire for “solidarity,” which not only validates the unquestioned need for expert knowledge based firmly on research, but also reflects on the processes of its reception, its use and abuse. Applying here (specific) archaeological perspective³⁶ I have tried to validate the opinions of various stakeholders

³⁵ I recall here the distinction between the “practical approach to the past” (when the past is studied and commented on because of the present needs for the potential of the past) and the “scientific approach to the past” (when the past in itself is seen as sufficient reason to think about), *vide*: M. Oakeshott, *The Activity of Being an Historian*, [in:] *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, Methue, London 1991 , pp. 158-161. More about the reasons for adequacy of that distinction in relation to archaeology: H. White, *Praktyczna przeszłość*, transl. by A. Czarnacka, [in:] *Teoria wiedzy o przeszłości na tle współczesnej humanistyki*, (ed.) E. Domańska, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, Poznań 2010, pp. 49-73; see also consideration on practical attitude to the past through the archaeological prism: A. Zalewska, *Archeologia studiowaniem ...*, pp. 1102-1104.

³⁶ More about it: Zalewska Anna, *Archaeology (of Second Degree) as the Element of the World of Cultural Representations. Archeologia (drugiego stopnia) jako element współczesnych wyobrażeń kulturowych*, „*Analecta Archaeologica Ressoviensia*,” IV, 2009 (2011), pp. 22-38; *idem*, *Spoleczne wytwarzanie przeszłości...*, pp. 68-80.

attempting to find out why certain material carriers of meanings views are voiced by them, and not so much whether they are true.

The specific remains of *Gasscapes* are sketched here as the *stimuli* for historical awareness and sensitivity.³⁷ They can be seen as hubs of: time, significance, meaning and function, where history becomes entangled with the fates of individuals and communities. Reasons are also indicated for which the lack of things results in the falling of certain historical events, phenomena and processes in the past or fates of individuals and groups, into the so called “floating gap” (*i.e.* a past time which we do not and/or will not know). Thus, it is concluded that the fuller our awareness of things and their agency—the wider the scope of problems, questions and phenomena perceived through things, and the dipper our understanding of ourselves (including our historicity) can become.

Roadside Lessons of Historicity. The Roles and the Meanings of the Material Points of References to The Great War and in Shaping Historical Sensitivity and Awareness

by Anna Zalewska

Abstract

The author attempts to demonstrate whether, how and in what circumstances material references to the past and material carriers of memory can be perceived and treated not only as the necessary conditions in scholarly practices, but also as the prompts useful in building lesser oppressive and more aware of its historicity social reality. On the specific examples of the material relics of the *Gasscapes* where the chemical weapon of mass destruction was used during the Total War I (1915) the author exposes the circumstances and consequences of the ways in which certain places, traces and records are becoming the necessary conditions for the “epistemological *mise-en-scene*” of the past and the future conducted *cum fundamento in re* by the existing self—while the other, despite huge potential are omitted and forgotten. Two issues are treated as vital in this context: (1) the complexity of mechanisms responsible for the fact that material relics are not always treated as material points of reference to the past in situations when “non-history” becomes history, (2) the problems of determining what defines archaeology’s (in)ability to

³⁷The *Gasscape* initiated close to Bolimów and today almost completely forgotten provokes also the question: what for to “promote” (to “awake”) such landscape, which is marked by pain, violence, loss and which is simultaneously pushed out of our contemporary minds? Why try to get out of this type of place, the material points of support for our knowledge about the past events and for our memories of them? Those questions require and demand, in my opinion, further and more complex consideration and action.

effectively demonstrate its social utility in revitalizing the memory of events that took place a hundred years ago, All presented in the article cases from the eastern *Gasscape*, though being materially entangled with the First World War, share today similar faith—despite their valuable mnemonic potency, they are not perceived as the “symbolic sites” and as such they are, so far, only potential roadside lessons of historicity. While at the western front battlefields the proposal of such roadside lessons is still improved further. Also with the participation of archaeology.

Keywords: archaeology, material relics, I World War, *Gasscape*, mnemonic processes and practices, history, historicity, education.