

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Nottingham		
Unit of Assessment: UOA 28 History		
Title of case study: Eyewitness to the Holocaust: Transforming the Use of Photography Among Museum Curators and Creative Practitioners, and Improving Audience Experience, Participation and Understanding		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2014-2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Maiken Umbach	Professor of Modern History	09/2011 –
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2016-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Photography is a powerful medium for engaging modern audiences with difficult pasts. But when it comes to the Holocaust, photography is often used in counter-productive ways. Umbach's research has highlighted the problems of relying overwhelmingly on perpetrator photography in modern pedagogic and curatorial practice, and provided solutions for a more productive use of visual materials, which foregrounds the experience and dignity of victims, and enables empathy. The research has transformed how leading Holocaust museums, creative artists and contemporary audiences in the UK, Germany and the US use photography. This change in practice means that museums now:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • avoid inadvertently reproducing and perpetuating the racist bias of Nazi photographers, but foreground perspective of the victims • empower audiences to develop a critical visual literacy, and transfer this to contemporary photos of victims of violence and persecution. • provided digital tools for commemoration of Holocaust at a generational turn when survivor voices are disappearing and Holocaust misinformation is rife. 		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>The research has been led by Maiken Umbach, a historian of modern Germany with expertise in the interpretation of visual sources. It both led to the development of, and is now being undertaken within, an AHRC-funded research project on 'Photography as Political Practice in National Socialism' [3.4] of which she is the PI, as well as associated follow-on funding for 'Understanding and Improving Public Engagement with Holocaust Photography' [3.5]. The research explores the role of photographs, public and private, during Nazi rule, and demonstrates how perpetrators, bystanders, and victims of the regime used this medium to re-invent individual and collective identities and convey them for contemporary and anticipated future audiences. Further impact work has generated data [5.6] that now offers an empirical base for understanding the negative impact on modern audiences of a one-sided reliance on Nazi photography to commemorate and teach about the Holocaust.</p> <p>Challenging existing notion of Nazi visual culture as top-down propaganda, a 2015 <i>Central European History</i> special issue edited by Umbach [3.1] made the case for using photos not just as illustrations of historical events, but as an exercise of power – and the resistance to power – in its own right. Umbach and team then worked with curators and creative practitioners, to develop new ways of representing and exhibiting this difficult history visually.</p> <p>Building on these foundations, subsequent research explored each dimension in more detail. In their 2018 monograph <i>Photography, Migration, and Identity: A German-Jewish-American Story</i> [3.2] Umbach and PhD student Sulzener demonstrated how private Jewish photos were central to resisting the prescribed racial separation of German and Jewish identities. Jewish photos, precisely because they were also eminently 'German' photos, were a means for Jewish citizens to defend and reassert their place in German culture and society, from which the Nazi regime</p>		

sought to exclude them. Umbach's PhD student Tofts, on a CDA with the Imperial War Museum (IWM) [3.6] is now using this approach to analyse the museum's collection of private Jewish photos, and make them usable for galleries and education activities at IWM.

The 2019 volume *Private Life and Privacy in Nazi Germany* [3.3], which emerged from a collaborative research project between Umbach, Harvey and the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich [3.7], made the case that making **private photography a central source** for both academic and public histories of Nazism not only allows us to consider the perspectives of victims, but also to better understand the **motivation of ordinary German civilian and military perpetrators**, who used the camera to perform and celebrate their own role in Nazi rule, the war effort, and racial politics.

Together, these findings have had transformative effects on Holocaust education and exhibition practice. By using photography to demonstrate the full spectrum of German and Jewish identities, we enable audiences to start to see beyond **faceless, nameless, generic** 'victims'. These effects have been enhanced by the fact that Umbach, supported in the two AHRC funded projects she leads by Nottingham-based colleagues G Mills (School of Education), S Benford and P Tenent (School of Computer Science), and J Stafford (History and Media Studies), has conducted further research on **visitor observations** [5.6], which reveals how resources and exhibitions based on their historical research **elicit radically different responses from modern viewers** compared to the photos that dominate Holocaust museums and school textbooks to date. Graphic images of violence elicit 'empathy' from only 2.5% of viewers, private Jewish photos prompt empathetic questions about the individuality of victims, and their lives before and after victimisation. While the publication of the visitor research is forthcoming, Umbach and her team have already co-produced exhibitions and shared the observation data with museum partners, which, as they testify, has enhanced a shared sense of significance and urgency in adopting the findings of our historical research for commemorative and pedagogic practice.

3. References to the research

[3.1] **Maiken Umbach**, 'Introduction' and 'Selfhood, Place, and Ideology in German Photo Albums, 1933–1945', in Maiken Umbach and Elizabeth Harvey, eds, 'Photography and Twentieth-Century German History', special issue of *Central European History*, 48/3 (2015). DOI: 10.1017/S000893891500076X & 10.1017/S0008938915000783.

[3.2] **Maiken Umbach** and Scott Sulzener, *Photography, Migration, and Identity: A German-Jewish-American Story*, Palgrave 2018. ISBN: 978-3-030-00783-6.

[3.3] **Maiken Umbach**, 'Re-Inventing the Private under National Socialism', and E Harvey, J Hürter, **M Umbach** and A Wirsching, 'Introduction: Reconsidering Private Life under the Nazi Dictatorship', both in idem, eds, *Private Life and Privacy in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge University Press, 2019). ISBN: 9781108754859.

[3.4] AHRC Research Grants – PI: **Umbach** – AH/P009883/1 – Photography as Political Practice in National Socialism – 7/1/2018-7/8/2021.

[3.5] AHRC Follow-on Funding for Impact and Engagement – PI: **Umbach** – AH/T012579/1 – Understanding and Improving Public Engagement with Holocaust Photography – 1/3/2020-1/3/2021.

[3.6] AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Awards – PI: **Umbach** (& IWM) – AH/R002886/1 – The photographs of people who were victims of Nazi persecution: building a collection; interrogating its meaning – 01/10/2017 (part-time) - 30/9/2021.

[3.7] Leibniz-Gemeinschaft – PI: A Wirsching; **Umbach** Co-I – SAW-2013-IfZ-7 – Das Private im Nationalsozialismus– 1/7/2013-30/6/2017.

4. Details of the impact

Understanding and remembering the Holocaust is vital to guarding against the continuing and resurgent dangers of **anti-Semitism, racism and conspiracy theories**, which currently plague political culture in the UK and much of the developed world. Photos of Holocaust victims – being deported, incarcerated and terrorized in ghettos, arriving in camps – powerfully draw modern viewers into the topic. But these photos are not neutral documents: they are overwhelmingly 'perpetrator photos', contrasting triumphant Germans with humiliated and dishevelled, sometimes ragged and half-starved victims [3.1, 3.3]. Today, such photos may elicit pity – but they do not necessarily create **empathy**; inadvertently, they may trigger **aversion** or even perpetuate and re-inscribe the very stereotypes they are supposed to warn against [3.2, 5.6]. Umbach and her

team, consisting of academic colleagues, PhD students and early career researchers, have addressed this challenge over the past five years. Their research on the opportunities and ethical pitfalls of remembering the Holocaust through photography has led to the development of new **pedagogic** methods and **creative** and **curatorial practices**, in five stages:

1. Working with the **National Holocaust Centre and Museum (NHCM)**, the team identified and addressed key pedagogic challenges in Holocaust education through films and providing educational materials.
2. The team **co-curated a touring exhibition** with five partner museums in the UK, which introduced new curatorial methods and media, including Virtual Reality, for displaying Holocaust photos, and rigorously assessed **audience responses**.
3. The team shaped the practice of artists to harness the power of **creative representations** to change the way audiences imagine, relate to and learn from this past.
4. The team pioneered new methods of digital audience engagement for museum partners during the Covid epidemic, creating interactive **online alternatives** to physical museum displays, and again evaluated audience responses.
5. The findings from the above enabled new partners to adapt our approach, resulting in transformative effects on curatorial, pedagogic and collection approaches and the new Holocaust Galleries of the **IWM London**, in their own network of museum partnerships, and at the **Austrian Museum of Ethnography**.

The team's research **shaped curation practice and museum education at the NHCM**, first through an AHRC-funded cultural engagement fellowship won in 2016 by Umbach and her PhD student Stiles. NHCM is England's only dedicated Holocaust museum, with c 30,000 yearly visitors. With the NHCM's education team, we assessed the existing pre- and post-visit materials for school groups, and on this basis, co-created **four short films** about how to view Holocaust photos as part of learning, which are now shown on the museum's monitors, and which they then used for workshops at the NHCM with hard-to-reach demographics [5.1], as well as staff training to improve the guided tours they provide for 24,000 pupils annually.

This research underpinned NHCM's successful bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund to **re-model** their permanent Holocaust exhibition. To translate the research into an exhibition designs, in 2018, the NHCM became project partners on the AHRC project '**Photography as Political Practice in National Socialism**', enabling them fundamentally to re-think their approach to visual sources, and bring their use into line with the institution's ethos to foreground victims' voices and perspectives. As the Director of Education at NHCM, states: "*The collaboration has had a significant impact on the strategic work of the Centre in progressing both our approach to photography as we undertake planning for site re-development, and expanding our audience reach.*" [5.1].

Winning additional Arts Council England funding in 2019, Umbach and educators from NHCM co-created the exhibition "**The Eye as Witness: Recording the Holocaust**", which sensitises audiences to the problem of perpetrator photography, and places victims' own photos [3.2] at the centre of historical representation. It includes a Mixed Reality experience that invites visitors to "step into" a Nazi trophy photograph taken in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943. Inside the immersive virtual space, and thus on the other side of the camera lens, visitors viscerally experience photography as an exercise of power, and explore what was left out and why. The exhibition then shows secret photos taken by persecuted individuals, and prompts visitors to apply what they have learnt to contemporary issues: on an interactive screen, they record their thoughts on which photos do justice to the perspective, agency, and dignity of victims of persecution and state violence, historically and today. In this way, it "*is a concrete demonstration of the synergy between [NHCM's] work with survivor testimony, and Maiken's research on the ideological significance of perspective in photography.*" The NHCM team have gone on to change how they use photography in all their programmes. [5.1].

New curatorial methods utilising virtual reality have **improved visitor experience** and deepened their **engagement**. Evaluation covering different demographics attending the exhibition at venues ranging from South Hampstead Synagogue to the Bradford Peace Museum show that the audiences [5.6]: (1) learnt to **engage critically** with photographic bias in Holocaust representations. (2) While only 2.5% of respondents recorded empathy as a response to graphic images that

show emaciated or dead victims, exhibition goes engaging also with Jewish photography displayed high degrees of empathy, and an ability to see the victims in terms of individual life stories transcending the situation of their victimisation. (3) Exhibition goes applied this sharpened sense of **critical visuality** to contemporary photos of ethnic violence and refugees (from Sudan, Melilla, and the US-Mexican border), overwhelmingly arguing that sensitive portraits of individual survivors were more appropriate to the dignity of victims than sensationalist and graphic press photos.

Beyond the tangible change to the audience's ability to engage with the difficult content, the new curatorial and engagement approach triggered a global media response. Media coverage of "The Eye as Witness" reached **148 million** people globally [5.5]; including newspapers, television, and radio. 'BBC Radio 4's 'Front Row' was particularly struck by "*photographs taken, at enormous risk, by the inmates of the ghettos and camps. [...] They reveal, amidst degradation and evil, a zest for life, humanity and love.*" [5.5]

The exhibition and its coverage enabled NHCM to develop **new partnerships** with the IWM North, Bradford Peace Museum, National Memorial Arboretum, the Jewish Museum London, and the Djanogly Art Gallery Nottingham. The tour was suspended due to Covid in March 2020, but will resume when COVID restrictions are lifted later in 2021. Its impact on NHCM has already been significant in terms of strategy and new partnerships: "*The exhibition has helped to drive forward the work of the Centre. In conceptual discussions, we grappled with the ethical and audience-based questions of combining a multi-media approach with a focus on artefacts and individual testimonies. These discussions were invaluable in framing the strategic considerations of site re-development. The opportunity [...] enabled the development of partnerships with hosting venues – including the Jewish Museum London, and South Hampstead Synagogue. These partnerships will be vital in helping us realise our ambition to achieve a truly nation-wide reach, and [...] will act as the foundation of a programme of co-created exhibitions with partner organisations*" [5.1]. Moreover, the visitor evaluation data has also **informed** the sector more widely. IWM consider it an "*example of best practice in digital innovation*" and have used it to inform **training** for museum staff in their "*Second World War and Holocaust Partnership Programme*", an NLHF funded project with eight museums across the UK exploring with new audiences, diverse stories connected to these histories, which involved at its first meeting a tour of the exhibition and a discussion of visitor feedback [5.7]. In March 2020, Umbach met with Lord Pickles to discuss the use of photos in the Learning Centre of the planned **National Holocaust Memorial** in Westminster [5.10]. Pickles then requested a copy of the visitor observation data evaluation report [5.6], in order to inform the curatorial approach to the NHM.

Restoring Access during Covid-19. The pandemic necessitated a new approach. NHCM and Umbach's team created an **interactive digital** version of EAW. Funded by an AHRC follow-on grant, research based on visitor observations from the physical and virtual versions confirm the **impact** of the exhibition and its potential to enable viewers to see Holocaust and contemporary images more critically [5.6]. This has helped inform the museum's broader approach to digital learning: "*Given the critical and sensitive nature of our content, robust and insightful evaluative work of the nature of online engagement and impact is particularly important. We see the work [...] as critical in informing next steps for the work of the Centre, and the broader field*" [5.1].

The research also led to a **re-design of the permanent Holocaust and Second World War Galleries at IWM London**, projected to attract **over a million visitors a year**. As its Chief Curator states: Umbach's "*research about the contextualisation of photography as a physical entity, and your thoughts on what photographs from this period can tell us about the Nazis' attempts to redevelop the landscape of eastern Europe in the image of the Reich were critical in the way that we developed our own approach*" [5.7]. Umbach also supervises Tofts, a PhD student on a CPD with the IWM, to help the Museum's Education Department to use private photos of Jewish victims of Nazim in their Holocaust education programme [5.7]. The IWM's Holocaust Education Director states that "*in developing our approach, your research on photographs in the National Socialist era helped shape our thinking about how we might encourage young people to consider critically the purpose and meaning of photographs, particularly those taken by perpetrators, and the power dynamic inherent in all photography. Your creative suggestions about how IWM's new Holocaust learning programme might work with a combination of digital technology, photography*

and personal testimony have been **inspirational** in helping IWM consider how students can engage with photographs directly rather than 'seeing/not seeing' them as mere wallpaper or less important than other historical evidence" [5.7].

Umbach's research has since **influenced curatorial practice at the Volkskundemuseum in Vienna, Austria**. The Curator, partner on Umbach's AHRC project, was inspired by this research to create the **first ever** archive of private photos from the Nazi era in Austria, which continues its work of collecting and interpreting these items [5.8]. This new archive also formed the basis of the exhibition 'Alles Antreten: Es wird geknipst!' of private photos of Austrians under Nazi rule in Vienna in 2019 [E8]. Umbach's research informed the exhibition design, and directly inspired the art installation commissioned for it. Finally, as the Curator states, "*witnessing the evolution of 'The Eye as Witness' [...] persuaded me of the benefits of co-developing History and Computer Science research [...] opening up new possibilities for how virtual and augmented reality can be mobilised to destabilise the way in which museum visitors view photography from this difficult period [...] and] empower audience to critique photographs, and thus help develop new media literacies*" [5.8].

Umbach's research also **transformed the practice of creative artists internationally**. An award-winning **Swedish artist Linda Selander**, who created multi-media installations presented across Europe, states that Umbach's research "*has had a crucial impact on my work [...] opening up of new ways of seeing, new way of grounding the past in the present.*" Prior to engaging with this research, "*I had no tools to seriously question and move beyond such images, and my own work on the subject would simply not have been possible.*" [5.2]. Similarly, a **London based artist Sarah Dobai**, who is working on an art film about Hungarian Holocaust victims, states that: "*Your research in this field very much supported my approach to the production of images,*" and is precisely why she avoided the use of 'documentary' photographs in the film, 'The Donkey Field'. [5.3]. The director of award-winning New York based **Tectonic Theatre Company**, describes Umbach's influence on their original production, 'Here There Are Blueberries'. Umbach's research "*became a lynchpin for our theatrical exploration of the images made by the perpetrators at Auschwitz.*" Her insights into the "*sociopolitical nature*" of "*ordinary*" photographs "*helped to clarify a critical theme in our play*" and enabled the writing of an additional scene "*in which we explore [...] how the German people 'performed' and 'humanized' their daily lives for the camera.*" [5.4] The Director also comments on Umbach's role in the development of an international educational programme around the play. Umbach's research is thus reshaping new cultural outputs across a variety of media on an international scale.

In 2020, Umbach's projects were selected as a UKRI impact case study on **EDI and Anti-Racism** [5.9], and, in the AHRC 'Culture in Quarantine' competition, to become the BBC film "Through Whose Eyes? Photography of National Socialism and the Holocaust". Umbach worked directly with the animator to design moving images around photos from her research to help audiences appreciate the difference between perpetrator and victim images. The film is now available on BBC iplayer (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p08z2xxt>). As of 12 December 2020, it has been viewed over 5,000 times. [5.11]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- 5.1 Letter of Support National Holocaust Centre and Museum, UK
- 5.2 Letter of Support from artist Lina Selander in Stockholm, Sweden
- 5.3 Letter of Support from artist Sarah Dobai in London, UK
- 5.4 Letter of Support from the Director of Tectonic Theatre Company in New York, US
- 5.5 Media Coverage Report from 'The Eye as Witness'
- 5.6 Visitor Observation Data from 'The Eye as Witness'
- 5.7 Joint letter from the Chief Curator and the Holocaust Education Director at the Imperial War Museum, London
- 5.8 Letter of Support from the Curator at the Volkskundemuseum in Vienna, Austria
- 5.9 UKRI impact case study
- 5.10 Lord Pickles Email Correspondence
- 5.11 Through Whose Eyes Viewing Figures