# Geography in the Holocaust: citizenship denied

**Paul Machon and David Lambert** make a powerful argument for teachers of geography to use opportunities to place citizenship at the centre of their work

This article seeks to demonstrate that traditionally rigid subject boundaries need to be broken through if students are not to be denied what they are entitled to: an understanding of what it is to be human.[1] It argues that geography in schools has not traditionally been seen as having much of a part to play in achieving this. By examining the **Holocaust**, perhaps the most extreme example of human brutality of the twentieth century, we make the point that all subjects have something to contribute to the wider goals of education. Until now, the Holocaust has been located in time, but not in space: this article shows how this lost dimension can be restored by focusing on the human geography of the **genocide**. Ultimately, of course, such an approach raises fundamental questions with which all teachers need to deal. What, we ask, is the purpose of teaching? When we plan lessons we have in mind the kind of individuals we are trying to nurture and develop.

We recently came across a sixth-form student who did not do A-level history because she really couldn't face 'doing the Nazis *again*'. In geography, many of us feel that 'doing rivers' has the same kind of appeal: it is sometimes done to death. With so much else to learn about, why do we resort to the same story repeatedly over the years of compulsory schooling (and beyond)? The idea of the spiral curriculum applies strongly to both history and geography, but is surely concerned with conceptual growth and development – that is, revisiting concepts rather than topics. (For the record, the student mentioned above dropped geography at 14 years largely because (to use her words) she could not 'see the point'; but she returned to it at A-level, instead of history, enjoyed it and did well.)

We wish to make the point from the start that this article is not in any sense a take-over bid. When we set about putting together our edited book on citizenship through geography, we agreed to co-write a chapter on the denial of citizenship, using the Holocaust as our case in point. We were amused to read in a review of our book that we had failed to convince that the Holocaust did not still belong to history, proving yet again how powerful is the 'hegemony' of subjects and topics. But school geography has no desire, nor any need, to steal this topic. We simply want to use it to make a number of points about the power of geography (see GA website).

## Subject disciplines

In schools, geography does not have much of a reputation for tackling overtly political issues, except perhaps in partial, coded and incomplete ways, for example with environmental issues. There is a risk that as 'citizenship' is incorporated into the suite of what is normally done in geography, then it too will be emasculated and its sting drawn.

All academic disciplines intend to *describe, account for and provide a critical 'take' on* the observable world. If a discipline has developed a distinctive approach to what and how its practitioners have operated – and particularly if a shared body of understanding has been developed and is shared by those practitioners – then that discipline has acquired a stature of its own. This status has risks, particularly the extent to which prevailing paradigms or practice can exclude some substantive work because 'it's not geography' and so must 'belong' elsewhere. But the challenge that confronts any discipline is the quality with which its three tasks are discharged in relation to the biggest and most difficult questions. The Holocaust in particular puts in front of social science's constituent disciplines particularly difficult questions because of the enormity of the event. Any discipline unable to cast at least some light on such events in a convincing way is fundamentally limited both substantively and methodologically. As such it may not have much of a role to play in education. So how does geography measure up?

## Geography in the Holocaust

**In choosing the Holocaust, we wanted to challenge geography as a discipline.** Partly, we wanted to offer a spatial interpretation of a particular and relatively familiar historic-political story, or *event*, emphasising what it reveals about citizenship – which at its heart is concerned with the relationship between individuals and the state. There are other stories or events we could have chosen, of course: the geography of the Gulag springs to mind, for example, or even more contemporary horrors such as those that have occurred in the Balkans. In relation to the latter, Ó'Tuathail has remarked that:

> *The ethnic cleansing of Srebrenica was not an unusual act of violence in the post-Cold War world. In Afghanistan, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Chechnya, Croatia, Rwanda, Sri Lanka and many other places political, ethnic and religious conflicts have degenerated into bloody wars of often shocking brutality ... Yet geography made the violence of Srebrenica unique* (1999, p. 120).

The geography in the Holocaust also made that a unique event. We settled on the Holocaust partly because it is more familiar, both to teachers and students, than these other examples of genocide. There is a huge and growing Holocaust literature – playing its part in the formation of preconceptions that also need to be critically examined – the serious study of which may encourage students to use geographical perspectives to help account for and understand other significant events of this nature.

But why, it might be asked, choose any such abysmal happenings? Surely we can test geography's power as a field of disciplined enquiry without turning to genocide? Well, this was to emphasise a curious gap in geography (and we mean geography, not just school geography). Conventionally, the Holocaust is perceived as history's property, although there have been notable achievements that have captured something of its spatiality like Martin Gilbert's *Atlas of the Holocaust* (1984) and a sense of place in Primo Levi's *The Truce – A Survivor's journey home from Auschwitz* (1979). But even these brilliant pieces employ space in a rather passive way, a canvas upon which this

historically contingent event occurred. More recently, that space and distance are not passive but key elements in these events themselves, is evident in Browning's brilliant account of the start of the Holocaust (2005). Yi-Fu Tuan has observed that the discipline of geography is probably to blame for this, for it seems to have had a blind spot toward questions of evil and 'the entire realm of morals and ethics'. Furthermore, he writes:

> *A deeper reason for the neglect of moral questions is the geographer's indifference to events. Events, we seem to feel, are best left to historians. The event of war is prominent in history books. In geography books it is conspicuously absent. There is of course a geography of the American Civil War, but we have not written it. We map battlefields – the cool and static aftermath of an event – rather than the clash of beliefs, alliances, and armies, in which courage, cowardice, wisdom, stupidity, good and evil are likely to be displayed* (Tuan, 1999, pp. 106-7).



The argument is that space and place, geography's focii, should more properly be seen as forming a dynamic element that structures such 'events' by offering spatially differentiated choices to agents with spatially differentiated political power. This is not to replace the 'passive canvas' with a mechanistic dualism of structure and agency, but is to argue for their co-existence in complex, messy, dialectical and iterative ways that are constantly being made and re-made. Spatially differentiated control of knowledge and action are amongst the basic elements of political power, including its legitimisation and perpetuation across whatever space is defined as the state's own, and so can begin to account for the variations in political practice that can always be found.

The Holocaust was an event in time, but it also happened in a particular space – indeed, in particular places within that space. Studying the spatiality of the Holocaust helps us understand the event.

## Geopolitics and Social Darwinism

Geopolitical thinking from the early part of the last century has been enormously influential, even to this day. It was heavily influenced by Social Darwinism (see Figure 1) and it helps us understand what in a way became inevitable once the Nazis had seized power. Put simply, 'scientific' racism plus 'scientific' territorial ambition led to the state stumbling towards the Final Solution, embodied by Auschwitz.

In Britain, Halford Mackinder is the most well-known member of the geographic community whose work supported **imperialism**. In his writings he insisted that geographical education should serve an imperial purpose:

> *The ruling citizens of the world-wide Empire should be able to visualise distant geographic conditions ... [and therefore we must] ... aim to make our people think imperially ... and to this end our geographical teaching should be directed* (Mackinder, 1907).

In Germany, Friedrich Ratzel was involved in a similar imperialist discourse that privileged the struggle for survival in an explicitly Social-Darwinist fashion. In *Political Geography* (1897) he argued that superior nations had the right to expand at the expense of the inferior in order to gain additional living space – *Lebensraum* – for themselves. These sentiments were later codified into a formal branch of the discipline, geopolitics, largely through the efforts of Karl Haushofer who began the journal *Zeitschrift fur Geopolitik* in 1924.

Haushofer's close association with the emergent National Socialist (Nazi) party must not conceal that such views, with all the attendant threats of political action, were not exclusively German, but a normal part of the lexicon of all nationalist movements at that time. But neither should we overlook geopolitics' place in another broadly-based project in German academic life, *Ostforschung* or 'research on the East' (Burleigh, 1998). This inter-disciplinary research was undertaken to demonstrate on historical, sociological, racial and linguistic grounds that large areas of central and eastern Europe were part of a far older German *Heimat* (homeland) to which contemporary German expansionists could claim a right. Maps of the area settled by Germans and where their cultural influence was paramount can be found dating from 1925 (see Rössler, 1990).

Nazism incorporated Social Darwinism into its distinctive **fascist** project. It built a provenance for 'race' theory that was developed on mythology and pseudo-science. This included *Rassenhygiene* (the claimed biological foundation for what has now become known as 'ethnic cleansing') and *Lebensraum* (the natural right to territory to the east – indeed, encouraging a sense of duty in Germans to 'civilise' this space). Thus, Nazism can also be characterised as *aggressive nationalism*. That is to say that it was fundamentally and uniquely a murderous state form but one that had extremely sophisticated and explicit territorial ambitions built on nationalist geopolitical thinking. Germany was to be for the Germans (however either term was defined).

In this way Europe was transformed from a 'blank canvas' to an ideologically-charged landscape occupied by people with differentiated rights to citizenship of an exclusive sort because it was defined on racial grounds.

### Social Darwinism

Darwin's account of evolution in the plant and animal kingdoms, and in particular the emphasis upon competition as a mechanism for evolutionary change, found a ready audience in much late nineteenth century social thinking. This mechanism was 'read off' into human affairs, supporting in an apparently scientific way Europe's world-wide imperialist project that was the dominant geopolitics of the time.

The concept also found resonance in the classification of 'the world's races' that acquired a hierarchical structure. In its most extreme form this theory produced the notion of an Aryan super-race and the notion of the *Untermensch* (sub-human).

Much of the language that is still employed to discuss cultural and ethnic differences as racial is uncritically drawn from this Social-Darwinist legacy.

*Figure 1*: Social Darwinism.

## The Holocaust in space

Across Europe the curious traveller can still be surprised by the physical evidence of the period that ended in 1945. By this date, millions had been **extirpated** in the Nazi project of producing a 'citizenry' made uniform on racial grounds. The isolated names on uncomfortable gravestones in rural France give way to longer and more monumental lists in Dutch cities. The density of such encounters increases as one moves east, eventually into eastern Poland with the broad sweep of camps, from Stutthof on the Baltic to the vast industrial death camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau in the south. Further east still, the evidence is present, but the techniques of death were less formal and apart from gross horrors captured in state monuments such as those at Babi Yar and Slutsk, evidence exists in the *absence* of ethnic groups: Roman Vishniac's 'vanished worlds' (1986; see also Wiesel, 1993; Vishniac Kohn and Hartman Flacks, 1999).

This geography has an elective affinity with Nazism's belief-systems, its geopolitics and *Lebensraum*. But the argument here is that space was actively involved in these processes and it is to three brief, important illustrations of this that we now turn.

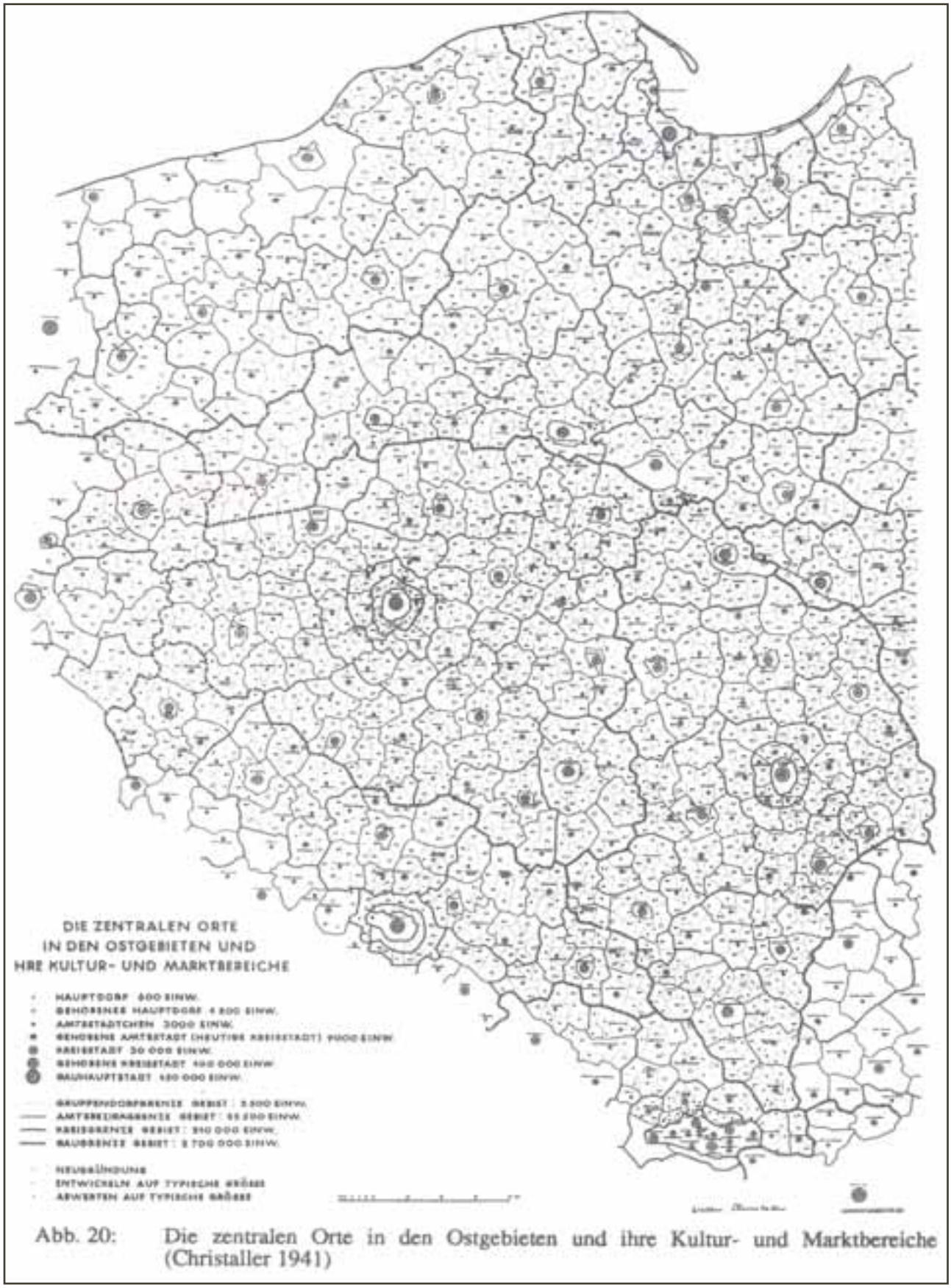


*Figure 2*: Plan for the 'Germanisation' of occupied Poland on 'rational' grounds, 1941. *Source*: Rössler, 1990.

1. The process of elimination of racial groups was tackled systematically and geo-strategically. This remained true throughout the development of the Holocaust mechanisms even though these evolved piecemeal, as one problem after another was resolved. What tied the evolving systems together was their increasing productivity. From the start two clear spatial patterns were established. The first was the clearance of rural areas and the decanting of those displaced into temporary zones in towns and cities – the ghettos. Flows in and out of these ghettos were regulated so that they became instruments of death, but their primary purpose remained as holding areas on the way to the death camps.

   The second was at a larger scale and broadly from west to east, from holding areas like camps near Bergarac or Nancy to the death camps on Poland's eastern borders. Only once an area was *Judenfrei* (free of Jews) were these camps and ghettos closed. Schwarz (1990) identifies hundreds of such sites,

indicating their satellite relationship to larger centres. The choice of such sites was not by chance, but guided by economically-rational decision-making processes like access to transport – particularly railways – as well their isolation and the political views of the local population (Hilberg, 1985). These last two factors contributed to the comparative invisibility of the process across space. Only in the Soviet Union did these two patterns differ. There, the rural to urban movement was present, but the west to east movement did not occur because of the incompatibility of the rail systems. In their place *Einsatzgruppen* (special action groups) exterminated Jews on the battlefield, near their homes or in the ghettos to which they had been transferred. Hundreds of thousands of people were shot dead.

2. The *Ostforschung* project was acted out in various cultural ways. Landscapes were 'germanised' by changes to the architecture; by the creation of distinctive regional governments within an expanding Reich and by the sanctification of agriculture (Adam, 1992). Academic geographers were involved in the planning and delivery of much of this work, legitimating what was being done by their scientific approach. The best known was Walther Christaller, the originator of Central Place Theory (CPT), an economically rational account of the distribution of settlements across landscapes that leant itself admirably to the germanification of landscape. Working in effect as a planning consultant for Reich agencies, Christaller's proposals for northern Poland are shown in Figure 2. Interestingly, CPT is still taught widely in British school geography, though rarely with any reference to its origins.
3. There were differences in the experience of the Holocaust state by state. This is to acknowledge that different state forms produced different views of citizenship – and its inclusivity and exclusivity. This can be glimpsed in the different survival rates state-by-state, or more properly region-by-region within states. There is no easy picture here because state fortunes changed over time and so states were exposed to a Holocaust mechanism of differing efficiency. Hungary can stand as an example here (Braham, 1994). Prior to the final reverses on the Eastern Front, Nazism's fascist allies in Hungary, the Arrow Cross, dealt with 'their' Jews without interference from outside unpleasantly enough by isolation and marginalisation. However, once the alliance disintegrated Hungary was quickly occupied and its Jewish population exposed to fully-developed and murderous Holocaust mechanisms. This is shown in Figures 3 and 4. Aided by effectively organised Arrow Cross members, often working in official capacities, rural areas were quickly emptied and a substantial ghetto was established in

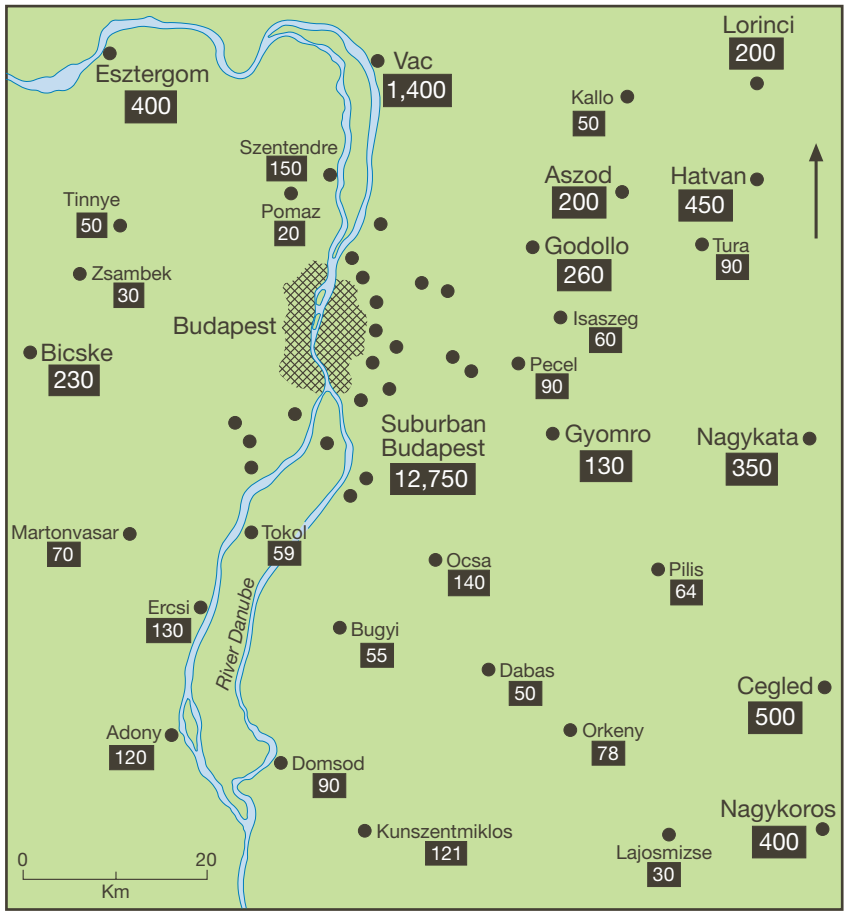


*Figure 3*: Deportation of Hungarian Jews from outlying districts into Budapest.
*Source*: Gilbert: 1984.

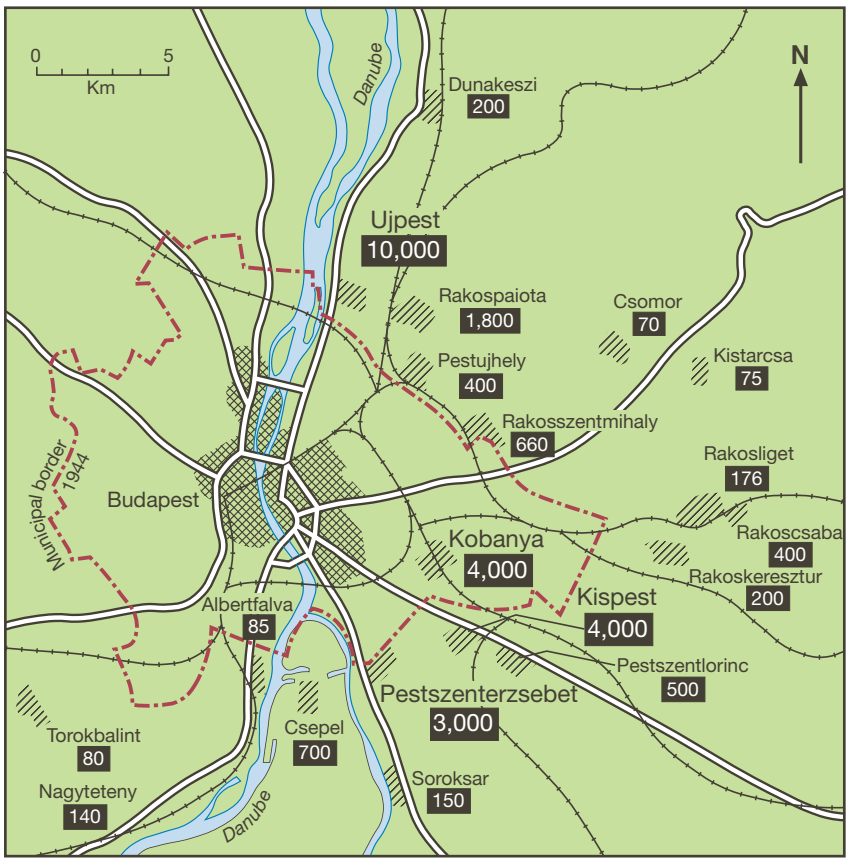


*Figure 4*: Deportation of Hungarian Jews from Budapest's suburbs into the city.
*Source*: Gilbert: 1984.

Budapest. At this stage of the war (1943-44), Auschwitz was working fully and the journey into southern Poland was short. Only the liberation of Budapest early in 1945 prevented the wholesale elimination of Hungarian Jewry (Maté, 1980).

The Holocaust did not just happen anywhere. Its spatial manifestations are interesting enough in their own right, but placed more fully in its spatial (as well as the temporal) context, the event becomes more understandable at the regional and national scale. It is even possible to understand the rightness ordinary citizens felt of their actions when their understanding of people and places (the stuff of human geography) had been shaped and distorted by the products of *Ostforschung*. The 'good citizen' in an aggressive, exclusive, nationalist state is capable of being complicit with evil.

## Some conclusions

*On visiting Auschwitz ... one is very much 'told a story'. The fact that 500,000 people now visit each year somehow influences the experience one will have at Auschwitz. ... You do not have to imagine the daily ritual of life that was done here; it is done for you. The way it is preserved gives us all the evidence we require to place it in our memories as a place symbolising terror. ... It is designed to shock and achieves that amply.*

A trainee geography teacher wrote this following a field visit to southern Poland near the end of the PGCE year. Her point was to open up a current issue well known to many in the social sciences, namely the 'crisis of representation'. By some bizarre coincidence, half a million people per annum was about the same number as passed though Auschwitz when it was functioning as a death camp, and it is said that many, perhaps most, had little idea of what the place was, even when they had passed though the now famous gates. The geography teacher writes that it is a place of terror, forming part of Tuan's 'geography of evil'. But if that is all it is – if that is the only way in which it can be represented – then perhaps its educational power is attenuated. Worse still, on the other hand, would be the notion expressed by other geographers on the same trip, that the death camp is a prime example of Fordist economics at work and an example of a rational least-cost location.

The point we make here is that, reiterating our health warning right at the beginning, teaching the geography of the Holocaust is not something we would want to advocate. Although it has been argued that geography helps understand the Holocaust very few geography teachers are readily equipped to teach it as a topic. However, it may be refreshing for teachers and future students for all subject specialists in the humanities and social sciences to think flexibly and boldly about what their disciplines bring to serving students' educational entitlement. Let us not defend 'subjects' in a series of never-ending turf wars, but promote them as resources that can contribute to, or serve, educational goals. We may have to think hard about this – for example, in geography there is a vast range of opinion on what constitutes the subject, even in terms of its key, threshold concepts. However, Place, Space and Scale are three which would be acceptable to most and it is these that have underpinned this article, though not exclusively of course, for geography is a subject that needs to feed off concepts derived from other fields, not least (in this article) political science.

The question of educational goals is perhaps the subject of another article. But for now it is worth concluding with the probably controversial notion that what separates teachers of geography from geographers in research, planning, etc, is the centrality of the idea of citizenship in their work. Does one teach for the state, or for the benefit of the individuals whose minds one is supposed to be developing? It seems to us that when we plan lessons we have in mind the kind of individuals we are trying to nurture and develop. What we have tried to show here is that human geography (the study of people and places) has the power to contribute to ways of understanding how one of the most shocking human tragedies happened. It can help account for part of the human condition and what it means to be European. ■



### Note

1. This is an edited version of an article from *Teaching History* (Lambert, 2004) based on an original chapter (Machon and Lambert, 2001). The Geographical Association is grateful to the Historical Association for permission to reproduce this text.

### Glossary

**Extirpated** – rooted out or destroyed completely

**Fascist** – person holding extreme right-wing or authoritarian views

**Genocide** – the deliberate extermination of a people or nation

**Holocaust** – the mass-murder of the Jews by the Nazis, 1939-45

**Imperialism** – an empirical rule, extending a country's influence through trade, diplomacy, etc.

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