EUROPEAN **HOLOCAUST**
RESEARCH INFRASTRUCTURE

EHRI-1 Publishable Summary (2015)

Project context and objectives

EHRI has aimed to support the Holocaust research community by providing (online) access to dispersed sources relating to the Holocaust and by encouraging collaborative research through the development of a Portal and Virtual Research Environment (VRE). From October 2010 until March 2015 a consortium of 20 partner institutions and a large network of associate partners have been cooperating by bringing together the expertise and perspectives of three disciplines: Holocaust studies, archival science and e-Research/digital humanities.

EHRI's overriding ambition was to overcome some of the hallmark challenges of Holocaust research – the distributed and dispersed nature of the research materials. Holocaust-related archival material tends to be fragmented and scattered all over the world, making access complicated, if not impossible, as well as very time-consuming. The value of an online portal lies in the ease of access it offers to such dispersed resources, whereas the advantages of universal access to them are obvious.

The dispersal of the sources from the ghetto in Terezín (Theresienstadt in German), one of the major places of persecution of European Jews, perfectly illustrates the difficulties that EHRI has sought to alleviate. Previous to EHRI, In order to consult the most significant archival collections, a researcher had to travel to the Memorial in Terezín, the Jewish Museum in Prague, Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and Beit Theresienstadt in Givat Haim, Israel. For instance, the daily orders of the Terezín commander, one of the major sources of information on the ghetto, have not survived completely in any of the four archives. And most of the original documents stemming from the agenda of the Terezín "Jewish Council of Elders" have been destroyed shortly before liberation, at the orders of the German commander in order to conceal the role of the ghetto in the Holocaust. The extant materials were hidden by prisoners or collected during a documentation project organised in Prague by survivors of Terezín shortly after liberation, and are nowadays spread out across different archives. Thus, in order to

write the history of Terezín and to reconstruct the fate of its victims the dots have to be connected piece to piece.

The European-wide fragmentation and dispersal of the early documentation on Terezín perfectly illustrates the challenges EHRI has sought to address. Indeed, building on integration activities undertaken over the past decades, EHRI has transformed part of the material available for Holocaust research into a cohesive body of sources. Beyond this unique attempt to bring collections together, EHRI activities have ranged from stimulating new research methodologies and an analysis of research needs, via creating models to contextualise integrated content, to providing research support. EHRI has also assessed relevant e-Science standards and technologies to provide a state-of-the-art online research environment for advanced access to these sources.

EHRI has provided researchers with new opportunities to engage with the wider scholarly community and to intensify dissemination activities to society at large. Apart from improving online accessibility to archival sources, the project has enabled access to the foremost existing Holocaust research facilities by enabling researchers to work on-site at a number of leading institutions through its trans-national fellowship programme. EHRI has organised summer courses on Holocaust research and promoted a Europe-wide approach, encouraged local research endeavours to link up and address new questions, shared information, and raised awareness about the Holocaust.

Work performed and main results achieved

Networking

From its very beginning EHRI has ensured that the project reached all its stakeholders and main target groups, and that interested parties received tailored information about its aims, progress and results. Thereby, EHRI has become firmly embedded within the relevant communities of Holocaust research, e-infrastructures, and archival and memory institutions. To achieve this, we have leveraged various tools including the EHRI website, social media, newsletters, formal scientific publications, responding to queries by interested parties, and (assisting in) the organisation of workshops and conferences.

During the project EHRI has organised three major conferences which deserve to be highlighted here. First, in July 2013, EHRI co-organised "Public History of the Holocaust: Historical Research in the Digital Age", that was hosted by the Jewish Museum in Berlin. Facilitated by EHRI and two other European infrastructure projects supporting humanities research, DARIAH and TextGrid, and sponsored by the German Ministry of Education and Research, the conference brought together policy makers,

archival and memory institutions, and academics to reflect on the challenges and opportunities the digital age offers for the public history of the Holocaust. This conference was very successful in highlighting the strategic importance of EHRI's work. In May 2014, EHRI organised a networking conference on "Holocaust Documentation in Eastern Europe" that took place in Krakow and at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. This international conference was designed to comprehensively map the unrecognized and non-accessible sources relating to the history of the Holocaust in Poland and the former Soviet Union, and to strengthen the relationships between those collections and researchers. The expansion of the network of partners in Eastern Europe is crucial for stimulating an integrated approach to the history of the Holocaust as a European phenomenon. On 26 March 2015, EHRI held its final event at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Berlin, where the project presented its results to over 200 guests, including European politicians, renowned Holocaust researchers, archivists, representatives from the Digital Humanities, digital infrastructure and educational experts. One of the highlights of the day was the presentation of the EHRI online portal, that gives access to dispersed Holocaust sources.

Research guides and methodological renewal

The primary aim of the EHRI Research Guides was to create a comprehensive, innovative and easy to use guide on the dispersed and fragmented sources on a particular part of the history of the Holocaust. The Terezín research guide illustrates the primary *raison d'être* of EHRI – to connect collections spread in many archives located in different countries. The guide which is integrated into the portal, https://portal.ehri-project.eu/guides, functions as a gateway to the Terezín archival resources.

The preparation of the Terezín research guide demonstrated that metadata as well as ways of capturing them differ heavily from institution to institution. EHRI analysed the provided information and created the mappings between the different sets of metadata of the partners.

The guide is designed not only for highly professional users, but also with a view to the needs of students, interested members of the public or family members of Terezín prisoners. The second EHRI Research Guide, the Jewish Communities Research Guide, allows users to add more collections of the Jewish communities in Nazi-occupied or dominated Europe in the future.

EHRI has also facilitated exchanges between experts of various methodological subfields of Holocaust documentation through a series of dedicated workshops. The EHRI methodological workshops have forged communities of experts that will continue to flourish and produce new insights. A number of topics were addressed for the first

time in an intimate workshop environment, such as Holocaust Art, physical and digital preservation of Holocaust documentation and early attempts of Holocaust documentation immediately following the war.

Training

An important aim of EHRI has been to stimulate trans-national research into the Holocaust and to create networks for younger researchers. We were eager to provide opportunities to Holocaust researchers not attached to major research networks, especially to those from Eastern Europe. To reach this goal, EHRI has organised 4 highly successful EHRI Summer Schools in Holocaust Studies in respectively Paris, Tutzing/Munich, Jerusalem and Amsterdam. Each Summer School lasted 3 weeks with 12 trainees each. The trainees were offered an up-to-date curriculum focusing on an overview of methods, sources and on-going research. The curriculum included an introduction into how to use metadata, integrated data collections and collaboration opportunities in such research on the EHRI portal.

In addition, EHRI has set up an online course in Holocaust studies on the graduate level (http://training.ehri-project.eu). With both activities, the Summer Schools and the online course, EHRI has given trans-national research into the Holocaust an important impetus.

Trans-national access

This part of the EHRI program provided direct opportunities for researchers. Through a dedicated scholarship program, EHRI has offered access to a number of leading institutions. Researchers could apply through EHRI for a short-term fellowship at five existing research infrastructures: Institut für Zeitgeschichte in Munich, Jewish Museum Prague, Mémorial de la Shoah in Paris, NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies in Amsterdam and Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

Calls for applications were issued and circulated widely in 2012, 2013 and 2014. Overall 179 applications were received for the EHRI fellowship program. The panel of experts selected 42 users from 12 countries to spend around a month at one of the 5 participating EHRI institutions to further their Holocaust-related research project. All in all, this adds up to a total of 168 weeks of trans-national access provided by EHRI. By offering access to these existing infrastructures EHRI has supported and stimulated especially junior academics, Postdocs, PhD candidates with limited resources and researchers from Eastern Europe.

Joint research activities

User requirements

An effective and efficient research infrastructure must be based on in-depth knowledge of user requirements. Substantial effort has been invested to survey and interview researchers as well as archival experts at partner sites. 277 researchers have responded to a web survey and 22 in-depth interviews have been held. The interviews and surveys gave a range of qualitative and quantitative indicators on how to advance with our research and development work. The interviews also led to the establishment of a Research Users Advisory Committee. The researchers were regularly consulted to comment and feedback as the user requirements for the project were developed. All the information gathered was used to formulate 10 detailed recommendations about the data environment of the EHRI portal, and 78 end-user functional requirements. These insights into the heterogeneous metadata landscape of EHRI as well as the work with the users were crucial to develop an effective approach with regard to the integration of collections into the EHRI VRE/Portal.

Investigating collections

One of EHRI's key tasks was the investigative work undertaken into the existing archives and collections in such a way that this identification work would directly benefit the researcher. The focus for the historical identification work has been especially on those archives that are not part of larger infrastructures and are 'hidden' to most researchers.

We undertook the identification work within a structured framework, leading from the identification of relevant countries and institutions to the investigation of Holocaust-related collections. On the country level, we have composed and published 47 country reports that helped to structure and prioritise our further research in each country. In consulting these summaries, the reader can get a clear and concise overview of why the country is being researched and what the current state of knowledge and access to Holocaust-related archives in this country is; including an overview of EHRI's identification work.

On the level of institutions, we have identified over 1,800 archives, libraries, museums, memorial sites etc. that hold Holocaust-related documentation and that would benefit from research-oriented integrating activities. Details about all identified institutions have been entered in the EHRI Portal.

On the collection level, we have developed an environment to provide high-quality descriptions for relevant collections, including the hidden ones. We have undertaken in-depth surveys of the Holocaust related archival landscape in the Baltic states, Ukraine,

Croatia, Czech Republic, Greece and Belgium. Our in-depth survey work has resulted in more than 3,000 new archival descriptions of Holocaust-relevant material. In addition, existing survey information was identified and procured on Belarus, the Netherlands and Poland.

Standards and Thesaurus

The establishment of a portal connecting dispersed collections and archives related to the Holocaust called for the use of international standards. Through the Standards work, it became clear that we could not simply rely on the implementation of metadata standards to support the integration of sources. A key reason was that institutions differ heavily in the metadata they use and in the way they apply the metadata towards the various parts of their systems. For the portal, we have been looking for a new integration approach that would require the least possible effort from the partners.

Part of the work on standards was the creation of a multilingual thesaurus combining existing efforts in the domain of Holocaust research, and its subsequent transformation into a reusable linked data representation. Through the extension of the existing SKOS vocabulary, it was possible to incorporate the thesaurus terms in 11 languages. Basing our work on existing thesauri we have created an agreed-on list of thesaurus entries that takes into account the diversity and linguistic sensitivity. The translations of the thesaurus keywords in the various languages resulted in a total of 13,437 entries (keyword) labels.

Virtual Research Environment

All our joint research and development work has culminated in the development of the EHRI Portal/VRE that provides free online access to all the information integrated and created during the EHRI project, as well as to a suite of tools that enable retrieval, exploration, analysis and sharing.

The EHRI Portal/VRE is built upon the Metadata Registry that stores and facilitates the retrieval of all the metadata ingested or created during the project. Technically, the Metadata Registry is based upon graph database technology. We have chosen a graph database solution, as it has allowed us maximum flexibility which is crucial to enable (future) integration of the highly heterogeneous resources we have identified.

The registry contains the standardised EHRI thesaurus, authority records, country reports, and descriptions of institutions and their archival material. EHRI has imported archival description metadata from 24 sources, which included exports from archival catalogue software, indexing services, structured books, and spread sheets. In total, the Portal provides access to more than 150,000 descriptions of archival materials.

An end-user interface has been created that allows researchers to explore, annotate and share the information content of the EHRI Portal/VRE. The conception of the end-user interface was significantly informed by our work on user requirements. The portal allows a flexible combination of browse and search strategies for data exploration, enables public and private annotations of all information objects, and allows researchers to connect and share information through features known from popular social media sites such as "following".

The Portal/VRE was launched in Berlin on 26 March 2015. It has been very positively received and already features over 500 registered users, and currently attracts more than 170 unique visitors a day.

Final results

EHRI has begun a movement for integrating Holocaust material and Holocaust researchers. It has delivered a dynamic, research-driven online environment where new material can be integrated and collaboration on content can develop. EHRI will continue to build on the movement towards more cooperation and integration in a four-year follow-up programme (EHRI-2), supported through the European Union's Horizon 2020 programme. It wants to remain a focal point for this movement and aims to constitute an important node in a network of new digital services that enable access to humanities data across Europe. This is also relevant for the larger public, as its research topic is deeply rooted in the development of European societies.