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## Historian: Imagination, interpretation key in seeing, believing Holocaust photos

MARY ELLEN WRIGHT Correspondent Apr 14, 2012

What kind of evidence do you need to prove a crime was committed: forensic studies, newspaper photos, eyewitness accounts, all of the above?

And what if the crime was part of one of the 20th century's most notorious of mass killings, the Holocaust?

"Sometimes seeing is believing, and sometimes seeing is not believing," David Shneer, a history professor and director of Jewish studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder, said in a recent phone interview.

In his keynote address, "Is Seeing Believing: Soviet Photography, Extermination Camps and the Tension between Sight and Science" - at Millersville University's 32nd annual Conference on the Holocaust and Genocide - Shneer will discuss the 2003-09 research that led to his 2010 book, "Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War and the Holocaust."

The book details the work of an elite group of Soviet Jewish photojournalists who documented Nazi atrocities years before Western journalists covered the liberation of death camps such as Dachau and Buchenwald.

Shneer's book contains dozens of images captured by these photographers before, during and after World War II, including graphic ones of the bodies of some of the thousands of Jews killed by the Nazis in the Russian city of Kerch. The city was occupied by the Germans, then liberated by the Soviet army in the final months of 1941.

Shneer, a Jew of Russian descent, interviewed relatives of the late Soviet photographers and found photos in archives and private family collections.

"There's a difference between photojournalism and documentary photography," Shneer noted. These photojournalists "very clearly ... had a list of instructions from their editor: Go photograph material that would be useful for the press." What's useful "for any press during wartime is to mobilize the population, if you want to keep fighting a horrible war."

nAt the MU conference, Shneer will also talk about scientific approaches to determining exactly what happened at sites such as Sobibor, a Nazi extermination camp in Poland that was closed following a prisoner uprising in 1943, buried with earth, and planted over with young trees.

"In 2008, a team of archaeological researchers started to try and see if they could use archeological techniques to re-situate what happened" in what is now a forest, Shneer said. That's what got him interested in "this question of what we think we see. They were taking pictures above the ground to try to match what happened below the ground. ... How do you find evidence of a crime that took place there 60 years ago? It's essentially a forensic exercise."

The Soviets at Sobibor "saw it as a place where Germans committed war crimes, and their goal was to document those war crimes. So, they took photographs, and they dug holes and they exhumed bodies, and they had scientists, and they had photographers and other kinds of researchers there," Shneer said.

"It's all about conjuring up what you can't see. Because there's nothing in front of you. The crime has already taken place."

Shneer noted that, while Soviet photographers were documenting Nazi atrocities, "the Soviet secret police ... were also conducting their own mass shootings of people and digging their own graves throughout the Soviet countryside."

nAt the conference, Shneer also plans to discuss the 1940 Katyn Forest massacre in Russia, in which the Soviet secret police killed thousands of Polish citizens in the forest and then buried the evidence.

The invading German army "discovered this place buried in the forest in early '43," Shneer said, "and they started circulating their photographs. 'Look, look what the Soviets did. We have evidence'. ... And, I'm telling you, those photographs look just like the Kerch photographs.

"Who's to say who did what? Who's to say that this photograph proves 'A' person's story versus 'B' person's story? So this is where some of the questions about science can come in, as well - the tension between science and sight," Shneer said.

Shneer said he found it interesting that both the photojournalists at Kerch and the archaeologists at Sobibor used photographs to try to demonstrate that atrocities had been committed by the Nazis.

"Science is based on imagination, so, ultimately, I don't think there is a huge difference between sight and science," Shneer said. "It's all about interpretation, which means more opinions ... more pictures, more 'I saw this' is what we need. But everything is about interpretation."

*Shneer will deliver his keynote address at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, April 19, in the Lehr Room of Bolger Conference Center in MU's Gordinier Hall. For more information on the April 17-20 free, public sessions, visit [millersville.edu/holocon](http://millersville.edu/holocon).*

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