

Ethnic origins and deaths at Auschwitz*

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Bouie’s article on the trans-Atlantic slave trade details the SlaveVoyages database, a comprehensive tool that documents the trans-Atlantic slave trade (O’Neill 2024). SlaveVoyages began as a physical CD-ROM, but in 2019 has expanded into an online website funded by grants and private investors. Documenting over 36 000 voyages that occurred during the trans-Atlantic slave trade, along with the personal details of over 95 000 enslaved Africans onboard, SlaveVoyage’s not only helps historians track the “most magnificent drama in the last thousand years of human history,” but connects some modern-day African-Americans to their heritage (Bouie 2022). Although a boon for the aforementioned, throughout his article, Bouie emphasizes the importance for statistical researchers to prevent themselves from dehumanizing the dataset into mere values and figures.

Similar to certain aspects of SlaveVoyages, we created an interactive graph and table using Shiny, a tool for building interactive web applications. This allows users to select specific ethnic groups and visualise the number of deaths that occurred in Auschwitz. Just as SlaveVoyages provides a detailed look at the trans-Atlantic slave trade, our project aimed to shed light on the scale of the Holocaust’s impact across different nationalities through user-driven exploration (Chang et al. 2023).

Through his experiences developing infographics about the slave trade and interviews with researchers, Bouie stresses the importance for everyone to understand the story behind the data. He contends that reducing the stories of millions of slaves to tables and figures is a form of objectification, akin to the enslaved who were objects bought and sold for profit.

The website we developed glaringly illustrates Bouie’s central worry. Our primary goal when developing the interactive graph and table was to increase user-interaction and facilitate more learning about Auschwitz. We initially hypothesized that by allowing the user to directly engage with the content, it would connect the user more closely with the material. However, we notice that although the ability for the user to select various demographics exists, the simple look of the portal and colourful aesthetic completely dehumanizes millions that died during Auschwitz (Berenbaum 2024). The aesthetic selected for our website infantilizes the

*<https://posit.cloud/content/7916437>, <https://github.com/alexandersunliang/Ethnic-origins-and-deaths-at-Auschwitz.git>

horrors that occurred throughout World War II. If we compare it to the SlaveVoyages website, we see they approach the sensitive topic with a darker, monotone colour palette that more accurately represents the somber content. Furthermore, their website is populated with an astounding amount of information on the trans-Atlantic slave trade that provides background and perspective to the data. On the other hand, in our graph, a single pink bar represents the horrific deaths of over a million people.

Although we accomplished our initial goal of developing an educational interactive website, we leave many elements to be desired. According to Bouie's philosophy on data, we should take further inspiration from SlaveVoyages and keep in mind the stories behind the data. Additional articles on Auschwitz, autobiographies from survivors, and a UI design change are all exceptionally important aspects that should be considered. When working with sensitive data, it is essential to consider the ramifications behind how that data is used and represented.

References

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