

Perpetrators of the Holocaust – Significance and problems of knowledge transfer regarding new findings of Holocaust research in the historical-political education of young people

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Even almost 70 years later, the studies of the genocide of European Jews by the National Socialists mean more than an analysis of historical data. It is a matter of coming to terms with one of the biggest crimes in the history of humanity and of doing everything so that racial hatred, anti-semitism and genocide are reduced.

In teaching about the events between 1933 and 1945, the National Socialist ideology, the planning, preparation and execution of Nazi crimes and, above all, the history of Holocaust victims have so far provided the main focus. In taking the perspective of the individuals, who were deprived of their rights, persecuted or murdered, it was possible to approach the events primarily from a biographical aspect and to illustrate that it was not only a matter of abstract numbers of murdered victims but that the Holocaust represents a great variety of murdered individuals and therefore life designs and histories, which were violently and prematurely brought to an end.

The analysis of the genocide started early; the historical events were partly reviewed already in the Nuremberg trials of the International Military Tribunal. They were followed by initial documentations; the first life histories of the survivors offered insights into the world of the concentration and extermination camps. Then came the scientific research; the appraisals in literature, theatres, films and subsequently on TV offered opportunities to approach the subject and so did school textbooks or special studies.

It is obvious today that biographical and individual histories and perspectives in particular enable young people to develop empathy in their historical-political education. The story of Anne Frank may be mentioned here as a core example. Addressing the fate of individuals helps in recognising the dimensions of mass murder and in making them comprehensible.

The perspectives have changed over time, just as teaching techniques have changed. But even the newest multimedia opportunities can only be as good as their content. It is therefore a good thing that the Spielberg Foundation, for example, and the Shoah Visual History Archive it created at the University of Southern California have conducted comprehensive interviews with the last witnesses at a time, which must be regarded as late but not too late. As a result, even later generations may access these collective histories. When these video documents are available for research and teaching at Freie Universität Berlin (Free University of Berlin), young students may also work with this material and may literally build their own picture and find their individual approach to the subject.

But the collective knowledge about the genocide of European Jewry and the sequences of individual crimes have led to a situation, where we do not only have greater knowledge about

the victims. In January 2009, Berlin was the venue of the international conference on “Perpetrator Research in a Global Context”, which was hosted by the German Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (Federal Agency for Civic Education). Today's knowledge about the perpetrators of National Socialist violence and the Holocaust was presented, analysed and discussed in several panels and workshops. Again and again, issues of how to teach these issues were at the centre of attention; and they included the integration of perpetrator research in the teaching and information services of memorials and schools.

Consequently, several examples will be given below to illustrate the resulting challenges, opportunities and limitations. They are at the same time the results of presentations and discussions in the workshop on “Teaching and Learning about perpetrators in Schools and Non-Formal Education”, which was held during the Bundeszentrale conference.

With the help of two introductory presentations and two practical examples, the workshop addressed the significance and status of the analysis of National Socialist perpetrators in civic education and they also included key problems in addressing the issue of National Socialist perpetrators as well as other challenges for teaching practice.

Falk Pingel (Brunswick, Germany) analysed the presentation of perpetrators in German school textbooks. He made it clear that violent National Socialist crimes are given quite considerable space in these books, but there are hardly any “perpetrator profiles” or attempts to find individual explanations for their involvement in these crimes. In contrast, there is a large number of individual witness reports or sources featuring the victims’ life histories, which have been used since the mid-1960s to assist students in finding an emphatic approach. But there now is a concern of “exposing oneself to criticism of egalitarianism or parallelism, when such a methods of individualisation are also used to ‘understand’ the perpetrators’ biographies“.

A perpetrator’s biography could also make the crime comprehensible and understandable - those are the fears - and it could therefore lead to the misunderstanding that the crime would be excusable or pardonable. Furthermore, there are practical problems such as the limited time available to teach this material in the classroom, as an analysis of individual biographies would require time and represent a special methodological approach. Falk Pingel concluded that the previous presentation of the developmental stages of National Socialist violence is a good prerequisite for including the perpetrators’ biographies in school textbooks and classroom teaching. The development of materials for the authors of school textbooks, which would then didactically counter the above-mentioned fears, is another challenge for educational practice.

In the discussion, there was a clear wish for easily accessible, didactically prepared materials for integrating the perpetrators’ biographies in classroom teaching. The participants also highlighted the problem of an adequate presentation of social processes in the National Socialist period, the fundamental problem of the multi-faceted preparedness to conform to the system and the widespread support for persecution and oppression in daily life, which all complemented the direct perpetration of the crimes.

Paul A. Levine (Uppsala) put the question of the motivation, the “why“, at the centre of his methodological considerations for dealing with National Socialist perpetrators in schools and higher education. He referred to the fact that - in the triad of the “perpetrator, victim, bystander” perspectives - the victims’ perspective must necessarily dominate, but it must be complemented by a presentation of the actions and the perpetrators. The educational challenge

in dealing with the perpetrators is not to stop at illustrating their motivations but to show the individual choices of every National Socialist perpetrator and to make it clear that every crime had been preceded by a conscious decision. If and when the perpetrators' decision-making processes and choices were exposed, the teaching would go beyond a mere presentation of the crime and the victim.

In his methodological considerations, Levine pointed to an analysis of perpetrator documents, which is close to and critical of the sources and puts them in their proper context; and he demonstrated the opportunities of such an analysis with the help of several impressive texts. He also considered this as an opportunity to counter the sometimes visible onset of "Holocaust fatigue". He regarded the question as unresolved whether the fascination of evil would be greater than the interest in the history of the victims. But the careful inclusion and analysis of perpetrator documents and the stories of their crimes in particular would offer a very good opportunity for a broader perspective. Levine also stressed the necessity for broadly based teaching of the subject in teacher training and of making good material available to the teachers.

This position was widely supported in the discussion. At the same time there were doubts whether "Holocaust education" would in fact be more extensively included in the future training of German teachers.

Using the practical project of "Representing the Holocaust in Graphic Novels", Julia Sarbo (Amsterdam) and Patrick Siegele (Berlin) explained the use of the graphic novel "The Search/Die Suche" in the classroom and in non-formal historical-political education. This material, which was prepared by Anne Frank House in cooperation with other organisations, works from four perspectives (victims, helpers, bystanders and perpetrators) and uses a fictional story, which is based on many true stories of persecution.

An evaluation in Germany has shown that more than 80% of all students and teachers interviewed had a very positive view of the material; more differentiated didactical materials are developed at the moment. The fears of showing some sort of "TinTin in Auschwitz", i.e. of trivialising the Holocaust through this new methodological approach, were not confirmed at all. In the discussion, the participants also referred to the opportunities offered by the previous approaches using graphic novels such as Art Spiegelman's "Mouse". They represented an enlargement of the former approaches with the victims' reports of their suffering or presentations in literature.

Akim Jah (Berlin) presented the concept of working with statements made by staff of the Berlin secret police (Gestapo), as it was developed by the Berlin Arbeitskreis Konfrontationen e. V. (Confrontations Working Group). Using an introductory text and some guiding questions, he presented biographical information and statements, which were made by staff of the Berlin Dispatch Office of the Gestapo during the preliminary judicial inquiries against them in the 1960s. These statements could be analysed in individual or group study sessions. In the discussion, it was made clear that this is a methodologically very demanding concept, whose realisation required a lot of time, extensive knowledge by the teachers and a broad conceptualisation and interpretation of the available sources.

On the whole, the findings of this international conference show that the integration of the findings of perpetrator research into the teaching of history/political education in schools and out-of-school settings may be a very good complement to formerly used approaches.

It was also obvious that there was a wish to have sound and classroom-adapted curricula and materials and to include them in teacher training. It also became clear that the presentation of such complex events as the genocide of European Jewry calls for committed teachers in full command of their subject. In this respect, science - that means both history and education - must show them viable routes to enable many perspectives in the comprehension of a crime, which we are a long way from understanding. Prerequisites for this understanding are a careful and sensitive approach and “a very close look at the matter” (to quote Wolfgang Scheffler, the recently deceased doyen of German Holocaust research).