

University Tuzla
Philosophical Faculty
Department for History



Winter semester 2014/2015

Elective course: "After the traces of our neighbors: Jews in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Holocaust"¹

Titel of the lecture:

„Teaching about the Holocaust in different education systems“²

Guest lecturer:

Dr. Falk PINGEL, Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research and „Erinnern.at“ Austrian governmental organization for Education about the Holocaust

Tuzla, 11/12/2014

Teaching about the Holocaust: *From a national or European to a global event*

The classroom is a meeting point of various societal interests that strive to influence content and methodology of the teaching process. Roughly speaking three different spheres of influence can be differentiated: educational policy, research and pedagogy:

- *The political authorities* who are usually represented through a state-commissioned curriculum that defines the learning aims: why should something being taught and, in the case of history, be remembered?
- *Subject-oriented research* provides the realm of knowledge, theoretical models and explanatory sets that developers of curricula and authors of textbook have to take into account. Content and methodology should be in accordance with

¹ This elective course has been financed by the EU within the Europe for Citizens project „After the traces of our neighbors: Jews in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Holocaust“.

² „Podučavanje o holokaustu u različitim obrazovnim sistemima“



research findings. However, research findings are often controversial. Furthermore, they do not offer clear criteria for the selection of specific content that should be taught.

- *Pedagogy* sets limits as to what can be taught to pupils of a certain age group in a limited period of time. It defines what is comprehensible to students in terms of their intellectual capacity and what is digestible for them. The pedagogical framework of a classroom is strongly shaped by national or even regional conditions and often depend on various factors (number of students per classroom, frontal teaching - vs. student-centered teaching, fact-oriented memorization vs. development of critical thinking; chronological vs. thematic approach).

The dominance of a nation-centered approach

Up until now, in most countries of the world history is essentially taught as history of nations rather than as "history of mankind".³ As a rule, national history forms the core of the curriculum and makes up the largest part of schoolbook contents. The adjacency towards one's own national history is the guiding selection criterion in regard to international content.

Roughly speaking till the turn of the century the position of the Holocaust in the curriculum was heavily dependent on the particular national political and pedagogical traditions of teaching history. This context-dependency has resulted in different teaching objectives and different forms of teaching and learning the Holocaust.

In most countries of the perpetrators and victims, the Holocaust has been part of the still prevailing chronological approach to history which ranges from Ancient times to the present.

Regarding Germany as the country of the perpetrators, one of the crucial interpretative issues has been the question if and how the Holocaust can be integrated into the continuity of German history. The remembrance of crimes committed by one's own nation or state poses a severe challenge: How can the reference to a 'negative past' be incorporated in a 'positive' historical consciousness?

The question why and how the Nazi dictatorship developed into a genocidal system is still a pressing issue for young Germans. In the past, German textbook authors strove to show to the students the step by step conversion of the German state institutions from an already shaken democracy to a violent dictatorial system in order

³ I draw in the following on Falk Pingel (2014) *The Holocaust in textbooks: from a European to a global event*, In: *Holocaust Education in a Global Context*, eds. Karel Fracapane and Mathias Haß, Paris: UNESCO, pp. 77-87; see also Falk Pingel (2001) *Teaching the Holocaust in Its Own Right – a reassessment of current pedagogical orientations*. In: *Beiträge zur historischen Sozialkunde, Special Issue 2001: Teaching the Holocaust and National Socialism*, pp. 3-10 and Falk Pingel (2006) *From Evasion to a Crucial Tool of Moral and Political Education: Teaching National Socialism and the Holocaust in Germany*. In: *What Shall We Tell the Children? International Perspectives on School History Textbooks*, eds. Stuart J. Foster/Keith A. Crawford, Greenwich/Conn.: Information Age Publishing, pp. 131-153.



to explain how the Holocaust and other mass crimes could happen. One could say: understanding the unfolding of the dictatorship was regarded more important than confrontation and empathy with its victims. This approach changed only with the 1970' and 1980's when the focus shifted to the victims.

Also in countries which were occupied by Germany the Holocaust was addressed within the context of national history for a long time. However, the persecution of the Jews was not at the center of dealing with persecution and resistance, since the Jews represented only a minority of the population, and in addition they did not belong to the nucleus of the nation and national remembrance that focussed on heroism, resistance and suffering of the majority population.

Trends to demythologize national history which had arisen since the 1970s and gained further ground after the collapse of the Soviet system opened up debates on the inter-relatedness of the majority population and minorities during Nazi occupation. These debates questioned the dominance of the paradigm of resistance, and placed more emphasis on collaboration, indifference and apathy, and suffering.

Through questioning the traditional national paradigm, a more humane narrative evolved dealing with the moral challenges a dictatorial system poses to its people. These developments made the curricula more responsive to allot more space to and emphasis on the persecution and suffering of the Jews as one of the most significant events of the Second World War. The image of the war itself changed as well. The presentation of military events has become less important whereas the impact of the war on the people – soldiers as well as civilians – has become a focus using biographical accounts, illustrations etc.

However, with the breakdown of the Soviet system competing memories emerged putting mass crimes committed by communist states on par with the Holocaust. These developments have sometimes led to problematic results. For some countries, like the Baltic states, communist persecution seem to be closer to the people who have still fresh memories of it. Consequently, the Nazi persecution is often treated less extensively than the communist terror. In Russia, it is often only treated in passing because it does not fit into the image of communist resistance and brave fighting against the Nazis which is still dominating the memory of the "Great Patriotic War" how the Second World War is called in Russia.

Conceptualizing the Holocaust as a universal paradigm: achievements and pitfalls

International trials, increasing thematic research, and the implementation of transitional justice in post-conflict areas after the Holocaust have further developed the understanding of „crimes against humanity“ and „genocide“ with the Holocaust as the prime example. This almost world-wide development had also an impact on the educational sector of countries which were not affected by the Holocaust. Many of these countries have integrated the teaching about the Holocaust in their curricula and textbooks over the last twenty years. Here, persecution and annihilation of the

Jews under National Socialism are dealt with because they represent a monstrous event of universal significance.

The Holocaust is seen as a paradigmatic event irrespectively of its relation to one's own national history.

An international or even global approach to history shows more clearly than a nation-centred narrative that certain historical events have different meanings in different national contexts, whereas others seem to have a global significance beyond the particular national narratives. Authors of history textbooks in Western Europe pay increasingly attention to commemoration procedures and politics of remembrance to enable students to understand the processes of shifting memories which are not fixed through the historic events but influenced by interests people have in history.

The German-French history textbook documents this in an exemplary way; it presents pictures of Holocaust memorial sites in different parts of the world posing the question to students why, on the one hand, the Holocaust is being remembered at all these places, and why, on the other hand, the size, the design and the function of the memorial places differ.⁴

In general, a presentation of the Holocaust which de-contextualizes it from its concrete historical background leaves aside a detailed description of the Nazi's rise to power and the establishment of their system of domination and suppression.⁵ Taking into account the limited teaching time designated for addressing the murder and persecution of Jews under National Socialist rule, curricula tend to concentrate on the worst phases of this history and have little opportunity to deal with the various steps from discrimination and exclusion to extermination. Explanations remain on a more general level such as the influence of racism and anti-Semitism.

A shortcoming of de-contextualization of the Holocaust is that it is often unconnected to the wide range of (Nazi) racist persecution which was directed, amongst others, also against the Sinti and Roma and handicapped people. Although textbook authors take the Holocaust as "pars pro toto", it often remains the only case of genocide that is taught in detail, so that the totality and diversity of the racist threat is never really addressed. An analysis of U.S. textbooks has found that some of the textbooks mention only Jews as victims of Nazi racism.⁶

Some countries still reject the inclusion of the Holocaust into their curricula; in this case, politically endorsed strategies of active denial are often at work (like in some

⁴ *Histoire/Geschichte. L'Europe et le monde depuis 1945/Europa und die Welt seit 1945* (2006). Eds. Guillaume le Quintrec/Peter Geiss, Paris: Nathan/Stuttgart: Klett, pp. 36-37.

⁵ Dan Diner (2007) *Gegenläufige Gedächtnisse. Über Geltung und Wirkung des Holocaust*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, critically comments on the separation of the Holocaust from the Second War context in public commemoration.

⁶ David Lindquist (2009) *The Coverage of the Holocaust in High School History Textbooks*. In: *Social Education*, 73(6): 298-304

countries of the Middle East).⁷ However, sometimes it is also felt that the Holocaust is alien to one's own history and takes students' minds off one's own traumatization in recent history. The dissemination of Holocaust education is interpreted as a new kind of cultural hegemony of Western experience.

In contrast to this, we find in some Croatian, Serbian and Bosnian textbooks an almost inflationary use of the term genocide which is applied also to state-committed killings by the enemy that occurred in Early Modern History or the Middle Ages. In this way, it is insinuated that the enemy has shown a genocidal behaviour over centuries.⁸

Comparative approaches if not carefully performed tend to simplify matters. Some Chinese textbooks show pictures of the Holocaust when dealing with the massacre in the city of Nanjing committed by Japanese troops during the Second World War. The message is clear: the acts of the Japanese troops represent a "Holocaust" or "genocide". The Holocaust is not treated in "its own right", it used as a symbol to explain other events.⁹ In these cases, the Holocaust - or the term "genocide" - is seen as an acknowledged universal symbol which is referred to in order to present one's own history more convincingly.

Since the universal approach takes the Holocaust as a paradigm for genocide in general, it is open for comparative views to other instances of genocide. A comparative approach should enable students to make distinctions and identify similarities as well as differences. This is easily said; it is, however, more difficult to make comparisons in classroom. Often, students are so captured by the tremendous horror of the Holocaust and have so many questions in order to understand why it could happen that they are not able to treat another example with the same attention, engagement and accurateness. The transfer of knowledge remains one of the most ambitious learning objectives of a universal approach to the teaching of the Holocaust.

Particularly when the Holocaust is interpreted as an event of global significance, it has to be localized and personalized in order to transmit a didactical message that makes the global significance of the event applicable to students' views and experiences. The diary of Anne Frank has become such an individual document with a global message that can be found in history textbooks world-wide. It seems to be so persuasive because it encapsulates both, the desperate situation of the persecuted which does not offer any route of escaping death in the end, and the

⁷ Gilbert Achcar (2010) *The Arabs and the Holocaust: the Arab-Israeli war of narratives*. Transl. by G. M. Goshgarian, London: Saqi; Goetz Nordbruch (2002) *Narrating Palestinian Nationalism. A study of the new Palestinian textbooks*. Washington: The Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI).

⁸ Falk Pingel (2004) „Sicher ist, dass...der Völkermord nicht mit Hitler begann und leider auch nicht mit ihm endet.“ *Das Thema „Völkermord“ als Gegenstand von Unterricht und Schulbuch*. In: *Genozide und staatliche Gewaltverbrechen im 20. Jahrhundert*, eds. Verena Radkau/Eduard Fuchs/Thomas Lutz, Wien: Studienverlag

⁹ Ju-back Shin (2012) *The Second World War in World History Textbooks of Korea, China and Japan*. In *History Education and Reconciliation – comparative perspectives on East Asia*. Eds. Un-suk Han/Takahiro Kondo/Biao Yang/Falk Pingel, Frankfurt/M: Peter Lang, pp. 119-134.



search for alternative options that help not giving up hope and keeping social, human behavior alive as long as possible.

Concentrating on persecution and suffering always bears the danger of “victimization”, i.e. viewing the Jews solely as victims of persecution.

To deepen students’ understanding of the concrete situation victims as well as perpetrators were exposed to a variety of teaching programs have been developed that strive to confront students with the problem of choice under constraints: How would I have acted in a similar situation? Teaching materials with a general human rights approach address issues of behavioural attitudes and moral choices. They ask for the students’ personal moral and emotional involvement.

Such teaching requires a classroom situation that allows for an open debate and needs teachers who are able to handle emotional statements. Teachers often use role play and simulation – pedagogical tools that are not easily applicable in the normal classroom situation. All the more so it is important that the teaching material offers approaches/sources that allow to individualize victims as well as perpetrators.

Often, the teaching focuses on the victims in order to arouse empathy and understanding. As important this may be, it has little value if the reasons and motivations of the perpetrators are not addressed also. Furthermore, the dichotomy of victim and perpetrator should be dissolved as this dichotomy transmits too simple a model of dictatorship in modern mass society. Research offers more sophisticated models that can easily be understood by students; Raul Hilberg’s triad of perpetrators, victims, and bystanders can be differentiated further.¹⁰

The social and ideological background of perpetrators has triggered a controversial academic debate. The explanatory models range from the concept of “ordinary men” to “willing executioners”.¹¹ In spite of the many sources available which deal with stories of perpetrators the teaching material still tends to transmit a simplified image of perpetrators concentrating on leading figures like Hitler and Himmler or members of the SS.

Summing up

Important factors:

Overall content in which the treatment of the Holocaust is embedded: National history, Second World War, General history (genocide)

Focus: Victims – perpetrators

Challenges: facts – emotions.

¹⁰ Raul Hilberg (1993) *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders. The Jewish Catastrophe 1933-1945*. New York: Harper Perennial.

¹¹ Christopher Browning (1992) *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. New York: HarperCollins; Daniel Goldhagen (1996) *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and The Holocaust*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf

