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Das mehrsprachige Webportal publiziert fortlaufend Informationen zur historisch-politischen Bildung in Schulen, Gedenkstätten und anderen Einrichtungen zur Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts. Schwerpunkte bilden der Nationalsozialismus, der Zweite Weltkrieg sowie die Folgegeschichte in den Ländern Europas bis zu den politischen Umbrüchen 1989.

Dabei nimmt es Bildungsangebote in den Fokus, die einen Gegenwartsbezug der Geschichte herausstellen und bietet einen Erfahrungsaustausch über historisch-politische Bildung in Europa an.

Sybil Milton

## **Holocaust Education in the United States and Germany**

### **Unique or universal?**

Recent historical research in the United States and Germany does not support the conventional argument that the Jews were the only victims of Nazi genocide. True, the murder of Jews by the Nazis differed from the Nazis' killing of political and foreign opponents because it was based on the genetic origin of the victims, not on their behavior. The Nazi regime applied a consistent and inclusive policy of –extermination—based on heredity—only against three groups of human beings: the handicapped, Jews, and Sinti and Roma ("Gypsies"). The Nazis killed multitudes, including political and religious opponents, members of the resistance, elites of conquered nations, and homosexuals, but always based these murders on the beliefs, actions, and status of those victims. Different criteria applied only to the murder of the handicapped, Jews, and "Gypsies." Members of these groups could not escape their fate by changing their behavior or belief. They were selected because they existed. Although this fact had already been uncovered at the Nuremberg trials, only recently has research on the German health-care system and the involvement of German scientists—physicians, psychiatrists, anthropologists, and geneticists—explored its implications.

What is unique in the Holocaust is the systematic nature of state organized criminality and the constantly widening terror and brutality of the coercive institutions that made the Nazi regime different from other governments. What is universal is that inquiry into the Holocaust provides critical lessons for understanding contemporary ethnic cleansing in the Balkans and Africa. The Holocaust provides us with an awareness that democratic institutions and values are not automatically sustained; and that the Holocaust occurred because individuals, organizations, and governments made choices which legalized discrimination and permitted hatred and murder to occur. The broader definition of the Holocaust have led Israeli scholars to express their fear that this history could be robbed of "its uniqueness and essential Jewishness." My perspective

as an American scholar and educator is somewhat different. The tragedy of the mass murder of European Jews is in no way diminished by acknowledging the suffering of others. In fact, there is something unseemly in comparing the pain and suffering of victims, since one cannot today presume that the horror of an individual, family, or community destroyed by the Nazis was any greater than that experienced by victims of other genocides. There needs to be greater tolerance and graciousness in admitting the suffering of all groups affected, but precision in analyzing Nazi policies. For scholars and educators, the Holocaust raises the most complex and difficult questions about human behavior. Thus in the end, neither uniqueness nor universality provide us with detailed understanding, since these general stereotypes distort the specificity of the historical realities from 1933 to 1945.

## **American Perceptions of Nazis, Germans, and the Holocaust**

Americans have been schizophrenic in the way they have judged Germany and Germans during the postwar years that started with the Nuremberg trials and ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall. On the one hand, Americans have viewed Germans as sober, hardworking, and orderly, and thus as desirable economic partners and dependable political allies. Undoubtedly, this radical change from hated enemy to valued partner was made easier by the long association of the American elite with things German: ethnicity, education, and culture. Citizens of German background made up a large proportion of the American population as shown in the quota allotted to them in the 1924 Johnson immigration law. The German educational model, first introduced at Johns Hopkins University, had served to train a generation of American leaders. These shared with Germans both religion and ethnicity, and had long been accustomed to work with Germans in science and in business. Compared to Russians, who were viewed as Bolshevik revolutionaries, and to the French, who were seen as unreliable, the Germans were thus promoted to the position—right after the British—of America's most desirable ally in the *Cold War*.

On the other hand, at the same time, popular culture in the United States continued to portray Germans as arrogant, authoritarian, and insensitive. The wartime film *Casablanca*, destined to become a classic, juxtaposed the pragmatic and freedom-loving American, played by Humphrey Bogart, to arrogant Nazi German officers, while Claude Rains played the lascivious and unreliable, but sympathetic Frenchman. These images in Hollywood films, and not only there, did not easily change during the postwar years. Germans were usually portrayed as the Nazi enemy, usually evil and sadistic, but sometimes, as in the TV series *Hogan's Heroes*, as comic figures with exaggerated Prussian arrogance. These images had little to do with Jews or the Holocaust, a subject covered only on the periphery during the first three postwar decades.

Conditions in the immediate postwar period were not propitious in the United States for a broader reception of the Holocaust. Overshadowed by European reconstruction and the *Cold War*, most Americans at first saw the Holocaust as an uncomfortable foreign experience whose primary impact was felt abroad. Furthermore, those survivors and displaced persons who came to the United States were preoccupied with building new lives.

By the middle 1970s, the old stereotypes had begun to dissolve. Although Americans continued to remember German Nazism and the war, the decades of Atlantic partnership had eroded the old hostilities, and even American Jewish organizations collaborated with official Germans. At

the same time, however, the memory of the Holocaust, until then excluded from public discourse, became a subject of study and commemoration. Undoubtedly, the passage of time and the emergence of a new generation removed the taboo that had been attached to this painful subject.

The resurgence of American interest in the Holocaust reflected changes during the 1960s and 1970s. The civil rights and desegregation movement of the 1960s, the bitter divisions engendered by the Vietnam war, and the student rebellion of 1968 destroyed an earlier uncritical complacency and historical consensus, creating a climate that made the lessons of the Holocaust more relevant to American society and education. Moreover, the issues of civic ethics raised by Watergate created conditions favorable to questioning governmental policies, thereby increasing possible reception of the Holocaust as a subject. The rediscovery of ethnicity and genealogy in the 1970s also contributed to the growing needs of a younger generation of Jews, who demanded information about the Holocaust.

Unlike Europe, the events of the Holocaust did not take place in the United States; the artifacts of the concentration camps and ghettos were usually not located in North America; moreover, most perpetrators and victims were not American citizens. The United States, unlike Israel, did not perceive the Holocaust as a central factor in its national self-image; in Israel, the success of Zionism depends heavily on the interpretation of the Holocaust.

The United States had four unique instances of involvement: first, the question of refugees and rescue until American entry into the war in 1941; second, the story of the liberators; third, the postwar trials; and fourth, the intersection of America and the survivors of the Holocaust. Despite its widespread acceptance, the story of the so-called liberators lacks substance. Despite its enormous emotional and patriotic public relations value, the American Army did not fight World War II to liberate Jews and concentration camp prisoners. The liberation of the concentration camps was an accidental by-product of combat, and, in reality, the impact of liberation, and the liberators, on the American self-image was minimal.

The postwar trials were an American invention and the one unique American contribution; these trials yielded vast numbers of original documents that are essential for scholars and educators. These postwar trials, not only the American trials but also later postwar German trials, pose significant questions of law, history, and ethics. The last intersection is the DP story of how survivors resettled in the United States after 1945 and how they and their children became Americans. This story is still totally unexplored.

## **The Holocaust in the American Educational System**

Both in the United States and in Germany, Holocaust education encounters unusual challenges and responsibilities. Education about the Holocaust invariably remains trapped between politics and scholarship in both countries. Although there are risks in generalization, it is tenable to state that as chronological and geographical distance from the Holocaust increases, the problems of education are magnified, perhaps more so through growing public familiarity with literal images of the Holocaust distributed through the media of photography, film, and television. It is nevertheless legitimate to explore how and why Holocaust education in Germany, where authentic historic sites of crimes exist, differs from Holocaust education in the

United States.

Although the United States had a greater chance of being objective about the Holocaust and could ostensibly approach the subject with truth as the sole objective, it is clear that this promise has only been partly realized. Access to the past is usually possible only by way of categories and patterns that are part of one's own culture and therefore American Holocaust education is influenced by cultural, religious, and political paradigms that can reinforce particular views of the past. Holocaust education does not exist in a political or geographical vacuum and therefore reflects national myths and ideals as well as the changing demands of diverse political constituencies.

Until the late 1980s, Holocaust education and memorial displays were overwhelmingly financed by the American Jewish community. In the first three decades after 1945, the Holocaust was presented as an exclusively Jewish tragedy. As a result, by the early 1980s, the public and the media perceived the Holocaust as a primarily Jewish affair. This placed the subject into an intellectual ghetto. Even when Jews wished to be less exclusive, they have been awkward about it, as for example, the unfortunate choice of words for the title of the 1987 U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council conference on "Other Victims." The growing interest in the fate of these victims reflected changing academic literature as well as political lobbying in the late 1980s by the handicapped, Sinti and Roma, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, and Poles. This expansion of content not only reflected historical accuracy, but also the success of pressure groups in American politics. It also reflected a broader realization among the general public in the United States that the Holocaust was a critical twentieth-century event.

Since the 1970s, these factors contributed to the growth of American publications, conferences, exhibitions, museums, and educational institutions concerned with the Holocaust. The first Holocaust curricula in the 1970s in the United States were based on commemorative anniversaries and events: the November 1938 pogrom, the invasion of Poland in September 1939; the Warsaw ghetto revolt; and the liberation of the concentration camps in 1945. Secondary schools also incorporated feature films and popular television programs about Anne Frank, the St. Louis, the Warsaw Ghetto, Auschwitz, and the Nuremberg trials into their learning activities. These decentralized initiatives based on private, local, and state funding resulted in growing educational options inside and outside the classroom.

In the United States, the Holocaust has usually been integrated into American history at various grade levels. It is also incorporated into advanced placement courses about contemporary world problems and cultures at the senior high school level, and in upper division high school courses on government. Literature from the Holocaust is taught in English literature and foreign language instruction (German, French, Italian, and Polish), including diaries, autobiographies, poems, plays, *Theresienstadt* children's poems, and postwar fiction about the Holocaust. More recently, Holocaust units have been added to art history, statistics and mathematics, history of technology, and law and society.

Obviously, in the United States, the Holocaust occupies at the least several hours/days or at most two weeks in mandatory subjects below the college and university level. The limited time available to secondary school teachers to cover such complex and difficult material is a serious problem. Moreover, the German and European historical setting necessitates an understanding

of geography, usually absent even among adults. Only in advanced placement courses in the last year of an academic high school can the Holocaust be studied for an entire semester. By the 1990s, state curricula guidelines and teacher training became available in at least nine states (California, Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, North Carolina, Tennessee, and West Virginia) and multiple institutions in many localities specialize in training secondary school teachers to teach the Holocaust. There has also been the growth of non-school educational programs through 120 private, municipal, and state Holocaust educational centers in 34 states and new regional Holocaust museums in New York, Los Angeles, Detroit, Houston, and elsewhere.

The 1990s has also seen changing official American attitudes, in part a result of the opening of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. in 1993. The American public has received the Museum with widespread interest and enthusiasm. Official German responses to the creation of an American Holocaust museum in Washington illustrates dissimilar American and German responses to the Nazi past. German fears that the Museum would lead to anti-German sentiments did not materialize. The permanent exhibition was designed to tell the story from the perspective of the victims, and German perpetrators did not take central place in the narrative, since the emphasis is on Nazis, not Germans. The exhibition presents the Nazi propagandists, and not German bureaucrats, and thus parallels German efforts to portray the Nazis as distinct from Germans.

During the 1990s, the pluralism of American Holocaust education has been strengthened by the growing number of Holocaust museums and local Holocaust educational centers. These centers provide education in non-school settings and are frequently actively involved in teacher exchange programs with German memorials.