

## Lernen aus der Geschichte e.V.

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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.

### Course of Events in the Weimar and St. Petersburg Projects

#### 1. Rendezvous in Weimar, March 2001

##### *The Group*

In total, seven participants from Russia (St. Petersburg) signed up for the project, alongside ten others from Germany. The group was made up of students and pupils aged between 15 and 27 years. While the Russians already knew each other from the »Memorial« human rights organisation in St. Petersburg, the Germans met each other for the first time at the workshop.

The first phase of the workshop took place in Weimar at the European Youth Education and Meeting Centre (EJBW). Half of the Russian guests had never even set foot out of their countries before in their whole lives. The majority of them had never been to Germany before. They did know that in front of the Weimar city gates stood the former Buchenwald concentration camp. They spoke with people who were inmates of the camp in their own city and in their own language. Nevertheless, they found it difficult to get a real impression of what the camp looked like at the time and how it might look today.

*“Before our journey, I heard a little about Buchenwald from some older people I know. However, this didn’t give me as clear an impression as did visiting the memorial in person. This visit completely transformed all my ideas about the Second World War, National Socialism, that period of history, and also about the nature of mankind itself. Many questions arose which I still cannot answer.”*

(Natalia N., Russia)

The majority of the German participants had already visited Buchenwald on more than one occasion, or, at the time of the workshop, were working intensively on a specific aspect of concentration camp history, either as a school project or thesis. None of the Germans were visiting a memorial for the first time. Because of, or in spite of this, they made very keen participants. The students were very curious about one another. How will be able to communicate? Would we be able overcome the language barrier? Was the topic not too heavy? Wouldn’t it affect our relationships to one another? How would one personally deal with the concentration camp visit? Wouldn’t the schedule be too much? These initial worries soon

disappeared and there was an atmosphere of mutual sympathy. Interpreters were on hand throughout the workshop and an initial reluctance to use one's own foreign language abilities was soon overcome. Exercises on inter-cultural learning helped the students to better understand the background of the other students, and to see things from a different perspective. After comparing German and Russian historical data, the German participants realized how much their view of the 20th Century was orientated around the mass crimes of the Nazis, whereas, more important for the Russian participants was the victory in the "Great Patriotic War". Each group knew little about the other's perspective even if it is shared history. This other perspective rarely came up in (national) history lessons.

*"Working with the German participants showed us another way of understanding history, a more emotional way. Maybe this is because you can find hardly any trace of that period in Russia today. The War has no connection to present day life even though many old people who survived it are still alive today."* (Natalia P., Russia)  
*Visiting the Buchenwald and Mittelbau-Dora Camp Memorials*

The first visit to the Buchenwald camp memorial took place on the second day of the workshop. To begin with, the students were given a potted history of the concentration camp and an orientation. Visiting again the following day, the group was introduced to work in the archives and were able to take a look at the small number of documents that were available to our later contacts from the memorial archives. Afterwards, the students once again toured the camp, including the former »execution site« where Soviet POWs were murdered en masse at Buchenwald. The reconstructed outer walls are all that remains today. To round up the visit, the students met up again at the »Street of All Nations«, situated at the far end of the former roll call area. The idea to lay flowers came from the Russian group, and the German participants readily agreed. Both groups took part in a joint minute's silence which many of them would later describe as important.

*"As soon as I woke up, I already began thinking about the day ahead and I knew we would be visiting Buchenwald and this made me very happy, because I had waited so long for this moment and I wanted to see Buchenwald and I was also thinking about our German-Russian group."* (Maria, Russia)

The third visit to the Buchenwald camp memorial focussed on the issue of "Special Camp No. 2", which both the Russian and German participants knew nothing about beforehand. Time appeared to be running out despite having spent almost three days at the camp. Since the group was also planning to meet people in St. Petersburg who were in Mittelbau-Dora or another Buchenwald subsidiary camp, the excursion moved on to Nordhausen on the penultimate day.

After each memorial visit, there was almost always the opportunity to discuss the experience. The participants were emotionally affected in different ways – there was no obvious difference between the reactions of the Russian and German young people. Also, the need to discuss what had been seen and heard varied a great deal from person to person. In this regard, the German participants seemed more extroverted than their Russian counterparts. For the latter, it is unusual (and undesirable?) to bring up and discuss private feelings in public. This made it difficult to develop a greater understanding of each other. Whether students had expected that they themselves, or the others, would be »moved« by the visit to the memorial also remained unanswered.

### *Preparing the Interviews*

The main reason for visiting the historical sites was to make the students understand the basic context of the events they would encounter when interviewing the eye witnesses. The students began asking questions. After being introduced to the theory of 'oral history' and the interview method that had been selected, the students began compiling the list of questions. The group

decided to produce a common guide to apply to all interviews. A huge variety of questions were suggested- from everyday life in the camp to philosophical issues. Work on the list of questions could not be completed and was put back until when the group would be in St. Petersburg. More and more questions were put forward: "What shall we do with the knowledge we have obtained? Is it morally sound to want to know and to want to ask everything?"

2. Rendezvous in St. Petersburg, November 2001

Seven months had passed since Weimar when the full contingent of German participants met up in Berlin to begin the eagerly anticipated journey. As well as the main reason for going to St Petersburg- to meet the interviewees- the week would also be shaped by two other issues: the Leningrad Blockade in the Second World War and the GULAG, the network of Soviet concentration camps.

### *Preparing and Carrying out the Interviews*

In St. Petersburg, it was now time to meet the eye-witnesses. Five interviews had been planned. Work on the list of questions couldn't been completed in Weimar and was resumed in St. Petersburg. Returning to the issue of the interview method, the students began forming the interview groups and assigning the various tasks. Next came the formulation of the questionnaire.

Our eye witnesses- Serafima Azarenkova, Olga Smirnowa, Anatolij Kuleschow, Leonid Majorow and Georgi Semenjok- were interviewed over 3 days in their own homes. The interviews were conducted in Russian and interpreted into German. Though the participants themselves were responsible for carrying out the interviews, at least one workshop leader was present at each interview to act as an observer.

Following an invitation from a St. Petersburg secondary grammar school, another item was added to the agenda. With help from their teacher, some pupils at the school had created a small, permanent exhibition on Ernst Thälmann and the Buchenwald concentration camp. This visit gave the group another opportunity to discuss the similarities and differences between the two countries regarding the issue of »Soviet POWs in German concentration camps«.

### *The Leningrad Blockade*

For a group which had set about examining the experience of former Soviet POWs in German concentration camps, a visit to St. Petersburg was not complete without considering the Leningrad Blockade. In October 1941, German troops almost completely cut off Leningrad from the outside world for almost 900 days. Approximately half a million people starved to death in the Winter of 1941/42 alone. This event plays a central role in the collective memory of the city. An entire day of the workshop was dedicated to this historical event. After an introduction to the topic, the Russian participants then talked about their own relation to the event as well as the stories that had been passed down in their families.

Afterwards, the students visited the »Monument to the Heroic Defenders of Leningrad« and a church that stood on the site of the former line of defence. The day turned out to be very important, especially as the German participants knew very little about the Leningrad Blockade beforehand.

### *The Soviet Concentration Camp System*

The German-Russian group's work with the experiences of the Soviets in German concentration

camps naturally lead to questions about the »GULAG« concentration camp system established by Stalin in the USSR. Julja, one of the Russian participants gave a presentation as an introduction to this topic. The group then followed up on the invitation made by the human rights organisation, »Memorial«, which were involved in caring for victims of the Soviet concentration camps. The president of the organisation talked to the participants about the work of the organisation. The German participants flew back home on 10th November 2001. The rendezvous was now officially over. Nevertheless, the intensity of common experiences would doubtless live on for some time in all the participants. The students were able to work together once more on preparing material for publishing, in the knowledge that a part of the findings would be made available to non-participants of the project.

Excerpt taken from:

Ponomarenko, Denis, Frank Reiniger & Barbara Thimm: “Leben mit der Erinnerung. Deutsche und russische Jugendliche interviewen Überlebende nationalsozialistischer Konzentrationslager“ (“Living with the Past. Young people from Russia and Germany Interview Survivors of National Socialist Concentration Camps), published in *Weimarer Beiträge zur politischen und kulturellen Jugendbildung (Weimarian Contributions to the Political and Cultural Education of Young People)* (EJBW series, issue 1). Glaux Publishing House: Jena, 2003. (in German/Russian ), pp 19–31.