

On teaching the history of the Holocaust: A view from the United States

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Abstract

Teaching the history of the Holocaust is certainly complicated in a number of educational settings. However, in the attempt to make the Holocaust relevant we are all susceptible to glossing over key historical facts. Since we live an age of some anxiety over the future of Holocaust memory and Holocaust education, educators should teach Holocaust history without flattening it, providing an approach that wrestles with the specificities of the Holocaust and contextual factors in the lives of individuals.

Introduction

I am not an Australian. I am not formally a historian of the Holocaust. I am an American Christian graduate student who occasionally teaches the history of the Holocaust, Holocaust literature, and films about the Holocaust. I know little about how the Holocaust is taught in public or private schools in Australia. However, I try to stay abreast of global dialogues regarding Holocaust education due to my position as project manager of Holocaust Denial on Trial (HDOT, www.hdot.org), an educational site about Holocaust denial and an online archive for the English libel suit *David Irving v Penguin Books and Deborah Lipstadt*. I have been following recent policy changes in Australian Holocaust education keenly.

According to recent articles about teaching Holocaust history in Australia, it seems that there is an uneven interest in teaching Holocaust history, as well as delayed implementation. A 2014 article from the Salzburg Global Seminar succinctly states that “The varying depth of teaching about the Holocaust raises the question about the willingness of teachers to educate students about the Holocaust to a sufficient level” (Yilmaz, 2014). Though this article was published in 2014, more recent articles indicate an ongoing anxiety in America and Australia regarding the public’s knowledge of the Holocaust and Holocaust history in the classroom. Educators

and scholars in the United States still struggle with a similar unevenness as that which Australian classrooms experience. That is to say, the issue is still not resolved in America, despite Americans’ notable interest in the Holocaust. A recent survey suggested that the American populace has very little knowledge of historical facts about the Holocaust while still considering Holocaust education important (B. Katz, 2018). A recent SBS article interviewed on-the-street Australians and representatives of Australian Jewish organizations. What these interviews hint at, non-systematically and non-scientifically, is that on-the-street Australians knew some key facts about the Holocaust, but interviewees claimed that they did not learn much about the Holocaust in school. Likewise, Jewish organizations feared that a more systematic survey of the Australian populace would reveal critical gaps in knowledge of Holocaust history (Baker, 2018). Some of the latest statistics from Europe generally indicate even worse knowledge of the Holocaust, Jews, and Judaism (Greene, 2018).

My own understanding of Holocaust history was uneven in school, where we devoured the memoir of Corrie ten Boom (*The Hiding Place*, 1971), the Dutch Christian woman who aided in the rescue of Jews from the Nazis and their collaborators during the German occupation of the Netherlands. The Nazis and their Dutch helpers caught her and her family, sending them to various concentration camps. Several of her family members died as a result. On the flip side, as constructed by Corrie and the book’s editors, *The Hiding Place* retreats from key facts and tensions related to the history of the Holocaust. For instance, why did so many professing Christians in the Netherlands and elsewhere across Europe, including Germany, actually participate in the genocide, said nothing, or refused to help their Jewish neighbours in need?

In her research on Holocaust education in an American public school (10th grade) and an American Christian fundamentalist school (8th grade, private), Simone Schweber found that

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teachers in these seemingly opposed settings can actually show profound similarities in their approach to the history of the Holocaust. Indeed, she finds that the schools' approaches and goals were fundamentally divergent. The instructor at the Christian school, on the one hand, emphasized the religious self-fashioning of its students by reading a Christian redemptive memoir (*The Hiding Place*). The public school addressed the Holocaust and its significance through the break down of prejudice. Despite their divergent emphases and readings, Schweber finds that both the public school and private school universalized the Holocaust's meaning in ways that obscured the history of the Holocaust. They ignored the contextual realities of victims, bystanders, rescuers, and perpetrators, among others. She states:

[In these classes] *Jews were displaced, cast aside from the prominent role they played in Holocaust history.* (S. Schweber, 2006, p. 29, Italics mine, inserted text mine)

[Both showed] similarities of deJudaization, narrative emplotment, instrumentalization of otherness, and treatments of historical information. Forced through the narrow funnel of reflexive affirmation, Holocaust memory in both classrooms was sweetened for easy ingestion, stripped of its horror, impotency, grandeur, and contingency. For both sets of students, then, *the Holocaust occurred in a world where actors act autonomously, unrestricted by historical forces, where individuals always triumph, redeemed through or despite their suffering, and where the plotline always ends well.* (S. Schweber, 2006, p. 30, Italics mine, inserted text mine)¹

The private school and the public school flattened the history of the Holocaust and failed to create an environment where students could wrestle with the specificities of the Holocaust and contextual factors in the lives of individuals. While students in both settings might have learned about faith or "Others", they never really tackled the historical realities of what happened, to whom, and why.

I should provide some caveats to Schweber's research and my reference of it here. I am in no way suggesting that all schools necessarily teach the Holocaust the same way or can even avoid overarching master narratives. Schweber even notes the fact that, in reality, no instructor can teach the Holocaust without some approach and desired outcome; definitely age and stage should be considered when communicating horror, suffering, and murder. I also am not trying to overextend the

two specific classes Schweber analyzed by claiming that they are definitively indicative of Holocaust education in general or in other settings. Schweber herself is smart enough not to overextend her method and results. Rather, I reference Schweber's findings as a cautionary tale of how seemingly divergent approaches to Holocaust history can slide into decontextualizing events and lived experiences. In our desire for particular outcomes and application of history, we should all as educators consider how we might fall prey to historical oversimplification, decontextualization, and the overextension of certain Holocaust narratives.

As Australian schools continue to grapple with the history of the Holocaust and wrestle with its educational outcomes, as we do in the United States, teachers should consider long and hard their approach to and treatment of the historical record. Educators across the globe should consider the call of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: "Failing to contextualize the groups targeted by the Nazis as well as the actions of those who resisted can result in the misunderstanding or trivializing of this history. Relevant connections for all learners often surface as the history is analyzed" (USHMM, n.d.). May we not be or grow complacent, rather continue to self-examine and self-critique our approach to the history of genocide. **TEACH**

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¹ One can see similar work by Schweber here: <http://dm.education.wisc.edu/sschweber/pci/cv2011-1.pdf>