

Holocaust Education and (Early) Signs of the Erosion of Democracy

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Introduction

Democracy is threatened well before the authoritarian regimes take power. It begins with rhetoric overstepping the boundaries of human dignity. The lessons from Weimar Republic illustrate that Holocaust education should pay attention to early signals of erosions of (fragile) democracies. Holocaust education aims at, taking Adorno's famous quote, doing everything possible such that Auschwitz will not happen again. This is why Holocaust education has to deal with the historical paths that led to Auschwitz. *Mein Kampf* is one of the historical text documents that makes evident the process of breaking taboos and overstepping the boundaries of human dignity on the road to the barbarism.

The culture of remembrance is an important part of German identity, culture, and politics. The German "dealing with the past" (*Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*) embraces a sense of responsibility for the past and the commitment to remembering its victims. This responsibility manifests on at least two different levels: (1) on the political level reflected in the special commitment to the state Israel and the principles of humanity in the current politics, for example, in the questions of migration politics,¹ and (2) on an educational level by learning about the past and for the future—reflected in Holocaust education. Holocaust education became a major factor in different educational institutions and programs—the term embraces

different pedagogical approaches and praxis—from historical learning to human rights education.² Holocaust memory and Holocaust education became a global phenomenon far beyond Germany, with references to the question of universal moral norms in societies,³ especially through the engagement of supranational organizations like IHRA, UNESCO, OSCE, the European Council, or the EU into the support and proliferation of worldwide learning about the Holocaust. The Holocaust is an important topic in the teaching of history, but it can also be placed under the umbrella of other frameworks, which would benefit from closer links: human rights education, peace education, intercultural education, antiracist education, and democracy education.

Given the strong focus on cultivating memory about the Holocaust and the antecedent developments that led to it, it is not surprising that the new critical edition of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* by the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich/Berlin provoked many discussions—in academia, in educational institutions, and in public discourse—throughout Germany and far beyond. This chapter focuses on the question of how to read this book and discusses Hitler's main propaganda work through the lens of Holocaust education. Acknowledging the antihuman, abhorrent, and insulting nature of Hitler's work, the question of its appropriateness as a "learning material" seems reasonable. In this text, however, I will argue that Holocaust education, conceived and designed also as a pillar of democracy education, *should* engage with primary sources of Nazi propaganda and their implications for attitudes, patterns of thinking, and acting. In their preface to the new edition, the editors state that the debate whether *Mein Kampf* was the announcement of the catastrophe is "the most insistent, even the most agonizing question that Hitler's writing poses."⁴ This epilogue certainly does not aim at answering this question but outlines a way of approaching this book with the focus on learning from history for the present—in order to develop oneself as a citizen capable of cocreating democratic societies and, if necessary, protecting freedom and human rights in an increasingly diverse and polarized world.

Mein Kampf is a radical right-wing propaganda work that Hitler wrote to promote himself as a national "leader." It was intended to influence and mobilize the masses. Especially after he took power, this book, which includes Hitler's stylized autobiography and his main ideological writing, became a cult, a domination tool, and the source of propaganda. Nonetheless, *Mein Kampf* is for historical learning first and foremost a source that can be interpreted and analyzed using many different pedagogical approaches.

In reference to different forms of collective memories as developed by Jan Assmann,⁵ we speak increasingly about the shift from the so-called communicative or communicated memory (where there are witnesses who can give us oral testimonies about the historical events) to "cultural memory" (where memory is preserved in written sources). This shift is natural, as the generation of witnesses, especially the survivors, passes

away. This means that historical-political education on National Socialism, or Holocaust education, will take place without the active participation of the survivors. The methods and tools will be different, so the pedagogical approach will need to be reconceptualized—including all kinds of preserved and available sources of historical information. Testimonials, personal stories, and eyewitness accounts will continue playing a crucial role in Holocaust education, due to the numerous videos and recordings which have been preserved by different initiatives and institutions, for example, in the Visual History Archive of the Shoah Foundation. Written texts and original documents will likely become increasingly important.

Holocaust Education

There are several definitions of Holocaust education. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights provides a helpful overview about the corresponding dimensions: “Holocaust education is understood as: Education that takes the discrimination, persecution and extermination of the Jews by the National Socialist as its focus, but also includes Nazi crimes against other victim groups.” It embraces “the pedagogical strategies to teach about National Socialist crimes, their precondition and history.”⁶ Plessow indicates that many scholars have been critical toward using the term “Holocaust education.”⁷ Even the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance suggests using the term “Teaching and Learning about the Holocaust.”⁸ Plessow himself refers to Holocaust education in its wide sense: “including every learning endeavor, concept or activity that focuses on the mass crimes during the National Socialist reign in Germany from 1938 onwards.”⁹ In this definition he includes primarily European Jewry, but also other persecuted groups. I argue that the content of Holocaust education should begin with Hitler’s first documented thoughts on eliminating European Jewry in *Mein Kampf* and thus encompassing the scope of themes around the “early signs of erosion of democracy.” This definition is based on the concept of “Education after Auschwitz,” as formulated in the 1960s by Theodor Adorno, who famously remarked that “the premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again.”¹⁰ Yet there is no straightforward path from this moral imperative to any specific programs for Holocaust education. The demand is still there to be sensitive and critical toward words, arguments, implications, and discourses in order to intervene, when necessary.

The understanding of Holocaust education is controversial, as it presupposes that we can and should learn lessons from the Holocaust; it has been challenged and criticized especially by authors who plead for emphasizing the uniqueness of the Holocaust and thus rejecting the universalization of it.¹¹ Many authors argue that the main purpose of the Holocaust education should be to know the historical content and circumstances, and to remember the victims rather than “instrumentalizing” the Holocaust for any purpose, even

the prevention of future atrocities.¹² According to Ofer, Holocaust education should utilize “knowledge for the sake of knowledge,” and do so through “a systematic historical analysis,” raising “the major issues through readings of primary documents and a comprehensive comparative study.”¹³ The historian Lucy Dawidowicz criticized Holocaust education because of the instrumental approach to the Holocaust, which discouraged deep understanding by treating Nazi anti-Semitism as the unique example of inhumanity. To conduct Holocaust education in the sense of “peace education,” as Dawidowicz described the prevailing tendency, is completely inappropriate for the subject.¹⁴ This debate, which revolves around the question of uniqueness, essentially divides Holocaust scholars into two camps. The first are scholars, like Dawidowicz, who see the Holocaust as a unique event, whose comprehension is possible only within the strictest limits of contextualized inquiry. The second are the scholars advocating for learning from history for the present and future, that is, through dealing with issues of prejudice, bigotry, exclusion, and so on.

The internationalization and globalization of Holocaust memory and Holocaust education involve certainly a risk of de-historicization, that is, abandonment of learning about concrete historical events and their context.¹⁵ I will argue for pursuing both paths—to learn *about* and *from* the Holocaust—and I will follow the notion of Holocaust education as defined in the book *Lessons of the Holocaust* by Michael R. Marrus, where the author stresses that knowledge of the Holocaust “not only deepens understanding of a great watershed in the history of our times but also enlarges our knowledge of the human condition.”¹⁶ For that, *Mein Kampf* can be a useful historical document helping to put the Holocaust into a historical context and to understand the dimensions and processes of promoting a unique dehumanizing ideology.

Still, Holocaust education can (and must) lead to a fertile discussion of values. A number of concepts on Holocaust education defend the view that knowledge about the Holocaust, about the unfolding of inhumane thinking turning into inhumane action, can and should increase moral sensitivity toward signs of dehumanization and the early predictors of evil. Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes in his forward to *The Encyclopaedia of Genocide*: “The compelling reason why we should learn about the Holocaust, and the genocides committed against other peoples as well, is so that we might be filled with a revulsion at what took place and thus be inspired, indeed galvanized, to commit ourselves to ensure that such atrocities should never happen again.”¹⁷

The concepts and approaches to Holocaust education, with a grounding in Adorno’s notion of education after Auschwitz (as this chapter does), emphasize the need to recognize the signs of totalitarian regimes as the psychological mechanisms of dehumanization and propaganda. A prominent institution pursuing this approach is the organization Facing History and Ourselves (FHAO). This educational curriculum of FHAO focuses on different roles and stances a person can take when faced with dehumanizing occurrences/societal developments: victims, rescuers, bystanders, and perpetrators. The educational programs and learning materials are focused

on the question of how to make a moral choice in difficult situations, which is seen as a way of preventing future atrocities.

A focus on the mechanisms by which such evil as Auschwitz was able to be done unhindered will lead us to the book *Mein Kampf*, a book that was kept by nearly every family in Germany and in which Hitler unambiguously described his visions and plans. He already communicated in *Mein Kampf* that the Jews should have been killed with gas during the First World War. Hitler promised from the very first page that all types of policy, domestic as well as foreign, must be based on racial needs—not economic considerations or other principles. Belonging to a nation would be therefore decided by “blood ties.” Thus, the Holocaust during the Second World War was not an unpredictable and unexpected event but the consistent practical realization of a terrible ideology. At the same time, we must acknowledge the lack of readiness or capacity to see and anticipate the dangers of the emerging tyranny during the first years of Hitler’s dictatorship. American historian on the Holocaust in Europe, Timothy Snyder points out: “The European history of the twentieth century shows us that societies can break, democracies can fall, ethics can collapse, and ordinary men can find themselves standing over death pits with guns in their hands. It would serve us well today to understand why.”¹⁸

Following the appeal of Snyder to be vigilant toward tendencies of possible tyranny, we can ask why the book *Mein Kampf* did not provoke a repudiating reaction of the citizens of the young (and therefore surely fragile) German democracy of the Weimar Republic? One explanation could possibly be the ignorance of the book’s content and the dreadful intention of its author. Neil Gregor, however, denounces as myth the claim that the book remained unread despite its being part of each household in the Third Reich. A pervasive claim that “we knew nothing about the content” delineates the climate of concealment, avoidance, and denial in the immediate postwar period.¹⁹ It implies also the denial of responsibility for what had happened, because seemingly nobody knew. Yet the assertion that the Germans consciously, with their eyes open, decided upon tyranny and barbarism, inhumanity, and atrocities would not reflect the reality of those times. According to Alexander Karn,

Germans who fled the political center beginning in 1930 concluded no deals with the devil, even if they ended up fastened in his clutches later. [. . .] Germans who abandoned the liberal center rarely expressed any desire to see others directly brutalized, but instead they lacked the intellectual tools and the emotional capacity that might have allowed them to make sound predictions about the consequences of their political choices.²⁰

In this regard we can turn to an approach reflected in the work of Hannah Arendt, in her famous (and famously misunderstood) notion of the banality of evil. To call evil banal, Susan Neiman says, commenting on Arendt, is

to imply “that the sources of evil are not mysterious or profound but fully within our grasp. If so, they do not infect the world at a depth that could make us despair of the world itself. Like a fungus, they may devastate reality by laying waste to its surface. Their roots, however, are shallow enough to pull up.”²¹ This conclusion highlights the imperative in Holocaust education to focus on early, sometimes even banal, signs of tyranny. Including the critical dealing with *Mein Kampf* into Holocaust education may therefore disclose the origins, context, and methods of the banal evil that led to the atrocities of Auschwitz. Critical dealing with *Mein Kampf* in different learning arrangements could be conceived as a resource for this kind of exercise.

Mein Kampf as a Learning Tool?

Mein Kampf has already been used in various educational settings and also in the challenging “edutainment” format. A cabaret artist Serdar Somuncu, German with Turkish background, became popular through his *Mein Kampf* tour based on reading and commenting Adolf Hitler’s manifesto in the form of satire. Somuncu presented 1,400 performances, many of which were to schools, of *Mein Kampf* between 1996 and 2001 to audiences in Germany, Austria, Denmark, Holland, Lichtenstein, and the Czech Republic.²² The primary critique toward Somuncu’s tour was that laughing about *Mein Kampf* indicates a lack of gravity, which should be given to this part of history. Somuncu responded that dealing with *Mein Kampf* involves recognizing the shocking antihuman and anti-Semitic agenda of Hitler, but at the same time revealing the risible passages, the absurdity of the text, and the argumentation.²³ His argument was access to the text contributes to its demystification. For Somuncu, the annotated new edition of *Mein Kampf* is, however, an “absurdity” because it amplifies a “toothless text,” which “had already made full-grown Nazis fall asleep” during his readings. As a deterrent, he recommends reading the original text because “the text emanates magical boredom and mental infirmity.”²⁴

Political cabaret can be considered an informal learning event. However, if we speak about using *Mein Kampf* in Holocaust education, also in formal (schools) and non-formal (different institutions for extra-curricular and adult learning) settings, some didactical considerations should be helpful. I claim that by reading *Mein Kampf* alone (even the newly commented version), it is unlikely that students would grasp the historical significance of it automatically. Furthermore, a possible partial grasping of the content can be problematic, because it can lead to false or distorted understandings.

As shown earlier, surrounding the question of how Holocaust history should be taught and can be learnt, some conflicting conceptions emerge. Research attests that teaching about the Holocaust poses considerable challenges for learners as well as for instructors.²⁵ Besides the emotional

involvement,²⁶ gap knowledge,²⁷ and confrontation with violence,²⁸ it is also a question of the Holocaust's historical contextualization with regard to its predecessors and its aftermath. We need to pay attention to both in the course of Holocaust education by connecting different time dimensions with each other. Totten demonstrated that middle and high school teachers speak often about the Holocaust, without discussing the preconditions and development of it.²⁹ However, it is the historical knowledge about the rise of the Nazi dictatorship that allows learners to analyze the presuppositions and the consequences of dehumanization; to learn about the fragility of human rights, as well as authoritative abuse of political power toward marginalized peoples and contrarians; how authorities can abuse official power; how propaganda may capture our minds. This lesson will also help us approach the questions of the Holocaust's aftermath, especially with regard to learning from the Holocaust as a vehicle for democracy education, citizenship education, antiracism education, and human rights education.

Access to the text of *Mein Kampf* with a thorough explanation of context and clarification of details and facts (as provided in the new edition) allows the use of the text in different learning situations with varying learning goals. These goals are not limited to the knowledge of historical context, but rather they focus on the reflective connection between different time dimensions: past, present, and future. The knowledge and reflection about the ideology, rhetoric of violence, and inhumanity of the past can increase sensibility toward the possible effects of those on the societies today. In the following sections, I will suggest several possible interconnected aspects in regard to how we can frame the process of learning around *Mein Kampf* with the aim to integrate past, present, and future with each other.

Being Vigilant Advocates of Democracy

The German historian Herman Glaser put this concept into the formula: "Wer in der Demokratie schläft, kann leicht in der Diktatur erwachen" ("Those who sleep in democracy can easily wake up in dictatorship").³⁰ This sentence could be a helpful lens through which to read *Mein Kampf* while learning about and from the Holocaust.

Holocaust education is often justified by the need to teach students about their role in society as effective citizens. The previously mentioned education after Auschwitz (Adorno) implies the expectation that while dealing with a totalitarian past and its artifacts, the positive or affirmative attitude toward democracy will be developed. Education after Auschwitz is meant by Adorno as "Education towards Autonomy"; the autonomous citizen is characterized by the ability to critically reflect on social conditions and to make (political) judgments and ethical decisions on this basis and to co-shape her lifeworld and society through her actions.³¹ This education should equip the citizens in a democracy against antidemocratic, populist slogans, neo-Nazi refrains,

and xenophobic attitudes, through convincing them that democracy is the only form of living together in a society which is morally right, namely the ideal of humanity. UNESCO provided several rationales for why we should teach about the Holocaust, starting with raising awareness of the fact that democracies are fragile: “Teaching how it could gain acquiescence and mobilize its intellectual, social, political and military resources to support and implement policies and actions that resulted in the murder of millions, and enlist groups in other nations, makes it possible to identify important warning signs for all societies” (Figure 14.1).³²

Referring to the current Holocaust education in the United States, Alferts (2019)³³ diagnosed a shift in topics, especially after the Trump election in 2016. She describes the tendency to focus on the prerequisites that made the Third Reich and Nazi atrocities possible, whereas the concentration on expulsion, deportation, and extermination is, comparatively speaking, diminishing. Since 2016, some historians, famously among them Timothy Snyder, have compared and analyzed current American events in relation to Nazi Germany. In his manifesto “On Tyranny,” Snyder warns of the fragility of liberal democracy in the United States and pleads for vigilance for early signs of gradual collapse into authoritarianism and, eventually, tyranny.³⁴

In their study, Starratt et al. could observe modest connections between knowledge about the Holocaust and support for democratic and civic values.³⁵ To analyze through contrast, comparison, assessment of structure of the historical and current rhetoric helps to deepen the understandings



FIGURE 14.1 Entrance to the Auschwitz concentration camp. Courtesy of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

of the complexity of issues to stimulate reflection about the correlation of personal choices and societal developments and, finally, to support the development of civic competencies.³⁶ This approach is, however, a challenging endeavor, because without a necessary context and depth it might lead to superficial learning effects such as simplistic, incorrect connections between past and present.³⁷ Analyzing and reflecting on the openly antidemocratic authoritarian and tyrannical ideology, as expressed in *Mein Kampf*, and using the background information provided in the comments to the new critical edition, helps to avoid the trap of oversimplification of the historical facts.

The question to put in this context could be: What were the obvious signs of fascistic ideology of Hitler's manifesto and what kept so many German citizens in conformity with Hitler's ideology and the regime? The question of personal choices and personal responsibility for the course of event, as well as awareness of the possible threats of despotic and fascistic rhetoric, can be a possible direction of using *Mein Kampf* as a learning tool. Using the words of Karn:

The idea behind this philosophy [of Holocaust education, THK] is to teach the past in a manner that equips students to see the ramifications of their choices in contrast to the Germans who, by virtue of their own choices, allowed themselves to be fastened in a system designed to achieve national revitalization and racial purification at any and all costs.³⁸

This desire for racial purification appears through Hitler's text and is stated as his obligatory goal for Germany.

If we want education to prevent a future Auschwitz and to recognize the mechanisms by which people were able to commit those atrocities, as Adorno put it, then the integral reflective connection between the past and the present, the precedent and the aftermath, cause and effect, is an indispensable part of such an education. Democracy needs democrats, wrote Adorno; democracy needs to be learned, "again and again, day after day, for a lifetime," wrote German pedagogue Oskar Negt (2004).³⁹ Democracy is not a self-evident form of living together; it needs to be vigilantly protected.

Identification of Propaganda Tools and Mechanism

Mein Kampf is unambiguously a radical right-wing propaganda book. But does it imply that the German people were victims of National Socialist seduction, which had been set by a refined political propaganda factory?⁴⁰ To assume this would mean to place human beings (in general) into the position of tutelage, to deny the capacity to develop their own judgment and the responsibility for one's own views. To use *Mein Kampf* today as a

learning tool means to gain awareness of how propaganda could work and influence the attitudes of people, but at the same time to develop agency to resist efforts of propaganda and take responsibility for forming and shaping one's own attitudes and worldview. A learning process with the text *Mein Kampf* can occur when a learner experiences this ideology as a reader and then learns how to free oneself from its propaganda efforts.

I argued before that Holocaust education is not mainly about human rights and peace learning but about the intellectual and emotional ability to analyze, interpret, find, and prove arguments—a general literacy that embraces the possibility to read deeper into texts, the historical as well as modern. In the time of cultural memory,⁴¹ Holocaust education is increasingly using written testimonies, recorded interviews, historical documents, and secondary literature as sources and tools for Holocaust education. These sources are sometimes easily accessible, but often inconsistently and even contradictory in the perspectives and analysis offered. These kinds of sources, however, make it necessary to examine the relevant facts and data. It therefore requires a critical (media)competency in dealing with different information, which is to be directed toward the analysis and reflection about the acquired knowledge—or, using Adorno's term, it progresses “towards autonomy and maturity.”

The importance of addressing the question of propaganda in Holocaust education is twofold. First, *Mein Kampf* is a propagandistic book that was important for Hitler's success in installing a regime and in convincing the German people to follow his aggressive plans.⁴² George Orwell, while writing a review on *Mein Kampf* in 1940, pointed out that Hitler made promises to the German people of enhancing their power, speaking to their desires of “drums, flags and loyalty-parades,” combined with striving for struggle and even “self-sacrifice.”⁴³ He promised the people more than a simple “hedonistic attitude to life,” and they followed him, captured by the attraction of this “emotional appeal” to heroism: “Hitler has said to them ‘I offer you struggle, danger and death,’ and as a result a whole nation ‘flings itself at his feet.’”⁴⁴ The second reason to deal with propaganda with reference to *Mein Kampf* is that speaking about the tools of persuasive communication and deception can help raise awareness among students about the dangers of this media tool. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler paid a lot of attention to propaganda, demonstrating the almost limitless possibilities of rhetoric and propaganda in the process of political decision-making.

Certainly, the propaganda techniques and tools are different and more sophisticated today than they were at the time of *Mein Kampf*. “Propaganda comes of age,” and attempts to deceive are becoming more diverse and multifaceted, as Martin Choukas stated in his book of the same name in 1965.⁴⁵ Modern technology and speed of information dissemination reveal a new level of “adulthood” or “maturity” of propaganda, because today it is possible to communicate any point of view to as many addressees as possible quickly and inexpensively, but also through different communication channels.⁴⁶ Snyder points out that the goal of today's propaganda is less

about disseminating false content, as much as it is to cause confusion and disorientation. The result, then, is a retreat into the private sphere, distrust of established media, disinterest, and also disenchantment with public and political life. This strategy leads to abandoning the search for truth while also abandoning the attempt to differentiate between truth and lies. He goes even further to say that “Post truth is pre-fascism.”⁴⁷ Along with idea of Levy and Sznajder,⁴⁸ who postulate that Holocaust memories help us differentiate between good and evil, we can argue that books like *Mein Kampf* force us to renew our striving to come closer to the truth (or at least to move away from lies), to differentiate the truth from lies, and to call a lie a lie (and not an “alternative fact”).

Dealing with *Mein Kampf* may lead us to these core epistemological questions: How can we gain and assess knowledge and its sources? What kind of knowledge is available to us and how can we perform a critical analysis of it? It can and should hint at the potential relationship between knowledge and attitude, and demands therefore a critical self-reflection: How do I deal with knowledge and how does it impact my world perception? Furthermore, the history of reception of the book may provide a way to reflect on different stages of awareness in the German (and not only German) memory culture. Reading excerpts of the book means exposing oneself to the text, in order to gain in the next step a critical distance to analyze it. Karn suggests thinking in the context of Holocaust education about the inertia of our cognitive structures: “[We] need to wrestle more seriously with the forces of inertia which keep people pent up inside their own cognitive structures, and in that way, beyond the reach of any transformative influence.”⁴⁹

At the same time, Holocaust education, as a value-based education, contains an inherent risk to be assertive, intentionally or not. This is why Holocaust education is called upon to be especially vigilant and to put its own methods, approaches, and practices under constant critical scrutiny.⁵⁰ An example of a misguided practice was described by Maseth and Proske in 2010. They conducted qualitative research about historical learning in German schools. One of the case studies used by them was a situation in the classroom where students dealt with the excerpts of *Mein Kampf*. The authors note in advance:

In Germany, Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* is considered to be “dangerous for minors” [. . .] The text is “known and notorious” enough that twelfth-grade students are likely to be familiar with its incendiary character. Although the students are expected to have prior knowledge of the text, the way it is used by the teacher suggests the construction of unknowledgeable, impressionable students who must still learn about the inhumane ideology presented in the text. The exercise therefore has a kind of cathartic effect. It is intended to provoke moral outrage on the part of the students, to lead them to condemn the crimes, and to immunize them against the seductive power such ideologies may possess.⁵¹

As the students were asked to summarize the excerpt, they were using language from the text (words such as “race” and “Aryans”). “Because they lacked critical distance from the text and used Hitler’s language uncritically, the teacher accused them of being potential victims of Nazi propaganda.” Maseth and Proske see, therefore, the danger of students’ becoming overwhelmed or even indoctrinated while dealing with a “primary historical document as morally fraught as *Mein Kampf*.”⁵² This situation will “pressure the teacher to address students not only from his functional role but also as an individual.” Unlike physics class where students’ learning can be evaluated as right or wrong and the failure to learn might make one a bad student, in history class the “failure to learn the evils of National Socialism can turn a ‘bad student’ into a ‘bad person.’”⁵³

To deal with propagandistic texts means to gain competencies in resisting manipulation and seduction. As citizens in a democracy, we gain tools to deal responsibly with propaganda, populism, and manipulation. Even today in contemporary Germany, there are new voices in the right-wing populist context that argue as far as nationalists did, and there are xenophobic voices in the refugee debate as well as the Pediga movement. It could be supposed the availability of the book could nourish these voices and attitudes. That is why a high sensitivity in dealing with this text is required. At the same time, it should also be presupposed that the citizens in a democracy have the maturity and autonomy to deal with populism and not too easily fall prey to manipulation.

In this line of thought, I want to emphasize again the central components of “Education after Auschwitz,” and “Education towards autonomy and maturity,” according to Adorno. The loss of autonomy is what Adorno initially seems to problematize as a precondition for barbarism. Individuals deceived by promises of supremacy and power develop a mindset akin a “conformist society.”⁵⁴ Once the capacity for autonomy has been lost, people tend to blindly acquiesce to the fancies of those in authority and thus follow them without resistance and dissent. Referring again to Snyder’s lessons from the historical heritage of tyranny: “Some killed from murderous conviction. But many others who killed were just afraid to stand out. Other forces were at work besides conformism. But without the conformists, the great atrocities would have been impossible.”⁵⁵ Not having the mindset for dissent, people think that there is no alternative to the status quo. Holocaust education is therefore also learning about searching for tenable alternatives, learning to disagree and to rebut when necessary, learning to resist and exercise agency. Plessow observes a general tendency in Holocaust education to emphasize “an individualization of agency”: “Many programs and concepts display a strong belief that in the decision-making of the individual, his or her empowerment lies the road to betterment of societal or fundamental political problems.”⁵⁶ Autonomous and critical thinking implies sensitivity toward rhetoric, discourses, and language as a tool of naming and marking the world around us.

Paying Attention to the Language— and to Othering

Learning about the Holocaust using the text (and critical analysis) of *Mein Kampf* implies also a closer look at the language and awareness of the meaning and power of words. Words help to shape and categorize worldviews; they shape conclusions drawn about intent, principles, and assumptions of the author. Language served, and continues to serve, as a mediator of political ideology. Using *Mein Kampf* as learning material means in this context to sharpen critical reflection regarding the process of exclusion of the Other—be it on the level of rhetoric as a preliminary stage or on the level of discriminatory actions. The question of dealing with and embracing differences can thus be discussed in the context of individual action, as well as in the social and political realm—and in the realm of ideas and concepts. Hartman et al. speak about Hitler's four core ideologemes: the ideologeme of race, of space, of violence, and of dictatorship.⁵⁷ Although developed decades before *Mein Kampf*, and not by Hitler, they were constitutive of his worldview and contained a "catastrophe potential." The barbarism of the political action was caught in words far in advance of its actual enactment.

In his research on *Mein Kampf*, Jäckel argued that Hitler made his plans for the elimination of the Jews quite explicitly.⁵⁸ Hitler uses in *Mein Kampf* the metaphor of Germany's "reawakening" under Hitler's rule by "recovering from a disease" and winning the war "against parasites" (i.e., Jews and other ethnic and social groups and nations). Especially clear is the attitude toward Jewish people, who are labeled in the book as "the Jew" or "illness-spreading parasite," among other dehumanizing terms. Hitler postulated his racial thinking more than clearly while asserting that Jews were impure and inferior, and "in order to advance, the [Aryan] race should be purified."⁵⁹ Hitler's manifesto written to explain his worldview delivers a clear picture of anti-Jewish ideology: the devaluation of Jews is taken to the extreme, to the idea of "final salvation" (*Erlösungsgedanke*).

The ideology of National Socialism was based on the idea that the German-Aryan race was superior to all others. According to this, the German race was entitled to rule over the other peoples. The web of images and themes used by Hitler (and his followers) was established through the language as a world in which fighting was sacred, and killing (Jewish) people became a question of honor and holy mission. One of the numerous examples in *Mein Kampf* illustrates this strategy: "Today I believe that I am acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator: by defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the work of the Lord."⁶⁰

Linguistic tools and euphemisms play a decisive role in making previously unacceptable and ethically wrong concepts sound more tolerable. Karn describes the effect of such discourse on political action: "Nazi mythmaking

and a public discourse that glorified ideological combat gave Germans a way of seeing totalitarian infringements and the legal codification of racial discrimination as acceptable and/or necessary trade-offs for their nation's rising international prestige."⁶¹

Musolff, who did research on the metaphors in *Mein Kampf*, refers to the ubiquitous use of the metaphor of "disease"—a symbol, from which the German "body" suffers⁶²—and "the Jew" is labelled generally as the germ or germ carrier or agent of disease."⁶³ Musolff points out that Hitler suggested himself in *Mein Kampf* as the healer of the "suffering patient, the German nation": "The nation thus becomes the patient that urgently needs the cure. The healer is present, the diagnosis is clear: the treatment is without alternative."⁶⁴

While dealing with *Mein Kampf*, it seems important to pay attention to the fact that this ideology and rhetoric were widely accepted by Germans (and not only propagated by Hitler). Some research pointed out the danger of Hitlerism, that is, perceiving Hitler as the only perpetrator. For instance, Schwendemann and Marks analyzed the teaching block on National Socialism in a ninth-grade school project.⁶⁵ They interviewed students before and after the block and pointed out the attitudes toward Hitlerism after the course: the students were convinced that Hitler himself—and he alone—was responsible for all atrocities in the National Socialist period.

Today, we will obviously read the book through a different lens. It should be said that the text of *Mein Kampf* is not easily accessible to today's readers, especially young ones, as the language has obviously changed over the course of time, and many contemporary allusions, historical examples, and metaphors are no longer understandable; the related issues are no longer relevant to them. However, using this text in educational settings may equip learners with important competencies, which are required in each society. Snyder, while encouraging us to learn from the history, emphasized the attention to the symbols and tokens used: "The symbols of today enable the reality of tomorrow. Notice the swastikas and the other signs of hate. Do not look away, and do not get used to them."⁶⁶

Summing up the suggested frames of using *Mein Kampf* in Holocaust education, I want to add a precaution: *Mein Kampf* was written long before the Holocaust started and can be read to understand the ideology behind the genocide. It can and should be read as a warning sign, an ideology that made atrocities possible. However, not every inhuman ideology has led to a genocide. Analyzing for early signs of the erosion of democracy means exploring the possible signs and using tools for critical inquiry to recognize ideological pitfalls but at the same time being vigilant not to catastrophize development by labeling them with historical comparisons. Notwithstanding, a sensibility toward early signs of the erosion of democracy, combined with a realism and reflexivity, can play an important role in the development of learners who will protect civil liberties and defend oppressed, vulnerable

groups—citizens capable of effectively serving as protectors of freedom and human rights in an increasingly diverse and polarized democratic society.

Conclusion

Mein Kampf is an historically important document which can be used to discuss several important questions of the present by understanding the past. It is well suited to provide relevant and revealing insights into fascism and examples about what makes such an inhuman, morally and intellectually repulsive “world view,” so attractive for some that they adopt it.

Mein Kampf furthermore can be used as a learning tool within the framework of Holocaust education, pursuing at least two aims: the first is dealing with historical facts through an historical document; the second is shaping critical thinking and contributing to a broadening of historical and political consciousness.

It is an essential document not only for Germany but also for other societies to help understand the roots of an antihuman ideology, and to develop critical and analytical thinking while dealing with propaganda. Thus, discussion about the book is essential at any time, and the relevance of this discussion can be seen in the present moment. The new, critical edition offers a helpful learning tool—even with the risk that neo-Nazis and any other racist groups could also use the book to promote a sinister agenda.

At the same time, the new edition of *Mein Kampf* is a useful source for adults who want to learn on their own and search for well-prepared sources for self-directed learning process. It is a great opportunity for them to deal critically with historical documents. This edition also shows how a critical approach to sources can look like and what it means to question a text, to question a message, and to develop critical reading competency.

A debate continues over whether the Holocaust should be taught in terms of history or human rights. I do not argue that using *Mein Kampf* as a learning tool within Holocaust education should follow only one of the ways: both perspectives are crucial to shape the “Education after Auschwitz.” I do, however, provide some arguments why the book *Mein Kampf* can be used as a tool for learning to address global and universal issues of society today. The emphasis on such an approach is placed on critical reflection, forming one’s own well-argued opinions on the historical documents.

In educational settings, it is important to help students draw connections between historical events and contemporary issues—without the loss of historical content. The comparison with current tendencies has its challenges and needs to be thoroughly reflected upon. To compare does not imply to catastrophize every event and to equate it with evil. However, while recognizing that evil can be banal, we can pay attention to the accumulation of signs, such as breaking of taboos in rhetoric, growing social acceptance for the violence toward and exclusion of the Other(s), and labeling of

minorities. Propaganda is the most popular tool that an authoritarian regime uses, but it is also used in democracies in the form of different PR measures. The propagandists of the past and the PR people of today know how to fight for the minds of the people/voters. Lessons from the past can be helpful in developing caution toward any smear campaign—no matter from which political camp it comes. An analysis of *Mein Kampf* can reveal how one minor political party in Bavaria could evolve into a ruling and hegemonic party that brought us the Second World War and the Holocaust.