

Teaching about the Holocaust in a Postmodern World

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"I implore all teachers who can hear this not to let the Holocaust become a footnote in history.....please listen to the echoes and the ghosts of the Holocaust and teach them in schools."

Steven Spielberg, director of the Oscar-winning film *Schindler's List* (*Times Educational Supplement*, 25th March 1994, p. 18)

"I cried. They were just like us."

from the visitors' books at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington DC
(Kelleher 1994)

The Holocaust is today being kept very much alive as a piece of twentieth century history of especial importance. During the past two years, two museums devoted to its memory have opened in the U.S.A. (Evans 1993 and Kelleher 1994), and it has been the subject of a major Hollywood film by a 'popular' director. 1995 has also, of course, seen the public commemoration - fifty years on - of the liberation of the camps (see, for example, Traynor 1995). With the Holocaust being a prescribed topic for study in secondary schools in England, as part of the History National Curriculum (Department for Education 1995: 13), it would seem to be an appropriate time to debate the teaching of the Holocaust to schoolchildren.

The Holocaust is a difficult topic to teach. It falls under the definitions of both a 'sensitive' and a 'controversial' topic. It needs to be taught with sensitivity because there is the potential to offend by

- referring to racist views;
- distressing pupils through the use in teaching of images/descriptions of brutality;
- being particularly distressing to pupils who are members of families or groups who were directly involved.

It is also 'controversial', because it involves questions of morals and values (Ryder and Campbell 1988: 137). In saying this, I am following J.J. Wellington's contention that a controversial issue will

- '- involve value judgements, so that the issue cannot be settled by facts, evidence or experiment alone;
- be considered to be important by an appreciable number of people.' (Wellington 1986a: 3) The teaching of the Holocaust becomes controversial not only when it

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examines the behaviour of people in the past, but also when we decide how much *space* we give in it to racist views.

I begin this study with some remarks about the role that teaching about the Holocaust has in the school curriculum. I then include some comments made by other writers concerning the role of the teacher when dealing with contentious topics. This is followed by a section delineating what I see as the most important realisations to have emerged as a result of postmodernist thinking within the discipline of History, and continuing with a description of a contemporary 'minority' viewpoint concerning the Holocaust. I then suggest what I regard should be the repercussions of the above for teaching about the Holocaust, which particularly affect the perennial concerns of 'balance' and 'indoctrination', and attempt to give solutions for some practical difficulties which are likely to arise in the classroom. This is a very personal piece of work, and in no way does it try to cover all aspects of teaching the Holocaust. My intention is to raise some issues and to point to what I regard as the way forward for this topic.

The Holocaust in the curriculum

The Holocaust provides the opportunity to look at the extremes of behaviour - from hideous cruelty and murder to remarkable acts of generosity and courage. By looking at the specifics of this event, pupils can go beyond the simple black-and-white good/evil divide, and consider a range of human responses and decisions. Is 'following orders' an excuse? Is violent resistance justified? Who was to blame? By taking this topic as a whole and in context, pupils can begin to see how apparently ordinary people can behave in extraordinary ways - for good or ill. How this was a tragedy created by the choices made by men and women.

I believe that it is appropriate for such issues to be addressed within History. The 'guidance' of people was set out by David Lowenthal as one of the benefits of knowing about the past, and, together with 'Predicting the future', 'to learn from mistakes' was mentioned as a value of history by 26% of respondents to a recent survey (Lowenthal 1985: 35ff; Merriman 1991: 24). As Lowenthal says, 'The idea that the past can teach the present dates back to the dawn of written history and animates much of it.' (1985: 46) For issues of racism, intolerance, collaboration, and even genocide, are ones which confront us now, and which will confront our pupils as adults in years to come. In particular, we would like, I believe, to counter the menace of today's Nazi movements, which had in 1992 70,000 members in Germany alone (Supple 1993: 278).

The 'guidance' aim of the writers of two Holocaust-specific textbooks I have studied is clear. Carrie Supple says that her book 'combines an historical account with themes and questions which encourage students to think about the events described in relation to their own lives and choices.' (1993: xii) An example of one of these questions is 'In your opinion, were the Edelweiss Pirates justified in (physically) attacking Hitler Youth groups?' (1993: 109) Supple also quotes Otto Widmaier as saying 'We must learn from our history what man is capable of doing, and, from that lesson, achieve the strength to overcome....prejudice and hatred in future.' (1993: 266). Rogasky's aim in writing *Smoke and Ashes* is, as well as being a memorial to those who died, 'to make absolutely certain that nothing like them [the camps] ever happens on the face of the earth again.' (1991: 76)

The role of the teacher

It has often been argued that in discussing controversial issues in the classroom the teacher should be objective - the neutral chairperson. Teachers should *not*, according to this view, use their position for promoting their own views (Ruddock 1986: 8). They *should* give equal time, weight, and apparent conviction to the presentation of different viewpoints (see Bridges 1986: 27, 31; Wellington 1986b: 152), and they should 'be cautious about exposing their own views unless they could be sure that their authority as teachers would not lead pupils automatically to accept their view as the right one.' (Ruddock 1986: 9)

In contrast, it has been argued that

'[The teacher] owes it to the group to indicate his [sic] preferences frankly and clearly, while yet making apparent that these preferences are continually subject to reconsideration, modification or even disapproval....' (T. Brameld, 1955, in Ruddock 1986: 10)

Certainly, there are strong objections to the view that the teacher should be 'neutral'. How is the teacher to make him/herself 'objective'? (Wellington 1986a: 4) The way a teacher puts across an issue will, inevitably, be affected by his/her own standpoint (Bridges 1986: 27).

History in a postmodern world

The study of the past has for many of its more enlightened practitioners become a reflexive exercise. It is recognised that the historian cannot be a seeker after the 'true' past - because there is no such thing as a fixed historical reality. Commenting on his own field of study, the late Glyn Daniel wrote 'We can be sure of only one thing in archaeology: that what is now said about the Sumerians or megaliths is not what was said a quarter of a century ago....and certainly not what will be said in a quarter of a century's time.' (1981: 8) Our view of the past is conditioned by the culture we live in. This has been well illustrated by Bruce Trigger by his analysis of the so-called 'New Archaeology' school of academic thought which began in the U.S.A. in the 1960s: in seeking to make universal generalisations about human behaviour, so downgrading the importance of localised traditions, it was reflecting American post-war imperialism in which national traditions were considered to stand in the way of American economic and political influence (Trigger 1984: 366). As a consequence, we can no longer categorically dismiss contemporary opinions that differ from our own as being false, and we can no longer present our own opinions as absolute fact.

This debate has important repercussions for teachers of the Holocaust, because it is an event which - like the Stonehenge monument in the field of archaeology - has attracted published interpretations which many professional researchers, scholars and teachers regard as 'lunatic' and untenable. They are regarded as a distortion of the evidence.

In 1977, David Irving sought to absolve Hitler from much of the blame for the mass murder of the Jews. The extermination campaign was, according to Irving, not something initiated by Hitler: 'the killing was partly of an *ad hoc* nature....- the way out of an awkward dilemma, chosen by middle-level authorities in the eastern territories overrun by the Nazis - and partly a cynical extrapolation by the central SS authorities of Hitler's anti-Semitic decrees.' (Irving 1977: xiv) Describing him as a 'lax and indecisive political leader', Irving maintains that Hitler consistently forbade the extermination of the Jews, and that when he was finally presented with the information that it was being

done in spite of his wishes, 'wholly in keeping with his character', he did not act to stop it (1977: xi, xiv-xv). This thesis has inspired such vehement outpourings as 'Irving is merely an apologist for Hitler and deserves no consideration as a historian' (Dawidowicz 1981: 156, note 34; see also Supple 1993: 147).

However, Irving has gone further than absolving Hitler from blame for the event, and has become Britain's foremost Holocaust denier (Cesarani 1994) - those who deny that the Holocaust ever occurred at all.

Those who face accusations of involvement in the extermination, have of course for many years made such claims. Louis Darquier de Pellepoix, responsible for the deportation of 70,000 Jews from France, was in 1978 reported as maintaining that the Auschwitz gas chambers were only for the removal of lice (Levi 1988: 15). However, in the 1980s, a number of writers styled themselves as a historical 'reversionist' school (Fresco 1994: 191, 192). As the hostile Nadine Fresco expresses it, 'Their principal thesis is that the genocide is a swindle, a lie fabricated after the war by the Jews in order to extort, by way of reparations, millions of marks from the unfortunate Germans.' (1994: 192) In 1987, Jean-Marie Le Pen, president of the National Front party in France, described the gas chambers as "a mere detail" in the history of the Second World War (Fresco 1994: 202).

The deniers can, of course, claim that photographs (see Levi 1988: 15) and monuments have been fabricated, without other historians having any *absolute* proof to the contrary. Indeed, the deniers have been inadvertently aided and abetted by those who undertook to preserve Auschwitz camp after the war (Cesarani 1993). The grim finale of a modern visit to Auschwitz is Cemetery I, scene of perhaps 10,000 deaths by gas (Dwork and van Pelt 1994: 295, note 4). However, the building had been considerably modified by the end of the war, since the furnaces had been dismantled and the use changed to become an air-raid shelter (Dwork and van Pelt 1994: 239). Consequently, the chimney, roof openings and furnaces which can be seen today are modern reconstructions (*ibid*). Birkenau, where far more people were gassed, is not part of today's guided-tour experience, since it was mostly dismantled after the war (Dwork and van Pelt 1994: 295 - note 4, 239, 240).

The consequences for the classroom

This postmodernist position which I have outlined above does, I believe, lead to *both* constraints and freedoms for those who teach the Holocaust. Our inability to be *absolutely certain* about past events, means that we *must* include the Holocaust denial viewpoint in teaching the Holocaust. Some teachers will no doubt regard this as unfortunate. But I am not arguing that we have to give the 'denial' viewpoint *equal* time and weight to the more standard historical vision in our presentation of the topic. This is because although it is *possible* that the minority viewpoint *may* be more correct, the vast majority of popular and scholarly opinion believes otherwise. In addition, I believe that the entry of the 'lunatic' view into lessons will actually be of benefit in meeting our aims in teaching the topic.

Currently, I believe, many Holocaust lessons do not cover the 'denial' theory. Neither Rogasky's Holocaust-specific text, nor a book commonly used to cover History in Year 9 (pupils aged 13-14) by Shephard, Reid and Shephard (1993), mention it at all.

Supple's text-book, which *does* have a section on 'Revisionism', does not go into the view in detail or attempt to show its inaccuracy, but states that 'Most people choose to ignore them' (Rogasky 1991; Supple 1993: 270). I suggest that a teacher should delineate the view, and then proceed to demolish it - although still conceding the *possibility* that it may be accurate. Only by this process - of singling out the view and then exposing its inaccuracy - can we *persuade* pupils of its inaccuracy (also argued by Short 1994: 58). A practising History teacher at a school in Cambridge takes just this approach, when examining the claims of neo-Fascists. Examination pupils aged sixteen are given a piece of National Front literature of 1975. Some of the questions asked in relation to this material seem quite 'neutral':

'Do you agree that the government is "deliberately trying to stop people being educated"?'

Others, however, whilst not plainly denouncing the material, are subtly leading pupils in that direction - the lesson, then, is not a balanced one:

'Give two examples from the passage of "unsupported generalisations" - that is, things said without any evidence to support them.'

'In your own experience, have you ever been encouraged to run amok in a lesson?' (it is claimed that 'Communist teachers' are allowing this to happen)

Taking this sort of approach towards 'denial' literature would further the process of stopping the Holocaust from being repeated, by guiding pupils towards the view that anti-Jewish stances - by Irving or by the British National Party - are not historical reality.

Accepting a postmodernist position does also, I believe, lead to other benefits. It allows us to argue for our view of past events *with passion*, giving the full story using the full horror.

Interpretations of events of the past always involve a selection of the material available, and the particular selection of material made by a given individual in a given society results in unconscious bias. However, there is also the question of the *conscious* decision not to give a full picture. Our particular concern here relates to the omission by some communicators of recent history of the blood and suffering involved in war. This has been most clearly observed in the area of heritage presentation, by David Uzzell (1989). Uzzell first looked at two presentations of recent violence, in Germany and France. A centre adjacent to Checkpoint Charlie in what was then West Berlin had as its purpose to give a history of attempts to cross the wall. Conceived in anger at the system which resulted in this situation, the presentation succeeded, according to Uzzell, in arousing a similar anger in the visitor, as well as admiration for the bravery of those who had tried to beat the system by crossing the wall, and compassion for the families they left behind. When, subsequently, Uzzell visited Oradour-sur-Glane, the scene of the massacre of 642 people by German troops in 1944, he found that visitors were not spared the full horror of the past - the booklets available there include pictures of the bodies. Uzzell characterised the type of presentation he saw at Oradour and Checkpoint Charlie as the 'hot' interpretation of the past. It is an attempt, through being shocking and moving, to 'emotionally engage' those who experience it, through empathy with the people of the past, and so to examine their own behaviour. Uzzell went on to compare these presentations to typical presentations of the wars of the past found in this country. He found many museums with a military theme to be obsessed with

uniforms: it was as though uniforms were the most important features of a war. The other side of war - the suffering - was being - and continues to be - excluded - in my view, both for reasons of 'good taste' and because it is not what the public wants to see - they want to see the glory and the technology. The National Army Museum, for example, promoted itself in a recent leaflet as an 'exciting day out for all the family'. This failure to even *attempt* to communicate the full horror of conflict seems to me to be creating an unbalanced picture: to not include the death as well as the glory is to leave out half of history.

The content of recent textbooks suggests that current practice in teaching the Holocaust is similarly *not* to show the full picture, the full horror. Rogasky's textbook *includes* the following:

- babies thrown from windows during the deportation from the ghettos;
- 'many SS doctors in the camps used inmates as laboratory animals' and Josef Mengele was responsible for 'horrifying medical experiments' (1991: 68, 93-94, 173).

She does *not*, however, relate the more graphic and sordid details:

- that 'human fat' might be used to help the bodies in the trenches burn;
- that Mengele was said to have 'thrown newborn babies directly into the crematoria or open fires';
- how the ovaries and testicles of perhaps two hundred prisoners were removed as part of experiments in sterilisation at Auschwitz;
- and that Wladislaw Dering, a prisoner-doctor who performed many such operations, had a tobacco pouch made from a scrotum he had removed (Lifton 1986: 171, 347, 247, 283).

Supple's book is more explicit than Rogasky in her half-page section on medical experiments:

'The most feared [doctor] was *Dr Mengele* of Auschwitz, who carried out 'experiments' on pregnant women. He liked to cut them open and see how long it took for a foetus to die. He also enjoyed research into the effects of torture, castration, sterilisation, infection and injection with poison.' (1993: 177).

Elsewhere, Supple writes that an SS man 'seized the child by its feet and smashed its head against a wheel of the wagon. This took place in full view of the mother...' (Supple 1993: 190). A similar story is recounted in Shephard, Reid and Shephard (1993: 191).

But neither this book nor Rogasky nor Supple depict the full story in their choice of photographs. There may be piles of bodies, but not close-ups showing the faces contorted in death, the skin tight over bone (cf Vrba and Bestic 1964: plates XIII, XIV, XV, XVI).

In our mission to show the full picture of the topic, we should not draw back from showing pupils shocking images of the Holocaust. Photographs and films *are* important because for a generation which is accustomed to receiving information through visual images, a description of the same scene can lack the same instant impact. As one young person commented after seeing images of more modern mass extermination:

"I ain't never heard 'bout the Armenian massacres or this bad dude Pol Pot. And if I heard it in history class I wouldn't have been much bothered. But man, this movie was awesome." (Evans 1993)

The acknowledgement that it is always possible that our view of the past - however carefully constructed, and however well backed-up by what we call 'evidence' - may be wrong, does *not* mean that we should not seek to convince our audience that the view *we* have reached - the view *we believe* is the closest to reality, being the most likely version among the possibilities available - is the best one. But we should do so in a personal way, stating our cultural background and not expressing our opinion in language that precludes all argument: 'We think this is what happened', rather than 'this is what happened'.

This 'personalised' view of historical reality, allows for, again, much more focusing on the *aims* of the topic. We will, *with good theoretical justification*, not have to use objective-sounding historical language. This is already in practice done in many Holocaust textbooks for pupils. Carrie Supple's *From Prejudice to Genocide* (1993) uses much emotive language. For example, on a time-line, the entry for 31/7/1941 is 'The beginning of the attempt to *murder* all the Jews of Europe.' (1993: 82, my emphasis) Later, Supple states that 'Gypsies, gays, Poles and thousands of others were also *murdered* in concentration camps.' (1993: 139, my emphasis) Rogasky says in the introductory section of her textbook: 'To say the truth straight out, this is a book about murder.' (1991: 3) Of the Nazis she says that 'If they had not been stopped by the armed forces of the free world, they would have unleashed their murderous madness everywhere on the face of the earth.' (1991: 3)

We can and should, therefore, be *passionate* in our depiction of the appalling cruelties - and apathy - which can be produced when a population is persuaded that people of another race are something 'other', something evil.

Practicalities

As I have said, I believe that revealing to pupils the full horror of the Holocaust, including the showing of horrific pictures, is necessary in the teaching of this topic. However, a safeguard must apply to stop pupils from fainting or being ill! A solution here would be to tell pupils that they may go elsewhere and do written work if images prove to be too much for them. In addition, the pictures are not, by themselves, going to be effective. To understand what happened fully, the events need to be made to seem less remote from our time and the victims to be 'humanised'. Unremitting images of death, and the statistics involved, can begin to become meaningless. In reviewing a film called *Ambulance*, Goldman and Frenkel commented that 'The message of this little piece...haunts the viewer long after the more graphic and horrifying films have been rejected by the mind's eye, which can only take in so much.' (1985: 199) Without some context, the bodies can be seen as just bodies, not people like us. One of the best ways to counter this is to look at the lives of certain individuals involved. Carrie Supple's book maintains that:

'The numbers are beyond comprehension. We can perhaps only begin to imagine something of what they experienced by hearing the voices of individuals who lived and died through those times.' (1993: xii)

As Sara Leucter says in relation to oral history, 'A narrator's personal experiences and emotions may have a profound effect on the listener.' (1985: 371) Of the stories I have encountered, one of the most emotional for me, which would perhaps have to be adapted in order to be related to younger pupils because of its sexual references, was that given in Vrba's account of life in Auschwitz - of the love affair which blossomed in the camp between himself and Alice, cut short when she was sent to her death (Vrba 1964: 182ff).

However, for school pupils, the best individuals to choose, as Supple does, are those who experienced the Holocaust as young people (see Klein 1993). At the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, visitors 'each carry the passport of a child whose destiny is only revealed at the end [of the tour]' (Evans 1993). One school pupil is reported to have reacted thus when given the news of 'his' child's fate: "Died from infection of a bayonet wound in Warsaw ghetto. Fifteen like me. Just a kid." (Evans 1993; see also Kelleher 1994)

The second reason for why the Holocaust can seem remote to today's school pupils is that it happened such a long time ago: it couldn't happen today, could it? As Supple expresses it, however, 'Many aspects of Nazism live on. Antisemitism, racism, prejudice, brutality, terror, dictatorships and mass murder continue.' (1993: 274) Many of those who seek to teach about the Holocaust give more contemporary examples of mass murder. Supple includes in her book the examples of East Timor, of the former Yugoslavia, of neo-Nazi groups, and of racial problems in Britain (1993: 274-280). Rogasky describes the recent situations in Cambodia, Tibet and Iran (1991: 155-6). The idea behind this educational approach has been well described by the director of the Museum of Tolerance:

"We decided to confront all aspects of intolerance today as a method of illustrating the sort of prejudices that led to the Holocaust. It brings the whole tragedy up to date." (Evans 1993)

The whole *approach* I have suggested does, of course, involve many dangers. In introducing anti-Jewish propaganda to the classroom, we may be responsible for *some* pupils subscribing to the same view. This possibility should be countered not by changing the *content* (i.e. leaving out the view), but by the *approach* - i.e. we must make sure that as well as understanding the view, pupils grasp the great *objections* to the view. Also, the approach may be said to be giving any teachers who are *themselves* anti-Jewish the license to 'indoctrinate' pupils. This is certainly a risk - teachers of the Holocaust must be carefully monitored by school senior management teams. If found to be giving an over-emphasis to the denial view, a team-teaching session could be proposed for the future, in which 'denial' sessions are interspersed with lessons from a teacher who subscribes to the majority view. In this way, pupils will get the opportunity to hear genuine exponents of both theories.

My argument for the use of more personalised language when putting forward views of the Holocaust, does not automatically stop pupils from believing us solely because of our authority as a teacher. I believe that the answer here, is, as Ryder and Campbell suggest, to simply 'Be vigilant about relying on reason rather than status in arguing your position.' (1988: 138)

Conclusion

The postmodernist interpretation of the way History is constructed confirms for *all* those who are involved in teaching events of the past that we can never be objective or sure that our view is 'right'. The response of teachers of the Holocaust should in my view be twofold. Firstly, in the interests of 'balance', they must include the Holocaust denial viewpoint - although it does not have to occupy *equal* time. Secondly, they need not be afraid of the 'indoctrination' of pupils by stating clearly their own Holocaust-inspired world-view - that the effects of prejudice and intolerance are terrible - using any means they can to arouse the emotions of their pupils. This is acceptable so long as it is done in a *personal* way - as a human being, not a teacher.

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