Genocide and its Relevance Today (Part I) - The Ongoing Relevance of Holocaust Education in German Migration Society: Why this Topic at all? | Strife

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by Elisabeth Beck

A passage through the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin (Image credit: Flickr/Jerzy Durczak)

The debate on migration is an emotionally charged one, particularly when that migration was forced. The same also applies to the discourse surrounding the culture of remembrance in Germany. The weight of such a discussion is further exacerbated when migration and memory are simultaneously present. Politicians and educators get involved in the discussion when it comes to the aims that Holocaust education ought to pursue in an immigration country, asking whether the participation of immigration and their prior life stories impact the objectives of that education in any meaningful way. People from different countries are socialised with various narratives about the Holocaust and, therefore, remember it differently – or not at all. Consequently, there is also a debate about the obligation for immigrants to learn about the 'German' past and to remember it in an assumed and specifically 'German' way. These various expectations from different players have created challenges for Holocaust education and, hence, the question arises as to how educational approaches in this field ought to look like in a society characterised by migration **[1]**.

In 2017, of the 82.6 million people living in Germany, 19.3 million of them were seen or marked as 'immigrants' or had foreign backgrounds. In this light, Germany is a highly diverse country[2]. However, there are still people who reject this and seek to portray German society as

a homogenous entity. Such a nation-state-oriented production of an 'us' – as a counterpart to an 'other', a 'them' – negates plurality which has been present even prior to the refugee crisis of 2015-2016. Global history is history of migration, and yet, this understanding is conflictual because discussing migration and forced migration remains highly complex and politically divided. The focus in social, scientific, and media debates on migration and integration is mostly on the linguistic and vocational training of immigrants and refugees. Because of this, little is known on how migration influences the way we remember, or on how education about the German past deals with processes of pluralisation. Even more so, it remains uncertain to what extent there exists a necessity of a 'different' or a rather more 'contemporary' method of remembrance.

When it comes to the Holocaust, there is a specific way of remembering the past in German society. In the past, the country developed and upheld a strongly institutionalised remembrance mechanism. This fulfills both political and social functions, from state integration, the identification with the political system, and consensus building to the creation of mass loyalty and stability assurance[3]. For this reason, history and its remembrance forms 'our' identity and the way we see 'our' society and 'ourselves', in stark contrast to the 'the others'. Still, the construction of an 'us' refers to the rigid entity of nation and, in many cases, neglects the heterogeneity in society that results from migratory processes. In so doing, one of the biggest contemporary challenges is the inclusion of different perspectives in the education of history and the avoidance of the production of an 'other' (symbolised by such terms as 'here' and 'there' or 'us' and 'them'). In short, Holocaust remembrance and Holocaust education in Germany needs to be open to new spheres and develop new forms of remembering and training in order to enable all people living in Germany to participate and conceptualise the country's history.

Different communities and diverse groups remember 'their' past in various ways. Since remembrance is such a powerful resource, conflicts can emerge as a result of its different conceptualisation, e.g. in the form of victim hierarchies or 'competitions'. In addition to the question of what plural remembrance can look like, the question of the legitimacy of remembering in general is also not uncommon in Germany. However, it is important to cope with fundamental societal changes and, therefore, with upcoming changes in Holocaust education and equally in genocide education. Discussing the reason why we ought to still remember *at all* and why we should think and educate about cruel pasts *cannot* be a solution.

Since the Holocaust is an event in history that shook the foundations of civilisation, Germany has a responsibility in remembering and not having to repeat the tragedies of the past[4]. This responsibility, however, arises not only from 'being German' or living in Germany. As human beings and critical individuals we all have the responsibility to prevent the occurrence of atrocities, namely any exclusion, discrimination, genocide, or ethnic cleansing in the world. This responsibility cannot be delegated to a national or state level. It must just as well be located within the individual. Recognising and developing this accountability is widely regarded as a challenge for education.

As such, education is an essential tool in the prevention of genocide by promoting knowledge about past violence. It does so by studying the causes, circumstances, dynamics, and consequences of such violent episodes in history; as well as developing skills, values, and attitudes in order to prevent group-targeted violence and genocide. Consequently, education needs to respond to changes in society by taking the diversity of people's backgrounds and experiences with discrimination, exclusion, and the violation of human rights (often related to processes of migration– into account. This is particularly important in cases of forced migration caused by war and violent conflict, both underlining the necessity and urgency to address crimes against humanity in education.

Still, by including different views and perspectives of Holocaust education participants, challenges may occur. Educators need to face problems like anti-Semitism and discrimination with increasing frequency. The number of people harbouring anti-Semitic attitudes – such as Holocaust denial, is widespread, not only in the German right-wing extremist scene[5] but also in the region of the Middle East and North Africa where more than fifty per cent of refugees who fled to Germany in 2017 came from. Holocaust education cannot immunise against anti-

Semitism but it can raise awareness and sensitise individuals to the different and in many cases traditional images of the enemy, and their different functions in respective societies. In so doing, Holocaust education in Germany can contribute to an increasing awareness of prejudices and stereotypes without demonising and putting refugees and migrants marked as 'the others' under general anti-Semitism.

Furthermore, research on this topic is mostly conducted in secondary school and training that usually takes place in school and through extracurricular youth education. Adults are rarely recipients of Holocaust education. In 2017, thirty-three per cent of the non-German population was at the age between 18 and 35 years. Therefore, it can be assumed that – depending on the latest migration movements in Germany – the majority of this community has not had access to the German educational system. Access to formal training is furthermore often limited and not available to every immigrant.

Consequently, immigrants and refugees living in Germany do not necessarily come in contact with Holocaust education in any formal way. They may not know about the meaning of the highly institutionalised Holocaust remembrance which is a key pillar in the formation of a presumed 'German' identity. This laguna presents a challenge to adult education because participants carry their own narratives and also victim discourses with them. These past experiences have a major impact on the education itself. Educators have to make sure that different narratives and family connections to the Holocaust are thematised. At the same time, they have to moderate and contextualise the different discourses in order to avoid a marginalisation or trivialisation of the Holocaust. Only a collaborative debate on the past – or rather different pasts – can help to highlight the relevance of this topic for German society and lead to a better understanding of the reason why it is important to remember – not only for German nationals but for every person living in Germany.

Equally important for developing a contemporary Holocaust education and genocide education for adults is the inclusion of various experiences of migration, discrimination, exclusion, and even the violation of human rights. The conceptualisation of a 'Holocaust Education and Beyond' that has an emancipatory effect and highlights the values of democracy and human rights is essential. Holocaust education has the aim of strengthening people into taking responsibility for their own actions in the present and future. Beyond that, Holocaust education as one of genocide education can provide knowledge and an ethical imperative for present and future actions by people. It can build bridges into the world in order to carry these ideas further to ensure a 'Never Again!'[6] pertaining to any violation of human rights. Genocide being one of them.

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[1] A *migration society* is characterized by the assumption that migration is a societal normality and that a society is influenced and shaped by migration processes. Therefore, every society is a migration society. Old and new affinities are negotiated conflictually. Contradictions of presumed clearly defined concepts of belonging, space and culture are identified, shown and deconstructed. However, set boundaries and limits are problematised by migration.

[2] With the term 'diversity' in this blog post I only refer to different ethnic backgrounds and diversity.

[3] Dietmar Schiller, "Politische Gedenktage in Deutschland. Zum Verhältnis von öffentlicher Erinnerung und politischer Kultur" in *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 1993, B25/93, p. 32-39

[4] The responsibility for remembering results from the certainty that atrocities in history mostly started with latent terms of exclusion and discrimination. This is what has to be prevented by remembering the past since history does not repeat exactly the same way it happened (see for example Jörn Leonhard, *Die Büchse der Pandora. Geschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs*)

[5] The German Federal Ministry of the Interior indicates a number of 25.000 people for whom there are indications of a right-wing extremist endeavour.

[6] Theodor Adorno states in his essay "Education After Auschwitz": "The premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again. [...] Every debate about the ideals of education is trivial and inconsequential compared to this single ideal: **never again Auschwitz**." (emphasis added by the author)

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