

An Unteachable Past? Holocaust Education in Contemporary Germany

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Wichtiger Hinweis:

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conversations and her packages stuffed with research material (and Swiss chocolate) not only helped me complete this thesis; they helped me be who and where I am today.

List of Abbreviations

BfV	Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (Office for the Protection of the Constitution).
KMK	Kultusministerkonferenz (Standing Conference of the Ministers for Education and Cultural Affairs of the Federal States of the Republic of Germany).
MSWWF	Ministerium für Schule und Weiterbildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung des Landes Nordrhein Westfalen (Ministry of School, Further Education, Science and Research of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia).
NRW	North Rhine-Westphalia.
ZDF	Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (Second German Television).

Introduction: Germany's Youth – Holocaust Deniers?

The first and foremost objective of education is to ensure that Auschwitz does not repeat itself. This is so much more important than any other demand to education that I must not and ought not justify it. I fail to understand that this teaching objective has been given so little attention to date. An attempt to justify it would be appalling in face of the atrocities that occurred.

Theodor W. Adorno, 1966.¹

When I was ten, I read *Anne Frank's Diary*. The fate of the German Jewish teenager impressed me so much that I quickly plowed through all of the children's literature on the Holocaust available in the local library. I started having nightmares of Hitler on my doorstep, ready to deport me, too. When I was thirteen, my whole school had to go and watch *Schindler's List* in the small movie theater in my German town, Ahaus, a community of 40,000 inhabitants in the northwestern part of Westphalia. Some parents protested and were afraid that their children could not handle the violence and cruelty depicted in the film. My teacher disagreed: "Jewish children your age and younger had to *live* through this horror. You might very well be able to watch a two-hour movie on the subject." And we all went.

When I was fifteen, my class visited Dachau, the concentration camp outside Munich, on a weeklong class trip to Bavaria. Many of my classmates cried and refused to watch the documentary shown in Dachau's visitor center. After the visit, it seemed odd to be back in the bus and off to the Olympia Stadium to watch a professional soccer game. Nobody had lunch that day. On a later class trip, we visited Theresienstadt. The guide showed us the execution sites, the cells and the gas chambers that the Nazis had built there but never used. I held my friend's head when he vomited outside one of the barracks. Seeing the scratches that fingernails had scraped in the mortar of the solitary cells had been too much for him to handle. The same class trip also took us to Lidice, the Czech village whose inhabitants the Nazis had executed in retaliation for the 1942 assassination of Reinhard Heydrich, head of the security police and the security service and Vice "Reichsprotektor" of Bohemia and Moravia. The guide took us to the remainder of the village and then showed us old film reels of the massacre filmed by the executors themselves. On the way back to the youth hostel, our teacher could not talk. She was choked with tears.

When I was sixteen, I realized that my grandparents had not been resistance fighters. Of course, I had thought that my family had fought against the Nazis. Yet, one of my grandmothers had been a member of the League of German girls. Both of my grandfathers had served in the *Wehrmacht*, Hitler's army. My other grandmother would tell me on numerous occasions that she had "liked Jews." She had invited them to all of her birthday parties, "even after 1933." She was not quite sure though, what had happened to her Jewish classmates. "And anyway," she added "why must people always talk about *this*? Can't we talk about Americans and what they did to the Indians?"

In the United States, I saw, for the first time, students proudly singing their National Anthem, hands on chest. I had nothing, of which to be proud. At Amherst College, my next-door neighbor wanted to know the first day we met: "So, are there still lots of Nazis around in Germany?" As we were moving in, my freshman-year roommate asked me: "I hope you don't mind that I am Jewish?" The student director of a play in which I was acting sounded threatening when he inquired: "What did your grandfather do during the war? Did he go around killing Jews? You know, nobody in my family drives Mercedes. They all hate Germans." Did he not realize how absurd his comments were? Did he not realize that I was not one of *those* Germans that had lived during the Third *Reich*? I was a different German. Seven years of history lessons at the *Gymnasium* had taught me that I had nothing to do with the Holocaust. I knew a lot about it, true. I knew that it was Germans' duty to remember. I also felt that I did not have a right to be overly proud of my country. I knew that nationalist

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Erziehung zur Mündigkeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972), p. 88. [My translation. All other translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.]

sentiments were bad. Yet, I had also been taught that the Federal Republic of Germany was very different from the Third *Reich*; it was a completely new nation, a new chapter in German history.

Nevertheless, one of my history classes in college challenged that view. I learned that perhaps the Third *Reich* could not be seen as so separate from Germany's larger history. I began to ask myself if I did have something to do with the Holocaust. I also learned that there is a difference between saying "Over six million Jews were killed" and "The Germans killed over six million Jews." I recognized that my high school history lessons had played a considerable role in shaping my vision of the Holocaust. And although I still believed that I had taken good history classes in high school, I realized that Holocaust education was more problematic than I had thought. I was thus shocked when my younger brother pronounced on one of my visits home that he was "tired of hearing about the mass murders (*Ich habe das alles satt*)." I had always been convinced that everybody in Germany knew about the Holocaust and agreed that knowledge about the Holocaust was vital. Newspaper reports that reveal the contrary still surprise me.

"Holocaust – what's that supposed to mean?"² is the title of a recently published German article in the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*. The author reports figures gathered by two renowned German polling operations indicating that "Germany's youth has no idea" about the horrors committed by the Nazi Regime and its followers. The article reveals that two thirds of 14 to 18 year-old Germans do not associate anything with the term Holocaust. Four out of ten teenagers, says the article, have never heard of Auschwitz, Dachau, and Treblinka. Accordingly, 62 percent of German adolescents do not consider denial of the Holocaust condemnable or alarming.³ This is not a new development. Polls conducted in the eighties and early nineties revealed a similar trend. Already in 1979, an article in *The New York Times* noted, "West German Youth Found to Be Ignorant About Hitler Period."⁴ The author of the article was referring to a private study conducted by a young German teacher that had shown how shockingly little German students knew about the Third *Reich*. These results were and are indeed alarming. As the *Zeit* article indicates, they cause headlines—not only in Germany but throughout the world.

Ignorance of the past is inexcusable in Germany. Ignorant teenagers are irresponsible teenagers who have forgotten their country's burdensome legacy. When discussing German students' lack of knowledge, domestic and foreign journalists almost instantly evoke images of skinheads and Neo-Nazis. The German public as well as foreign observers easily associate insufficient knowledge of the Holocaust with burning hostels for asylum seekers – with the killing of men, women, and children in xenophobic attacks. Newscasts show young and rowdy males marching through the centers of East German cities, heads shaved, their arms stretched forward in the "Heil Hitler" salute, their heavy steel-capped boots rhythmically beating the cobblestones. "*Ausländer raus!*" cries are audible from afar. Foreigners and Germans assume that ignorance of the past undermines the democratic foundation of the country. Democratic citizenship goes hand in hand with the conscious rejection of Hitler's regime, with the conscious acknowledgement of Nazi horrors and their consequences. Teenagers unable to perform this conscious "coming to terms" with the past present a threat to the democratic future of the country, and to its democratic image.

The New York Times might easily criticize (and demonize) the ignorance of Germany's youth, while at the same time neglecting to emphasize gaps in knowledge among American high school students. Ignorance of the massacres of the Plains Indians is not viewed as a threat to American society and to the American political order. By contrast, when German

² Heidrun Holzback, "Holocaust – was soll das sein?" *Die Zeit*, August 10, 2000, n. pag.

³ According to Article 18 of Germany's constitution, the *Basic Law*, the claim that the Holocaust has never happened or that it was not as cruel as historical research has proven constitutes a criminal offense:

Article 18 [Loss of basic rights]: "Whoever misuses the freedom of speech, especially the freedom of the press, the freedom to teach, the freedom to gather and the freedom to unite, for the fight against the liberal and democratic basic order of the Republic, loses these rights."

⁴ Ellen Lentz, "West German Youth Found to Be Ignorant About Hitler Period," *The New York Times*, April 7, 1977, p. 13.

teenagers are shown to be oblivious to their country's immediate past, to the systematic killing—only a little more than fifty years ago—of the disabled, homosexuals, gypsies, other “unfit” individuals, and of over six million Jews, Germany's democracy is thought to be seriously jeopardized.

Yet, apart from alarm, reports of a waning memory among German high school students also cause surprise. As Mareike Ilsemann, a young German journalist, asks, “But are there still young Germans, who have not read *Damals war es Friedrich*, who have not seen *Schindler's List*, who do not know Anne Frank and who have never been to a concentration camp memorial?”⁵ Considering the growing attention that state and society pay to Holocaust education and the enormous importance the media accords to the subject, the polls' results are surprising. It is true that the majority of German students do not know American representations of the Holocaust; Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Elie Wiesel's *Night* are not read in German high schools. But to take this lack of familiarity with certain Holocaust literature as additional evidence of German teenager's ignorance⁶ would unjustly apply American standards of remembrance to the Germans' struggle with their past. Holocaust material of all kinds exists in Germany and is accessible to the young; remembrance is a part of daily public discourse. An American journalist claims: “These days, every public-school student in Germany visits a concentration camp, a Holocaust memorial or a museum, or perhaps all three.”⁷ All German high school students should thus have learned about their immediate history in one way or another. In fact, as the historian Saul Friedländer observes, “the presence [of the catastrophe] in the conscience and imagination of contemporary society seems to grow rather than pale as time passes.”⁸ In her survey of knowledge of concentration camps among German teenagers, the psychologist and historian Renata Barlog-Schulz comes to similar conclusions.⁹ German students do question and interpret their country's most recent past. It is thus debatable if the polls reveal a truly adequate picture of the historical consciousness of Germany's young.

Scholarly research discloses statistics that differ significantly from the results compiled by popular polling institutes. In her interviews with high-school students in Regensburg, the historian Matrina Langer-Plän encountered a “certain reluctance” to deal with the subject but she still concluded that there was generally a broad interest in Jewish history and culture among those students.¹⁰ Similarly, all other writers who have conducted surveys on students' awareness and knowledge of the Holocaust found great interest among those students.¹¹ Teachers also generally reckon that the Holocaust is a “popular” subject matter in their history classes.¹² In his analysis of Holocaust education in the state of North Rhine Westphalia, a teacher at Düsseldorf's American high school, Stephen Pagaard, observed that “the level of student awareness is high and interest is keen.”¹³ Teachers also think that students have substantial knowledge of the Holocaust. Barlog-Schulz noted “a more or less detailed knowledge”¹⁴ of National Socialism among her interviewees. In the yet most comprehensive empirical study on German high school students and their relationship to

⁵ Mareike Ilsemann, “Die Elfjährigen und die SS,” in ed. Frank Schirrmacher, *Die Walser-Bubis-Debatte* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), p. 396.

⁶ Michael Blumenthal, “Of Rest and the Weary: People who suffer ‘Holocaust Fatigue’ may be those who know the least about it,” *Time International* February 28, 2000, p. 104.

⁷ Elinor J. Brecher, “After years of neglect, German students now study Nazi horrors,” *Knight Ridder Newspapers*, June 14, 1999, p. 6.

⁸ Saul Friedländer, “Auseinandersetzung mit der Shoah: Einige Ueberlegungen zum Thema Erinnerung und Geschichte,” in eds. Wolfgang Küttler, Jörn Rüsen, Ernst Schulin, *Geschichtsdiskurs Band 5* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuchverlag, 1999), p. 15.

⁹ Renata Barlog-Schulz, *Historisches Wissen über die nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager bei den deutschen Jugendlichen* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Peter Lang, 1994), p. 72.

¹⁰ Martina Langer-Plän, *Darstellung und Rezeption deutsch-jüdischer Geschichte als didaktisches Problem* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Peter Lang, 1995), p. 22.

¹¹ Compare Kurt Pohl, *Bildungsreform und Geschichtsbewusstsein* (Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus-Verlagsgesellschaft, 1996), p. 234.

¹² Compare Stephen Pagaard, “German Schools and the Holocaust: A Focus on the Secondary School System of Nordrhein-Westfalen,” *The History Teacher* 28 (1995): 551. See also Pohl, *Bildungsreform*, p. 126.

¹³ Pagaard, “German Schools and the Holocaust,” p. 552.

¹⁴ Barlog-Schulz, *Historisches Wissen*, p. 426.

history, Bodo von Borries, professor for education at the University of Hamburg, found that most students directly associate National Socialism with genocide and that an overwhelming majority of these students rejected National Socialism because of the regime's crimes against humanity.¹⁵ German teenagers know about National Socialism *and* about the horrors associated with it.

It is not only scholars who note teenagers' general knowledge of and interest in the Holocaust and the Nazi regime. The Ex-President of the Republic, Roman Herzog, confidently backs the academic findings. "I know from my own experience," he asserted in a speech at the annual memorial gathering for the liberation of Auschwitz in 1999, "that knowledge about National Socialism among our youth is remarkable. But especially that the willingness for a continuous discussion (*Auseinandersetzung*) is great [...] There is no question: our young people do not shut their eyes (*Unsere jungen Leute schauen hin*)."¹⁶ Journalists, scholars, and political figures thus all vehemently disagree with opinion polls' shocking revelations of teenagers' historical ignorance. They also contradict conclusions that could be drawn from these polls. German students have sufficient access to literature and information on the Holocaust; they are interested in learning about it; their knowledge is considerable; and they are willing to try to cope with the subject.

Yet, the opinion polls represent real figures, real percentages of real teenagers living in Germany. How is one to reconcile the disturbing results of these polls with the generally positive and optimistic attitudes of the German elite? Journalists and scholars naturally turn to the secondary schools, where young Germans spend half of their days, half of their lives. Secondary schools in Germany are given the heavy responsibility of educating the nation's young to be responsible and autonomous citizens. Indeed, the public expects schools to even fight right extremism with Holocaust education. In August 2000, Germany witnessed a disturbing outbreak of right-extremist violence. Newspaper articles reporting on Neo-Nazi crimes simultaneously pointed to the state of Holocaust education in German high schools. Similarly, Paul Spiegel, the new president of the Central Council of the Jews in Germany, commented: "The problem lies with the inadequate teaching of the Holocaust."¹⁷ An analysis of this education may help to explain why this education is not fulfilling the public's expectations.

Teaching the Holocaust is not easy. Batsheva Dagan, an Israeli psychologist and a Holocaust survivor, observes: "The events of the Holocaust are beyond conceptual perception [...] because of the disparity between life in the present and events in the past."¹⁸ She suggests that it might be impossible to teach German teenagers about the horrible, unimaginable crimes that their ancestors committed more than 50 years ago. Similarly, the British historian Carrie Supple points out: "There are problems specific to teaching about the Holocaust."¹⁹ She claims that teachers cannot treat the Holocaust as any other subject in the history curriculum. In her article, she addresses questions that every history teacher charged with Holocaust education is likely to have asked before: "What is the right age for students to learn about the Holocaust? What materials should the teacher use?" and "What attitude should a teacher adopt when approaching the subject?"

Germany's Ex-President Herzog admits, "I am not sure if we have yet found the right way to prepare the succeeding generations for [the] necessity [of awareness]."²⁰ The Holocaust, he explains, is not a subject comparable to others. Teaching the Holocaust is not just about conveying historical facts; the Holocaust is a moral subject. Herzog is aware of the problems and obstacles that secondary schools face. He realizes that as a school subject, Holocaust education will encounter students' general resistance against anything related to education.

¹⁵ Bodo von Borries, *Das Geschichtsbewußtsein Jugendlicher* (Weinheim und München: Juventa Verlag, 1995), pp. 72, 406.

¹⁶ Roman Herzog, "Sich der Geschichte nicht in Schande, sondern in Würde stellen," in Schirmmacher, *Die Walsler-Bubis Debatte*, pp. 599-600.

¹⁷ "Spiegels Kritik," *taz—die tageszeitung*, January 24, 2001, p. 16.

¹⁸ Matthias Heyl, *Erziehung nach Auschwitz—Eine Bestandsaufnahme* (Hamburg: Krämer, 1997), p. 289.

¹⁹ Carrie Supple, "Issues and problems in teaching about the Holocaust," in ed. The Council of Europe, *The Holocaust in the school curriculum: a European perspective* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1998), p. 17.

²⁰ Roman Herzog, "Rede des Bundespräsidenten bei der Gedenkveranstaltung aus Anlaß des 60. Jahrestages der Synagogenerstörung am 9./10. November," in Schirmmacher, *Die Walsler-Bubis Debatte*, p. 114.

Furthermore, he worries about the correct “dosage” of confronting students’ with Nazi crimes. Extensive and repeated exposure to Nazi horrors might incur “numbness”.²¹ Herzog is concerned with two major problems that schools confront on a regular basis. On the one hand, factual and sober teaching of the Holocaust runs the risk of too easily condoning forgiveness and closure. On the other hand, a strictly emotional experience devoid of historical discussion might overwhelm teenagers and cause them to turn away from the subject. Supple shows that history teachers face the hard task of finding a right balance between emotional and factual teaching methods.²² The scholar for education, Helmut Schreier, calls this task “education’s dilemma between shock and analysis.”²³

The struggle to find the right teaching method may explain the disparate results of polling information and scholarly research. The teaching method is not only responsible for the transmission of knowledge about the Holocaust but also for the way in which students use this knowledge and how they apply it to judge past and present. The format of Holocaust education thus not only determines what students learn but it possibly influences students’ political attitudes. Students may know about the Holocaust. Yet, they may not think that Holocaust deniers deserve punishment. They may simply not know that they are not only expected to learn *about* history, but that they should also learn *from* history in order to participate as responsible mature citizens in a democratic society. In fact, they may very well not know that what they are taught in the history lesson has significance for their personal lives.

Much of the recent German literature on Holocaust education thus examines whether or not different teaching methods succeed in demonstrating to students that their lives are connected with the horrible events that they study in class. Scholars do not agree on whether it seems advisable to favor a “factual” approach that would allow students to analyze the topic while keeping their distance, or if emotional teaching methods seem more appropriate to convey the suffering of Holocaust victims.

Supporters of a purely factual approach to teaching the Holocaust worry about maintaining the authority and authenticity of the school history lesson. In fact, statistics show that students today still grant their classes ultimate authority and credibility because the information conveyed there seems more sober and accurate than what they learn from novels, films and popular culture.²⁴ Von Borries generally notes that students are more interested in and have more fun with historical novels and films, but still think that the school lesson is the only legitimate source of historical knowledge. The tenor is that the history schoolbook is boring but important.²⁵ This attitude immediately hints at a problem: if students experience the school history lesson and its materials as boring, they are not likely to retain a lesson’s content. Moreover, as the historian Eva Kolinsky stresses in her analysis of German history textbooks, simple factual knowledge does not suffice for a consequential teaching of the Holocaust.²⁶ Both Barlog-Scholz and the historian Kurt Pohl found that students who were able to recite the sequence of events the best and who generally received the best grades were unable to relate to the events in an engaged manner.²⁷ Pohl also observed that history taught as facts is perceived as material to be memorized, relevant only for tests and short-term memory. He saw students’ interest in Holocaust education seriously decline when they were confident that they “had all the facts down.”²⁸ This suggests that factual knowledge of and interest in the Holocaust are negatively related.

The notion of “having all the facts down” reveals another problem with “factual” history lessons on the Holocaust: once a student has the “facts down”, then he or she may confidently close the book and move on to other issues. For a long time teachers had treated

²¹ Herzog, “Sich der Geschichte nicht in Schande [...]”, pp. 601-602.

²² Supple, “Issues and Problems,” p. 35.

²³ Heyl, *Erziehung nach Auschwitz*, p. 263.

²⁴ Pohl, *Bildungsreform*, p. 179. See also von Borries, *Geschichtsbewußtsein*, p. 102.

²⁵ Von Borries, *Geschichtsbewußtsein*, p. 106.

²⁶ Eva Kolinsky, “Geschichte gegen den Strom, Zur Darstellung des Holocaust in neuen Schulgeschichtsbüchern,” *Internationale Schulbuchforschung* 13 (1991): 129.

²⁷ Barlog-Scholz, *Historisches Wissen*, p. 429. See also Pohl, *Bildungsreform*, p. 240.

²⁸ Pohl, *Bildungsreform*, p. 251.

National Socialism as a finished epoch in German history. In the 1970s, historians specializing in pedagogy realized that mistake.²⁹ If one is to believe the recent research of historians, however, this attitude still lingers. As Kolinsky laments: “The National Socialist regime and its measures are depicted as its own world with its own language, own laws and own rules and regulations, logical in themselves, but so different from the normal, federal-republican society, as if all of this had happened on another planet.”³⁰ In her analysis of currently used textbooks, Kolinsky observes that Nazis are caricaturized and demonized and are thus far removed from the democratic norms and ideals taught to students in the present. Students cannot relate to them and so perceive them as a category to be studied, memorized, even remembered, but not as an issue that concerns them and their daily life. Kolinsky argues that the same is true of the depiction of Jews. They do not appear as human beings in everyday life, but only as the objects of Nazi rules and regulations. According to Kolinsky, when students learn about Jews, they learn about them “almost exclusively in the form of Nazi caricature or Nazis’ prejudiced, exclusive propaganda.”³¹ This, of course, leaves little room for students to identify with the victims as normal citizens. Students are thus not likely to empathize with these victims. Worse, these depictions seem to outline the Nazi proceedings of the killings chronologically. As Kolinsky shows, history textbooks often give “a step by step” overview of the stages of the Nazi massacre. They make the genocide seem a logical and almost rational process.

Kolinsky also discovers another flaw in how German textbooks treat the Holocaust: almost all of the source material (including pictures) is taken from Nazi propaganda and Nazi legal writings. The textbooks do not tend to encourage a critical approach to these texts; instead they imply that these sources are simultaneously information and primary sources. In his analysis of documentary photographs in history textbooks, von Borries comes to similar conclusions.³² He laments that the majority of material consists of pictures taken by the Nazis for propaganda purposes. He argues that textbook editors should also include photographs taken by American liberators, so that students are able to analyze differences and similarities in depicting the mass murders. He considers it problematic that textbooks do not actively encourage students to perceive propaganda material as such and thus to question their content. In his most recent survey, Borries found clear evidence for “document credulity” and “lack of competence to criticize sources.”³³ The flaw of “factual” textbooks and history lessons is that they present as fact and reliable information that which is clearly not objective.

This is not only true of the use of primary documents as sources of information, but also of the scholarly explanation of events. To their surprise, both Pohl and von Borries noticed that high school students still perceive Hitler as the main agent of National Socialism and its wrongs.³⁴ While the so-called “Hitler thesis” is merely one historical interpretation, some history lessons still reproduce it as a given fact. When Pohl asked students whom they held responsible for the genocide, a considerable number named Hitler as solely guilty. Some included Hitler’s immediate subordinates in their list of felons. Their history lessons based on “evident facts” had allowed them to answer the question “Who was responsible for the Holocaust?” without having to think of Germans’ responsibility for the events, without having to question their relatives’ involvement in Nazi crimes. Students could easily point to the guilty: Hitler and his immediate henchmen.

As the above summary shows, an uninvolved, seemingly detached and factual history class encourages students to categorize historical actors, to draw quick conclusions, and to exclude this chapter of German history from their own world. A supposedly “sober” approach to teaching the Holocaust does not create responsible citizens able to negotiate their country’s past within their present lives. As Langer-Plän maintains, “sufficient knowledge of

²⁹ Barlog-Scholz, *Historisches Wissen*, p. 51.

³⁰ Kolinsky, “Geschichte gegen den Strom,” p. 125.

³¹ Kolinsky, “Geschichte gegen den Strom,” p. 135.

³² Bodo von Borries, *Geschichtslernen und Geschichtsbewußtsein, Empirische Erkundungen zu Erwerb und Gebrauch von Historie* (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett Verlag, 1988).

³³ Von Borries, *Das Geschichtsbewußtsein Jugendlicher*, p. 106.

³⁴ Von Borries, *Das Geschichtsbewußtsein Jugendlicher*, p. 73. See also Pohl, *Bildungsreform*, pp. 204, 242.

the Holocaust does not guarantee [...] a willingness to draw consequences for one's own actions out of the past."³⁵

Many scholars, politicians, teachers *and* students demand a more emotionally involved history lesson. Schools already have to compete with popular television screenings, films, and literature that offer an easy emotional access to the story of the Holocaust. This is problematic as "first emotional impressions often create a very lasting impression."³⁶ The impact of the media on the emotional perceptions of the Holocaust is a reality that schools can no longer ignore. "But nobody taught us how to relate to the Shoah emotionally," the German born Holocaust-educator Björn Krondorfer laments in his own reminiscence of his German education.³⁷ Today, Holocaust education is moving away from detached teaching towards a method that focuses on feelings of distress, surprise, anger and guilt. This reform of Holocaust education was first initiated in the 1970s, when the screening of the American TV series *Holocaust* first showed the fate of individual Holocaust victims to a large part of the German population. Until then, the history lesson in school had been rather "passive" in dealing with Germany's most recent past.³⁸ After *Holocaust*, Germans started heavily criticizing the insufficiencies of Holocaust education in German high schools. In response, teachers started propagating a Holocaust education that was more focused on local history, and on portraying the human, the "life" side of history. In addition, the ministers of education of the federal states published a series of decrees that reminded teachers to pay special attention to the treatment of the Holocaust. Since then, teachers have been told to focus on social and local history in their units on the Holocaust. As the historian Hermann Glaser has commented, "*Holocaust* made clear to everyone that students are willing to deal with the Nazi past if this past can be portrayed in a way that also causes an emotional reaction."³⁹ There are, however, a number of problems connected to the "emotional" teaching of the Holocaust. First of all, if emotional teaching methods that neglect the analysis of historical facts dominate the history lesson, the lesson might lose its scholarly principles. Langer-Plän, for example, argues strongly that an emotional teaching approach should not ignore analytical standards and methods of history.⁴⁰ She questions whether focusing on emotional concerns will enable students to analyze the Holocaust with the necessary sober distance.⁴¹ If emotional dismay or "pangs of conscience" enter historical analysis, Pohl agrees, students might be easily moved to dismiss perpetrators outright, without seeking to question and understand their motivations.⁴² Furthermore, a completely emotional approach, which often focuses entirely on local or oral history, risks students forgetting about global historical processes and structures.⁴³

Other critics of emotional teaching methods voice different concerns. They worry that by addressing the student's emotional reactions and stirring highly emotional responses, teenagers will be overwhelmed. The pedagogue Malte Dahrendorf thus defends the fact that Nazi cruelties are relatively rarely mentioned in German children's literature on the Holocaust. The majority of this literature, he concludes, is adequately adapted to children's information and reading needs.⁴⁴ Over-stimulating children's emotions can have serious consequences. Alan Posener, writer for the daily newspaper *Die Welt* points out that many students refuse to learn more about the Holocaust, because educators rely too heavily on stirring students' emotional reactions to the horrors. He suggests that students do not want to continually look at mountains of emaciated bodies.⁴⁵ The British historian Carrie Supple similarly warns that students might be paralyzed if teachers insist on depicting the cruel side

³⁵ Langer-Plän, *Darstellung und Rezeption*, p. 361.

³⁶ Pohl, *Bildungsreform*, p. 232.

³⁷ Björn Krondorfer, *Remembrance and Reconciliation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 33.

³⁸ See Heyl, *Erziehung nach Auschwitz*, p. 143.

³⁹ Heyl, *Erziehung nach Auschwitz*, p. 147.

⁴⁰ Langer-Plän, *Darstellung und Rezeption*, p. 249.

⁴¹ Langer-Plän, *Darstellung und Rezeption*, p. 254.

⁴² Pohl, *Bildungsreform*, p. 234.

⁴³ Langer-Plän, *Darstellung und Rezeption*, p. 254.

⁴⁴ Malte Dahrendorf, "Was leistet die 'zeitgeschichtliche' Kinder- und Jugendliteratur für die Aufarbeitung der nationalsozialistischen Vergangenheit?" *Neue Sammlung* 36 (1996): 353.

⁴⁵ Alan Posener, "Der neue, der hilflose Antifaschismus," *Die Welt*, November 10, 2000, p. 30.

of the Holocaust. As the educators Brigitte Dehne and Peter Schulze-Hageleit suggest: “The horror, which we have ourselves not fully grasped yet, is expected to be grasped and processed by students. That is [...] too much to ask. If teenagers under these circumstances, are [...] reluctant to be emotionally affected and act (seemingly) ambivalent toward the horrors, that is [...] our [the teachers’] failure.”⁴⁶

Emotional distress about the Holocaust can cause reactions quite the opposite of what an emotional teaching method initially intends. Mareike Ilsemann, the young journalist, remembers that she visited a concentration camp as an eleven year-old and wonders whether that was the right age to have been exposed to Nazi horrors. She recalls that students would cry in her history lesson on the Holocaust.⁴⁷ Instead of bringing the events closer to the student’s personal life and experience, emotional teaching methods may move teenagers to stop dealing with the topic entirely. Indeed, it seems that in response to their Holocaust education, many German teenagers refuse to be involved. For emotional involvement causes too much pain.

Many German students may in fact resent overly emotional renderings of the Holocaust. The pangs of conscience they experience when looking at pictures of Holocaust victims do not allow them to feel proud of their country. Ilsemann notes the problems that a negative “over-confrontation” with the past holds for students. Similarly, Jane Kramer, the European correspondent for *The New Yorker*, notices that young Germans are “tired of always having to be ashamed of [the] past.”⁴⁸ Krondorfer also meets many young Germans in their teens and twenties who “are suffused with guilt and anger.”⁴⁹ These students seem emotionally touched, yet they try to rationalize and control their emotions by rejecting the past as not their own. Educators acknowledge that a heavy emphasis on the emotional aspects of the Holocaust will ruin teenagers’ interest in the past. Anita Mächler, the head of a Berlin *Gymnasium* observes: “The fact that we can’t look back on the last century with any pride is certainly difficult for some young people.

Children want to be proud of something and need to identify with something.”⁵⁰ Teenagers will only reluctantly sit through a lesson on the Holocaust if the teacher increases their bad conscience for what their family members might have done. The objective of Holocaust education—to make teenagers aware of their political responsibility for the past—will not be achieved in that way. Germany’s young long for a national pride and feel wronged when history does not allow it. After all, the young have nothing to do with the past.

Attempting to teach German teenagers about the Holocaust is, as many scholars have shown and continue to show, a daring and difficult project. The problem does not lie with either knowledge or the necessity to remember. The majority of German students *knows* about the Holocaust and knows that it is vital to remember. Phrases like “We have to study National Socialism so that such horrible events never occur again,” are a common feature of every history lesson. But this does not mean that students actually feel and process this phrase. The problem of Holocaust teaching in Germany thus centers around the question of how to get students to project their knowledge of the Holocaust into their own lives so that it will influence their political judgments and actions. Polls only depict knowledge of the Holocaust among students. If a student does not know the exact meaning of the term “Holocaust” – a foreign term introduced by Americans – that does not mean that he or she is not aware of every German’s responsibility to preserve the memory of the country’s past. Similarly, a teenager might have a substantial knowledge about the Holocaust and still join a right-extremist group. As possible solutions to this dilemma, scholars suggest that Holocaust education focus more on the relationship between past and present.

⁴⁶ Brigitte Dehne and Peter Schulz-Hageleit, “Der Nationalsozialismus im Schulunterricht,” in eds. Bernd Mütter, Uwe Uffemann, *Emotionen und historisches Lernen* (Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1996), p. 348.

⁴⁷ Ilsemann, “Die Elfjährigen und die SS,” pp. 394-95.

⁴⁸ Jane Kramer, *The Politics of Memory, Looking for Germany in the new Germany* (New York: Random House, 1996), p. xvi.

⁴⁹ Krondorfer, *Remembrance and Reconciliation*, p. 59.

⁵⁰ Gabriel Fawcett, “Teaching History and the German Right,” *History Today* 51 (2001): 17.

The former Federal President, Roman Herzog, considers the “training of empathy” as the main goal of the learning experience. All scholars agree. Their studies conclude that the teaching of genuine empathy represents the most effective way to link the catastrophe of the Holocaust directly to students’ immediate personal experiences. The history teacher Kurt Pohl stresses at several points in his study that one major goal of a successful education should be to bring the past closer to teenagers’ own lives and worlds.⁵¹ The repetition of normative conventions, such as “This must never happen again,” “We have to love our neighbor,” or “Fight racism,” does not serve this purpose. Neither should past events be judged by present normative values. The past should be approached in a truly individual effort to understand. Pohl demands “empathy and comprehension instead of moral arrogance.”⁵²

According to historians, students should be encouraged and challenged to critically analyze past events on their own and to question historical narratives. These critical skills involve the ability to understand the perspective of others. In the conclusion of his empirical survey, von Borries stresses that a major aim for educators should be to instill a genuine understanding of the other and the respect for the otherness of past societies.⁵³ The history lesson therefore cannot depict historical actors as caricatures, but needs to show real people. Langer-Plän objects that too often Jewish Germans only figure as victims of the Holocaust. She insists that Jewish society be examined from within⁵⁴ and that Jews should be depicted as acting subjects.⁵⁵ Paul Spiegel similarly criticizes that German history lessons tend to depict Jews solely as victims, and that consequently German students have little opportunity to view them as human beings.⁵⁶ Kolinsky agrees: the stereotypical representation of groups, such as “the Jews” or “the Nazis”, will not enable students to relate to historical actors; the history lesson (and the textbook) should relate individuals’ experiences and should include personal life stories.⁵⁷ The teachers Dehne and Schulz-Hageleit partly achieve this objective in their own history lessons: they employ what they call “filter figures,” biographies of common German citizens and their daily lives in the 1930s and 1940s through whose eyes students can follow and experience past events.⁵⁸ The attempt to understand people’s individual experiences is thus one way to close the gap between past and present.

Still, it does not suffice to be able to relate to and understand the experiences of other past actors. If the teaching of the past is meant to have an impact on present actions, students need to be able to understand themselves. Barlog-Scholz thus argues that a significant amount of “self-analyses and self-reflection” must be part of successful Holocaust education. Von Borries demands this kind of understanding especially when perpetrators are discussed. They, too, are not to be seen as a homogenous, caricatured, and distant group. Students should be encouraged to actively engage themselves in understanding what motivated the perpetrators.⁵⁹ Von Borries argues that this process might threaten students since they would come to know perpetrators as authentic individuals; judgments then become more difficult. But this process necessarily links past events to the present. As students are no longer able to apply conventional standards to individuals’ past decisions, they are automatically challenged to think about their own moral behavior in their own worlds. It is no longer possible to judge the past from a present perspective, to stand above past events and to feel detached from them.

If history lessons constantly stress the continuity of past and present, feelings of detachment may become less frequent. Langer-Plän thus insists that the meaning of Auschwitz for the present should be made even more concrete.⁶⁰ Students must realize what consequences Germany’s past holds for the Republic’s future citizens. A teacher might demonstrate to

⁵¹ Pohl, *Bildungsreform*, p. 133.

⁵² Pohl, *Bildungsreform*, p. 254.

⁵³ Von Borries, *Das Geschichtsbewußtsein Jugendlicher*, p. 426.

⁵⁴ Langer-Plän, *Darstellung und Rezeption*, p. 220.

⁵⁵ Langer-Plän, *Darstellung und Rezeption*, p. 239.

⁵⁶ “Spiegels Kritik,” p. 16.

⁵⁷ Kolinsky, “Geschichte gegen den Strom,” p. 123.

⁵⁸ Dehne, Schulz-Hageleit, “Der Nationalsozialismus im Schulunterricht,” p. 349.

⁵⁹ Von Borries, *Das Geschichtsbewußtsein Jugendlicher*, p. 431.

⁶⁰ Langer-Plän, *Darstellung und Rezeption*, p. 251.

students that Germany's political philosophy is largely based on what happened in Auschwitz. A lesson should include the discussion of rising Neo-Nazism, and that history teaches Germans to reject right-extremist attitudes. Barlog-Scholz adds that the treatment of National Socialism always has to offer a view of the present and the future.⁶¹ Students must learn that different time periods are inextricably linked. Von Borries' definition of 'historical consciousness' considers the ability to link past, present and future as the most important factor in students' political formation.⁶² High school history lessons should thus avoid teaching history as different and unrelated chapters of a long book. As the historian and textbook writer Hans-Jürgen Pandel writes: "History is after all a narrative construction that sensibly links events distant in time."⁶³ If students do not see that the Holocaust is one part of the longer narrative of the country they live in, they naturally have a hard time identifying with their country's past.

History taught as a narrative is also a lesson in historiography. Students should learn that there are different historical narratives of their past that even contradict each other. Langer-Plän insists that teachers remind their students of these controversies.⁶⁴ She argues that students should be exposed to historiographical problems.⁶⁵ If teenagers are taught that even learned scholars are still struggling to faithfully depict what happened, students will realize, again, that the Holocaust still presents a real problem in the present. This is especially true since students are able to directly follow some of these issues in the media. The debate about Daniel Goldhagen's book, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*; the controversies around the Wehrmacht exhibits; the actions of the Holocaust deniers; and the parliamentary fights surrounding the national Holocaust memorial in Berlin have all attracted considerable media attention.⁶⁶

All of the scholars' solutions actively link past events to students' present situation. They teach students that the Holocaust matters for their lives. It seems as though scholars offer perfect solutions. But can these solutions be realistically applied in the daily context of the high-school history lesson? Do actual teachers follow the scholars' proposals? Closer examination reveals that scholars neglect the realities of the actual school experience. This points to another dilemma in contemporary German society: students are blamed when they neglect their country's past, but the debates about Holocaust education always take place between adults and for adults. All of the surveys take a highly critical view of students, yet the proposed solutions are geared towards educators. They are hardly accessible reading material to a broader audience and are clearly not directed at students themselves. The former Federal President Roman Herzog criticizes the older generations' infatuation with themselves and their readiness to condemn the country's youth.⁶⁷ Herzog demands that more attention be given to the young themselves, "the young humans who will mark the future of our country."⁶⁸ Pohl recommends that the objectives of a history lesson be agreed upon by teachers and students. He then suggests yet another solution to a potentially more effective teaching of the Holocaust: students themselves should play an active role in determining learning objectives, methods, media and degrees of their proper involvement in the history lesson. They will then be responsible for knowledge and understanding of the past.

Polls indicate a high level of ignorance on the subject of the Holocaust among German students. Yet these polls reveal relatively little about students' (and teacher's) own perceptions of Holocaust education in German high schools. Polls, in fact, seem to ask the wrong questions and to consequently obstruct the search for proper solutions. To examine

⁶¹ Barlog Scholz, *Historisches Wissen*, p. 62.

⁶² Von Borries, *Das Geschichtsbewußtsein Jugendlicher*, p. 23.

⁶³ Hans-Jürgen Pandel, "Postmoderne Belieblichkeit—Über den sorglosen Inhalt mit Inhalten und Methoden," *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 50 (1999): 289.

⁶⁴ Langer-Plän, *Darstellung und Rezeption*, p. 225.

⁶⁵ Langer-Plän, *Darstellung und Rezeption*, p. 423.

⁶⁶ Pandel, "Postmoderne Belieblichkeit," p. 290.

⁶⁷ Herzog, "Sich der Geschichte nicht in Schande," p. 599.

⁶⁸ Herzog, "Sich der Geschichte nicht in Schande," p. 598.

students' knowledge of historical details does not reveal whether they have truly understood what happened during the Third *Reich* and that the Nazi horrors still bear implications for life in contemporary Germany. The historian Matthias Heyl warns journalists not to prematurely blame schools. He explains that scholars have not yet conducted sufficiently thorough research on teachers' and especially students' perceptions of the Holocaust as a subject in the history lesson.⁶⁹ Similarly, Gottfried Kössler, a history teacher concedes: "We don't really know how adolescents process and experience a history lesson on the Holocaust."⁷⁰

So far, pedagogues, historians, and scholars on Holocaust education have primarily blamed inadequate teaching methods for students' unwillingness to personally confront their country's recent past. As the following chapter will show, state government guidelines on the teaching of the Holocaust have closely followed scholars' proposals. But this leaves only more questions unanswered: Are government solutions and guidelines not properly implemented? How do teachers feel about proposed objectives and methods of Holocaust education? Is it possible to put them into practice? And: do students consider existing teaching methods effective and interesting?

Most of the answers to these questions can be found in German secondary schools themselves. While scholars have done research and interviews in schools before, their questionnaires have focused mainly on students' factual knowledge about the Holocaust. Furthermore, scholars have tried to examine and evaluate students' unconscious reactions to existing teaching methods. If one is to believe the scholars' assessment of Holocaust education in Germany, one is left with a very negative impression of German students: they seem uninterested in everything connected to their high school history lesson. These scholars tend to take German high school students as objects of research. Yet, scholars neglect to consider that students might be uninterested because students' own opinions are hardly ever explored. Thomas Leithäuser, an expert on Holocaust education, admits that scholars' should "conduct their research with students and teachers, not about them, and especially not over their heads."⁷¹ An analysis of the state of Holocaust education in contemporary Germany thus needs to acknowledge the principal participants of this education: German teachers and students.

My own research focuses on exploring students' and teachers' conscious views about Holocaust education in *Gymnasium* history lessons. With the help of a two-page questionnaire (consisting of multiple choice and short-answer questions) and through personal interviews, I have found out how students themselves assess their experience of Holocaust teaching in Germany. Holocaust education, as scholars and government officials underline repeatedly, is a vital part of the formation of democratic citizens. I believe that 15 and 16 year-olds (who are now allowed to vote in local elections in North Rhine-Westphalia and other states) are already capable of behaving as political actors and are thus capable of having a personal opinion of their lessons in school. They are not, as some previous research suggests, simple receptors of history teachings. Similarly, teachers themselves, who have to combine the government's expectations with the daily reality of the German school system, might be able to describe the state of Holocaust education in German schools better than any outside observer could.

The area of my research is very small: Ahaus, a rural town in the northwestern part of the county of Borken, in the state of North-Rhine Westphalia. This region, the *Westmünsterland*, is a primarily Catholic, very rural area of an otherwise densely populated and industrial state. The schools, two *Gymnasien*, whose students and teachers I interviewed, serve a predominantly middle-class population. The students grew up in small communities (the largest community is Ahaus itself with about 40,000 inhabitants). The area's inhabitants are very conscious and proud of their local history, and students will have likely heard about the history of their towns – also outside the history lesson in school. In view of this communal

⁶⁹ "Hamburger Forschungsstelle plant Forschungsprojekt zum Unterricht über den Holocaust," <http://www.fasena.de>.

⁷⁰ Gottfried Kössler, "Erfahrungsaustausch," Paper delivered at the International Conference on Teaching Experiences and Teaching Material on the Holocaust, Buchenwald/Weimar, September 24, 2000.

⁷¹ "Hamburger Forschungsstelle."

commitment to remembrance and the considerable influence of Christian values of tolerance and peace, one would expect the students' knowledge of the Holocaust to be well above average. Furthermore, Holocaust education plays a considerable role in both *Gymnasien* of the town. Most of the students have visited memorial sites on class excursions; many have participated in drama projects dealing with the Holocaust and World War II, such as Max Frisch's *Andorra*⁷² or Wolfgang Borchert's *Draußen vor der Tür*,⁷³ and others have contributed their school and art work to public exhibitions on the subject. While research within a very limited area with specific social and demographic characteristics cannot claim to speak for the state of NRW, much less for Germany as a whole, it still seems useful to examine such a circumscribed region. A researcher interested in students' personal experience of Holocaust education should first look at those schools that consider Holocaust education as one of their major missions and where Holocaust education has a long tradition. Furthermore, one might find suggestions for improving Holocaust education among those students who already have substantial knowledge about the genocide, and whose teachers might have conducted adequate lessons on the Holocaust.

Before turning to a more detailed analysis of the schools, however, it is necessary to explore the context in which Holocaust education takes place in all schools in NRW. The first chapter thus focuses on the governments' guidelines and recommendations for the secondary school history lesson in general and Holocaust education for tenth graders in particular. In the two following chapters, I summarize my findings of students' and teachers' opinions on these regulations, as well as their experience with Holocaust education in the actual classroom. The classroom is, in fact, the focus of my research. It is neither journalists, nor professors of education, nor historians who can determine the format of Holocaust education in German high schools. It is teachers' individual engagement and students' motivation to learn about their grand- and great grandparents that characterize a lesson on the Holocaust. Scholars' debates around ideal teaching methods suggest that it is difficult to formulate suggestions for a standard teaching unit on National Socialism. Once I listened to individual teachers and students, I realized that it was equally difficult to judge the current state of Holocaust education in Germany. A high school lesson is an interaction between individuals. Teachers and students bring to the classroom their own experiences with and their own feelings about Germany's recent past. A statistical analysis will not grasp the individual character of a history class on the Holocaust; it will not adequately describe how each individual struggles differently to understand and to explain what happened. It is by listening to individuals that I gained insight into the struggle of contemporary Germans to remember their horrific past. I also found that it is unjust to say, "Holocaust education is failing." As the following pages suggest, Holocaust education is sometimes successful and sometimes not. My research demonstrates why it does or does not succeed.

⁷² Max Frisch, *Andorra, a play in twelve scenes*, trans. Michael Bullock (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964).

⁷³ Wolfgang Borchert, *The Man Outside; Prose Works*, trans. David Parker (Norfolk: New Directions, 1952).

High Expectations: Government Guidelines for Holocaust Education in North Rhine-Westphalia's Schools

To inspire awe before God, respect for the dignity of man and social responsibility is the principal objective of education.

The young should be educated in the spirit of humanity, of democracy and freedom; they should be educated to tolerate and respect the convictions of the other, to be responsible for the preservation of the natural resources, bearing love to their people and country, to the community of peoples and to the commitment to peace.

Article 7 of the Constitution for the State of North-Rhine Westphalia

In a speech honoring the memory of the liberation of the concentration camps at Auschwitz, former German president Roman Herzog reminded his listeners that education about the Holocaust plays an important role in German society. He also recognized that teaching the Holocaust is still a problem, 50 years after the end of the catastrophe. He demanded urgently: "Society cannot abandon our schools [...]. Let us discuss educational contents and methods very strictly, very publicly and with a marked focus on objectives."⁷⁴ German schools, however, are not left alone when it comes to Holocaust education. In theory, teachers do not have to decide by themselves how to teach the Holocaust, what materials to use, and what teaching objectives to fulfill. The State issues guidelines on the content and methods that are to be employed in Holocaust education. The Ministry for Schools, Further Education, Science and Research in North Rhine-Westphalia (*Ministerium für Schule und Weiterbildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen*) issues guidelines for all primary and secondary school types and binding curricula for all subjects taught in the state. The Ministry also regulates the approval and rejection of appropriate textbooks and class materials.

Teachers in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) are bound to strict regulations. They cannot teach their subject matter as they see fit, but have to consult several state government publications, all edited by the Ministry of Education. A history teacher in charge of Holocaust education in the first two levels (*Sekundarstufe 1*, grades 5 through 10) of the *Gymnasium* (the school type eventually leading up to the *Abitur* and further study at the University) is supposed to refer to four different publications. The *Guidelines and Curricula—History* outlines the *Gymnasium's* primary educational mission, states general objectives of history lessons, enumerates required themes and subjects, and stipulates teaching methods. It also gives some specific examples for how selected topics (among them the unit on National Socialism) should be taught. The teaching of National Socialism is also addressed in three additional decrees that the Ministry of Culture and Education (the Ministry has changed names since) issued in the past twenty years. Finally, when choosing his or her teaching material, a teacher is bound by the state's law on appropriate pedagogical publications and the list of history textbooks approved by the Ministry.

While each of these publications refers to specific aspects of the history lesson, all of these texts share one general conviction: the school's mission is to form responsible democratic citizens. The classes offered in the *Gymnasium* are to provide students with the critical skills necessary to form healthy democratic attitudes. Students should learn to reflect on the past and its lessons and consider the weight these lessons carry for political action in the present. They are to view their own lives as embedded in their country's larger history. NRW officials have written that Holocaust education in their state should "develop in pupils the ability and willingness to deal in a thoughtful and sensitive way with the significance of this historical experience for German society today and for their own identity."⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Roman Herzog, "Sich der Geschichte nicht in Schande, sondern in Würde stellen" in ed. Frank Schirrmacher, *Die Walsler-Bubis Debatte* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1999), p. 602.

⁷⁵ "Passing knowledge of the Holocaust in the Schools of the Land of North Rhine –Westphalia" in Secretariat of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the *Länder* in the Federal Republic of Germany (Kultusministerkonferenz, KMK), *On the Treatment of the Holocaust at School—A Contribution from*

The Ministry's educational principles echo historians' and pedagogues' assessments and critiques of the state of Holocaust education in Germany. As shown in the Introduction, the history teacher Kurt Pohl and the pedagogue Bodo von Borries criticize those teaching methods that fail to encourage students to analyze the past and to understand how contemporary Germany fits into this history. Given the regulations of the NRW Ministry of Education, the pedagogues' "solutions" should already be in place. Yet, scholars are still writing books proposing "solutions" and newspaper articles still seem to suggest that Holocaust education in Germany is failing. An analysis of the government texts on Holocaust education in NRW will help reveal, why, given the similarity in attitudes towards the role of history lessons among scholars and the state government, the actual teaching of the Holocaust in NRW's schools today seems to fall short of everyone's expectations. To what extent do the scholars' and the Ministry's perceptions of adequate historical education really converge? Are the Ministry's standards applicable to actual history lessons? Do the government regulations provide sufficient instruction on how Holocaust education should be implemented?

Closer examination of the government texts shows that the government fails to acknowledge the difficult nature of Holocaust education. The texts do agree with scholars on the pedagogical objectives of such education: the democratic and intellectual formation of Germany's youth. None of the texts, however, provides adequate practical advice for teachers on how to approach this subject. Knowing what one is to teach does not necessarily mean knowing how to teach it. The *Guidelines'* authors do not seem to realize that teaching the Holocaust is a challenge; that a lesson on the Holocaust is considerably more difficult to plan and to carry out than a lesson on daily life in the Middle Ages.

In fact, in spite of the importance attached to Holocaust education, the Ministry does not consider the Holocaust distinct from other subjects on the history curriculum. The concept of "Holocaust Education" is an American one. The term is not known in Germany and – as Ralph Bollmann, editor for the daily Berlin paper *taz* points out – it "better not be translated into German,"⁷⁶ because it could imply teaching how to organize a mass slaughter rather than teaching about the genocide. Bollmann continues: "In the history lesson of the *Bundesländer* (the federal states), the Holocaust only plays a subordinate role." He notes that in Berlin 20 hours are allocated for the unit on National Socialism, but teachers are to spend only three hours discussing the Holocaust. The situation is very similar in NRW. The Ministry's employees may repeatedly state their ambitious goals for Holocaust education but they do not seem to recognize the difficulties that necessarily arise when teaching adolescents about the industrial extermination of more than six million people – just fifty years ago, in their own country. Moreover, by formulating prescriptions for history teachers to follow during their lessons on the Holocaust, government officials place additional – possibly unrealistic – demands on educators that underscore the purported failure of Holocaust education in Germany.

The paradoxical nature of the government documents is especially clear in the *Guidelines and Curricula*, the main Ministry publication. The four chapters of the pamphlet are all organized following the same principle: a reiteration of ideal teaching objectives is followed by an explanation of the teaching methods that are thought to advance these objectives. The first chapter is concerned with the mission of the *Gymnasium* in general, the second with the conduct of the history lesson at the *Gymnasium*, and the third with how these general recommendations could be applied to specific subjects on the history curriculum (one of them being National Socialism). Finally, Chapter Four specifies which of the government's suggestions are considered binding regulations, and which ones are intended to serve teachers as guiding examples. Yet, despite their different headings, these chapters do not actually differ in their content. Over and over again, the *Guidelines'* authors restate what *Gymnasium* education, history classes and education about the Holocaust should achieve.

the Länder (Bonn: 1997). The English version of this text is available on the World Wide Web, on the Conference's website <http://www.kmk.org>.

⁷⁶ Ralph Bollmann, "Hilflose Aufklärer," *taz, die tageszeitung*, November 4, 2000, pp. I-II.

Yet, the authors never explain how a teacher is to achieve their ambitious objectives. The question of how to handle the controversial and highly emotional nature of the subject, for example, is only addressed superficially. The *Guidelines* seems without concrete content. As Klaus Fröhlich, a historian at the University of Bochum, points out in his summary of government guidelines for history lessons: “The guidelines state highly abstract teaching objectives that appear attractive to a large majority due to their lack of content.”⁷⁷ State officials seem unable to give concrete advice on teaching the Holocaust. Perhaps they are hesitant to do so for such a highly controversial topic. Given the *Guidelines*’ insufficient instruction and ambiguous phrasing, it would not be surprising to find very different interpretations of government standards among NRW’s secondary schools.

At first glance, the government’s *Guidelines* does seem like a very concrete and practical piece of guidance. The booklet, edited by the Ministry for Education with the help of schools, superintendents, and scholars, comprises 190 pages and covers general secondary school guidelines; the objectives, contents, and teaching methods for the history lesson; and examples for different units and possible test and homework assignments. As stated on the page preceding the table of contents of the *Guidelines and Curricula*, the booklet is to be made available to the entire secondary school staff and is to be kept in the school library. The publication thus seems to be a very practical manual, written by teachers for teachers planning and teaching history lessons. Yet, the structured and concise form of the *Guidelines* does not necessarily mean that it is truly helpful.

The first chapter is preceded by a citation of NRW’s constitution (see above) that clearly considers the teaching of democratic principles the foremost goal of secondary education. According to Fröhlich, this commitment to civil education is to be expected: “No author of guidelines would omit to refer to the democratic norms of the *Basic Law* (Germany’s constitution) or the State’s constitution.”⁷⁸ Thus, the first pages of the *Guidelines and Curricula* reiterate that the educational mission of the *Gymnasium* is to “enable students to participate maturely in a democratic society [...] and to consciously adopt their own value systems.”⁷⁹ This statement is repeated on the following page – in bullet form, possibly to make it even clearer. The *Gymnasium* is to give its students “help in the development of a mature and socially responsible personality.”⁸⁰ “Help in the development of a socially responsible personality” means “the unfolding of individual abilities, the building of social responsibility, the creation of a democratic society, the orientation along basic values, cultural participation and responsible action in the professional world.”⁸¹ Each of these headings is succeeded by a short explanatory paragraph. Yet, these short sections hardly illustrate the practical sense of the government’s demands. Rather, the explanations add to the convoluted nature of the text. Each paragraph contains yet another list of nouns that does not clarify its heading but further complicates it. Complex terms such as “Urteilsfähigkeit” (the ability to judge), “Handlungsfähigkeit” (the ability to act), “Wert- und Sinnmuster” (patterns of value and sense) or “Wertentscheidungen” (value decisions) do not necessarily tell the teacher what precisely he or she is to do. The authors of the text seem to have been over-ambitious, trying to fit too much information into brief manual-style paragraphs.

To be sure, the reader *can* gather the general intentions of this first chapter; secondary education is to promote a general democratic mission. The authors of the *Guidelines* clearly agree with what scholars see as the basic tasks of education. For example, when the *Guidelines* demands that teachers encourage tolerance and solidarity and teach their students to fight extremist tendencies,⁸² they echo von Borries’ concern about basic democratic values in education. When the *Guidelines* emphasize that in order to understand

⁷⁷ Klaus Fröhlich, “Richtlinien, Lehrpläne,” in eds. Klaus Bergmann et al., *Handbuch der Geschichtsdidaktik* (Seelze-Velber: Kallmeyer’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1997), p. 514.

⁷⁸ Klaus Fröhlich, “Richtlinien, Lehrpläne,” in *Handbuch*, p. 514.

⁷⁹ Ministerium für Schule und Weiterbildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen (MSWWF) ed., *Sekundarstufe I, Gymnasium, Richtlinien und Lehrpläne, Geschichte* (Frechen: Ritterbach Verlag, 1993), p. 11.

⁸⁰ MSWWF, *Richtlinien und Lehrpläne*, p. 12.

⁸¹ MSWWF, *Richtlinien und Lehrpläne*, p. 12.

⁸² MSWWF, *Richtlinien und Lehrpläne*, p. 13.

the democratic process students should participate in decisions at school and voice their individual needs and wishes in the classroom,⁸³ one is reminded of Pohl who sees students' responsible participation in decisions as a vital part of the learning process. According to Pohl, von Borries, and Barlog-Scholz, this learning process is not a mere indoctrination of democratic values. If students do not arrive at a conscious adoption of these values, the lessons have failed. It is not enough, the state officials emphasize, to teach students what basic democratic principles are. Students need "to comprehend their origin and significance and develop the willingness to accept them freely and responsibly."⁸⁴

Scholars and the authors of the *Guidelines* agree on yet another area of historical education. In their introduction, the *Guidelines'* authors emphasize that "the communication of basic knowledge, abilities and skills" is as important as the teaching of democracy. The *Guidelines* here echoes the historian Martina Langer-Plän who warns that an exclusive focus on emotional values in the history lesson might fail to do justice to the academic demands of the subject. In Germany, the *Gymnasium* is to prepare students for entry into German universities. Accordingly, the *Guidelines* demands that students in grades 5 through 10 be taught the basics of scholarly thought and analysis (*wissenschaftliche Methoden*).⁸⁵ The authors provide the reader with yet another list of convoluted nouns. The objectives of an "academically oriented" lesson (*wissenschaftspropädeutischer Unterricht*)⁸⁶ are "continuous questioning, systematic thought and work, as well as methodological reflection."⁸⁷ Again, this list of vague terms adds to the drawn-out character of the *Guidelines*. The Ministry may well agree with the majority of the historians on what an adequate education is to achieve, but this agreement does not guarantee a successful implementation of educational objectives. Most teachers would doubtlessly concur that encouraging curiosity and creativity in students is an important pedagogical principle. In what ways, however, is the teacher to raise curiosity in a subject, which may easily repel or shock teenagers? How can a teacher motivate students to critically judge historic interpretations when their own grandparents may have been involved in the events? Given the ambiguous phrasing of the *Guidelines*, it seems unlikely that teachers could turn to this publication for useful solutions to their teaching dilemmas. In fact, the *Guidelines* does not answer these questions.

The same is true for the government's more elaborate stipulations for the history lesson at the *Gymnasium*. In fact, the second chapter adds no new information to the recommendations provided in the first. According to the authors, the history lesson (like the *Gymnasium* education in general), is to teach students the democratic values of the nation and instruct them in historical facts and historical method. The history lesson must "offer possibilities to positively identify with a pluralistic society and its humanitarian and civilian, its democratic and constitutional traditions and values. It denounces crimes against humanity and any form of discrimination, especially anti-Semitism and xenophobia."⁸⁸ The authors of the *Guidelines* stipulate that teachers are to raise students' historical consciousness, a term taken straight out of von Borries' book on historical consciousness among German teenagers.⁸⁹ Von Borries suggests that students must be taught to experience their country's past as part of their present lives. The *Guidelines* formulates similar objectives.

In bullet form the booklet then enumerates several educational goals to ensure the formation of students' historical consciousness. Students should develop curiosity and empathy; they should experience "otherness", and be able to critically analyze different possibilities of historical interpretation. Furthermore, they should be encouraged to realize that their own value systems are conditioned by history and warned not to apply these in evaluations of past events and historical actors. "Students must understand history as a reconstructive process, which is spurred by society's need for self-interpretation, self-identification and self-

⁸³ MSWWF, *Richtlinien und Lehrpläne*, p. 13.

⁸⁴ MSWWF, *Richtlinien und Lehrpläne*, p. 13.

⁸⁵ MSWWF, *Richtlinien und Lehrpläne*, p. 17.

⁸⁶ The translation for "propädeutisch" is "preparatory" according to *Collins Unabridged Dictionary*, 4th edition, New York: Harper Collins, 1999. "Wissenschaftspropädeutischer Unterricht" then would translate as "preparatory lesson for academic method."

⁸⁷ MSWWF, *Richtlinien und Lehrpläne*, p. 18.

⁸⁸ MSWWF, *Richtlinien und Lehrpläne*, p. 33.

⁸⁹ Bodo von Borries, *Das Geschichtsbewußtsein Jugendlicher* (München und Weinheim: Juventa Verlag, 1995).

legitimization and which thus requires continuous critique and control.”⁹⁰ This realization should enable the history student to come to a reasoned personal interpretation of Germany’s past. Students should understand contemporary life in its historical contexts. Finally, this understanding should then enable them to responsibly participate in Germany’s political life. Scholars of Holocaust education criticize precisely those teaching methods that fail to stress the connection of the present to the past and that do not encourage students to think on their own about this past and its consequences. The authors of the *Guidelines* thus fully cater to the scholars’ critiques.

The authors also argue that students must be taught the basics of historical method and analysis. The history lesson is not only a lesson on democratic citizenship, but also a lesson on the country’s factual history, a lesson on how to read historic documents, and on how to write a correct analysis of a primary source. Teaching students “how to analyze historical processes and to comprehend and engage in historical problems, as well as to broaden their repertoire of subject specific terms and categories”⁹¹ is thus also a part of the government’s list of the history lesson’s objectives. Students are to learn how to read and interpret maps, graphs and statistics; they should also be trained to use appropriate language both in class discussion and formal papers. In fact, the *Guidelines* even provides a vocabulary list containing useful expressions for writing a standard history paper, such as “Throughout the 19th century, a century later” or “according to the author, the author demands that, the author criticizes.”⁹² Other words on the vocabulary list contain verbs associated with political regimes, such as “to participate”, “legitimize”, “to pass a law.”⁹³

Given this striking convergence of scholars’ opinion and the *Government Guidelines*, one would think that scholars have little reason to critique Holocaust education in NRW. Yet, the *Guidelines’* agreement with the scholars on pedagogical aims does not mean that these aims are implemented in NRW schools. At the end of the first section of the booklet’s second chapter, for example, the reader still does not know what “instilling historical consciousness and historical competence into the nation’s youth” exactly means. The *Guidelines* might give a cluster of convoluted nouns (often neologisms) to describe this concept. Yet a teacher referring to its instructions would still not know exactly *how* to raise historical consciousness among his or her students.

The *Guidelines’* section that discusses “didactic principles” and teaching methods is hardly more specific. The summary of didactic principles in Chapter Three is a reiteration of teaching objectives rather than a practical explanation of how to teach historical subjects. The *Guidelines* specifies two “didactic principles” that a teacher should follow in planning and conducting his or her lesson. These are “orientation towards the student” (*Schülerorientierung*) and “orientation towards academic method” (*Wissenschaftsorientierung*). The introduction of these new terms does not mean the *Guidelines’* authors provide any new information in this section. The more “concrete” examples this section provides do not tell teachers how to react to students’ feelings about the topic, or how to lead a discussion on it. The third section on the history curriculum *Guidelines* does give some more suggestions on how to implement the government’s demands. To guarantee students’ active engagement in the history lesson, teachers are to encourage students to work and inquire on their own. The *Guidelines* calls these methods “participation in creation” (*Mitgestaltung*), “learning through discovering” (*Entdeckendes Lernen*) and “orientation towards action” (*Handlungsorientierung*).⁹⁴ According to the *Guidelines*, students should be encouraged to do independent research, to participate in competitions and history prizes, and to have a say in decisions on class scheduling and choice of topics. The history lesson should be an interactive experience. Students should be encouraged to restage historical events in role plays, for example. The authors of the *Guidelines* also suggest that they practice the tasks of a historian in direct contact with original written sources or by conducting small oral history projects.

⁹⁰ MSWWF, *Richtlinien und Lehrpläne*, p. 34.

⁹¹ MSWWF, *Richtlinien und Lehrpläne*, p. 34.

⁹² MSWWF, *Richtlinien und Lehrpläne*, p. 148.

⁹³ MSWWF, *Richtlinien und Lehrpläne*, p. 147.

⁹⁴ MSWWF, *Richtlinien und Lehrpläne*, pp. 128-129.

According to the *Guidelines*, however, an exclusive reliance on a student-directed history class does not guarantee an adequate teaching of historical method. To teach their students appropriate academic standards, the *Guidelines* states, teachers need to rely on the reading of primary sources, statistical data, and graphs. It suggests that teachers use illustrations and personal accounts to get students' attention and to raise their motivation. But the *Guidelines* warns that if teachers do not simultaneously give students a framework for critical analysis of these sources, students might not come to a reasoned judgement of historical events. The textbook should, according to the *Guidelines*, be the main focus of the history lesson, for it contains "the major part of subject-specific structural elements and can thus contribute importantly to the students' methodological competence."⁹⁵ Yet, a teacher cannot simultaneously capture students' attention with "student friendly" teaching methods and fulfill the government's scholarly demands. This paradox also illustrates another major shortcoming of the *Guidelines and Curricula*. One single teacher cannot combine ideal "interactive" teaching methods with the government's concern for methodological training. A forty-five minute history lesson twice a week is not enough to guide students in their own research projects and to train them in the proper historical analysis of primary sources. While the historian Klaus Fröhlich is delighted to find both insistence on proper academic method and suggestions for more interactive and "revolutionary" teaching methods in the NRW curriculum, he recognizes that to include both in the daily grind of the school day would be impossible.⁹⁶ The *Guidelines*, even in their more practical specifications of possible teaching methods, thus only add to the demands that a history lesson is supposed to fulfill.

Ironically and in spite of these expectations, the history lesson is considered a "minor subject" in the middle level of the *Gymnasium*. In contrast to "major subjects" such as Mathematics, German Language and Literature and English—all subjects, which are accorded up to six lessons a week—history teachers for grades 6 through 10 have two 45-minute lessons weekly to cover an extensive list of required topics. As the third chapter of the *Guidelines* explicates, teachers are to treat 16 different historical topics in this time, ranging from the "World of Ancient Egypt" to the "Cold War" and the "Fall of the Berlin Wall." To teach all of these different subjects using the appropriate teaching methods the booklet outlines in this section is not self-evident. Yet, the *Guidelines* does not specify how a teacher is to live up to the Ministry's seemingly conflicting prescriptions.

The conflicted nature of the *Guidelines*' ambitious demands is even more apparent when one examines the specific recommendations it makes for teaching students about National Socialism. To be sure, all the provisions and requirements described above are also to pertain to a lesson on the Third *Reich*. Just like any other topic in the history lesson, a teaching unit on the Holocaust ideally fulfills all the standards laid out by the Ministry. Once again, the *Guidelines* focuses more on the objectives of the lesson than on the actual teaching methods that should be employed. In fact, the *Guidelines* barely devotes three and a half pages to Holocaust education, or rather the obligatory unit on National Socialism. The Holocaust is one topic to be treated among many required topics in this unit. The unit is to start out with a description of National Socialist ideology and the structure of the Nazi dictatorship. Teachers are also to illustrate daily life during the Nazis' reign and to examine people's attempts to resist the regime. Furthermore, they are to outline the characteristics of Hitler's war. The Holocaust, or what the *Guidelines* refers to as "the murder of the European Jews,"⁹⁷ is treated as part of these sub-topics.

When the *Guidelines*' authors specify teaching objectives and appropriate teaching methods for this unit, they stress yet again that teachers are to focus on the training in democratic citizenship, the building of students' historical consciousness, and the development of appropriate methodological skills. The teachers must encourage their students to consider different possible interpretations of the Third *Reich* and should warn them not to judge historical agents on the basis of present political and social values.⁹⁸ Students are to learn not to simply condemn Germans living in the 1930s for having violated the democratic and

⁹⁵ MSWWF, *Richtlinien und Lehrpläne*, p. 137.

⁹⁶ Fröhlich, "Richtlinien, Lehrpläne," in *Handbuch*, p. 516.

⁹⁷ MSWWF, *Richtlinien und Lehrpläne*, p. 112.

⁹⁸ MSWWF, *Richtlinien und Lehrpläne*, p. 113.

humanitarian values of the present Federal Republic. Instead, they should realize why Germans acted the way they did and what social and economic circumstances might have influenced their actions. The unit on National Socialism is also to address the motives and actions of perpetrators, as well as the lives and experiences of victims, resistance fighters and exiles. An understanding of different historical contexts and the motivations of historical agents is seen as a major prerequisite for an appropriate “differentiated structure of historical judgment and evaluation”.⁹⁹

According to the *Guidelines*, if students consciously reject the horrors of the Third *Reich*, they will necessarily promote and support the democratic order of their country. Consequently, the *Guidelines* demands that teachers emphasize the burden that the Nazi horrors still place on German politics today.¹⁰⁰ Teachers should remind students of their own responsibility for the memory of the Third *Reich*, but then should also ask them to discuss their grandparents’ and parents’ positions towards the past. In spite of its habitual use of convoluted phrases and vague terms, the *Guidelines’* reasoning here is logical. But once again the *Guidelines* does not mention how teachers should approach these sensitive issues. Students might not be willing to engage in the kind of historical debate the *Guidelines* promotes. Talking about “the collective guilt” of the German people is, when taken seriously, a hard task. Even teachers might have unresolved feelings about the issue. Teaching democratic values in the context of other subjects is much easier than applying the government’s objectives to the teaching of the Holocaust. It is easier to condemn French 18th-century monarchs for their undemocratic attitudes than one’s own grandparents (or those of the students). It is easier to make students reject cruel South American dictatorships than a period of their own country’s most recent history. The *Guidelines*, however, does not recognize this difference.

The *Guidelines’* authors also seem to neglect this difference when spelling out the teaching methods to be used in the unit on the Third *Reich*. Teachers teaching the Holocaust are to promote their students’ critical skills. They are to practice different forms of historical analysis and should broaden the students’ “professional” vocabulary. The *Guidelines* gives a list of expressions that students should master after having completed a unit on the Third *Reich*. These expressions are “coming to terms with the past, fascism, genocide, collective guilt, racism and resistance”.¹⁰¹ One might think that giving such concrete advice as “Study different historians’ agendas on the topic!” or “Teach the following vocabulary words to students!” represent helpful touchstones for teachers. However, interpretation of the Third *Reich* is still considered problematic. A teacher might struggle to confront students with very critical representations of their own grandparents; a teacher might hesitate to study interpretations of the Holocaust with his students that might hurt their national pride or make them feel overly guilty. The same difficulties hold for the list of words teachers are to impart to their students. None of those terms are easily explained. How does one convey the meaning of the word “genocide” to a sixteen year-old? Have historians conclusively determined the meaning of “fascism”? How does a teacher talk about racism without raising complicated and difficult issues that concern, worry and affect students deeply? How is a teacher to deal with students who exhibit racist attitudes? The *Guidelines* does not answer these questions.

The *Guidelines’* authors appear equally unrealistic when listing additional recommendations for teaching methods to be employed in a lesson on the Holocaust. The Ministry states, “a mere descriptive illustration of National Socialism cannot be called an adequate didactic treatment of the subject.”¹⁰² Consequently, the *Guidelines* holds, “an abstract, statistical representation of the war and the murder of the European Jews” is insufficient. The *Guidelines* considers “film and sound documents especially suited to illustrate the destruction, death and misery”¹⁰³ experienced by victims of the Holocaust. It also encourages teachers to use local history and a visit to a memorial to bring the Holocaust closer to

⁹⁹ MSWWF, *Richtlinien und Lehrpläne*, p. 113.

¹⁰⁰ MSWWF, *Richtlinien und Lehrpläne*, p. 113.

¹⁰¹ MSWWF, *Richtlinien und Lehrpläne*, p. 112.

¹⁰² MSWWF, *Richtlinien und Lehrpläne*, p. 113.

¹⁰³ MSWWF, *Richtlinien und Lehrpläne*, p. 115.

students' imagination. Yet, the *Guidelines* stops there. It does not suggest, for example, how teachers should discuss documentaries that show mountains of dead emaciated bodies or how they should prepare their students for a visit to a concentration camp. What does a teacher do if students refuse to see the inside of barracks at a concentration camp or a reconstruction of the gas chambers that the Nazis built? How does a teacher comfort students who are overwhelmed by horrific images? How does he or she engage students who are unmoved? The *Guidelines* does not provide answers. It does not seem to recognize that teaching the Holocaust puts different and higher demands on a teacher than other historical subjects.

The failure of the *Guidelines* in addressing specific and practical teaching methods is even more apparent in the last chapter of the booklet. Chapter Four specifies which of the *Guidelines'* propositions are "guiding examples," recommendations that may or may not be followed. The teaching of historical method and the measures stipulated in additional decrees (to be discussed below) are considered obligatory for teachers to teach. Teachers are also bound to cover a list of 16 different historical subjects in the course of four years of the *Gymnasium* history curriculum. The more concrete examples of teaching methods, which the *Guidelines* provides in earlier passages, represent suggestions that teachers may ignore. Indeed, the authors state in the introduction to the Chapter Two: "Necessary concretizations of the history curriculum are to be realized in the lesson itself."¹⁰⁴ In other words, teachers are left to their own devices on how to employ the *Guidelines'* standards in the actual classroom. The government text affirms at the end: "It cannot be the task of the curriculum to prescribe individual planning steps—neither for the general planning of the staff meeting nor the individual planning of the school lesson—for the process is always subjected to individual working conditions."¹⁰⁵ In another publication, NRW officials aver that the *Guidelines* "puts the onus for decisions about didactics and teaching methods on the teachers. This also applies to decisions – within the framework of certain binding targets – on the choice of content and the accentuation of themes."¹⁰⁶ Thus, the State Ministry itself recognizes that it cannot and should not lay down precise rules outlining every single lesson. At the same time, this assertion seems to suggest that perhaps the government itself does not know how to practically achieve its ambitious demands. When the authors of the *Guidelines* suggest that teachers and students work together to decide on "the use of the free time left open by the curriculum,"¹⁰⁷ it sounds extremely ironic.

True: one could argue that, since the *Guidelines* acknowledges that precise regulation of the history lesson is impossible, one cannot criticize its authors for not providing teachers with more concrete advice. Yet, the *Guidelines* still sets demands that do not recognize the difficulties involved in Holocaust education. A teacher might be able to teach a unit on the Holocaust without referring to the *Guidelines*. It is questionable, however, if a teacher can teach a lesson on the Holocaust and fulfill all of the expectations that the government spells out in its educational texts. A teacher might have various ideas on how to creatively conduct a lesson on the Holocaust. Yet, the government's demands leave little "free time" in the curriculum. A history teacher's creative lesson might not fulfill all of the governments' requirements. History teachers are overburdened with the amount of material they are expected to cover and with the objectives they are obliged to fulfill. To suggest that teachers dispose of "free space" in deciding how to implement the government rules is to turn the full responsibility for teaching the Holocaust—and fulfilling the public's expectations—over to them.

The *Guidelines and Curricula* fails to appreciate the considerable problems that teachers face when having to relate the genocide of the European Jews to German teenagers. Like the German public, the *Guidelines* does not seem to recognize that explaining an almost inexplicable event to teenagers in an adequate manner is not self-evident. The public and the *Guidelines* are more concerned with the results of Holocaust education – that German students know about what happened, so as to participate in the Republic's political life – than

¹⁰⁴ MSWWF, *Richtlinien und Lehrpläne*, p. 35.

¹⁰⁵ MSWWF, *Richtlinien und Lehrpläne*, p. 166.

¹⁰⁶ KMK, *On the Treatment*, p. 7.

¹⁰⁷ MSWWF, *Richtlinien und Lehrpläne*, p. 47.

with the process of teaching, with the question of how German students have learned about the Holocaust.

One would imagine that individual decrees directly addressing Holocaust education or National Socialism might give more concrete advice to history teachers. One can find these decrees in a huge compilation of all valid government directives on schools and the educational system in NRW, called *BASS* (short for *Bereinigte amtliche Schriften der Schulverordnung* or Revised Official Texts on School Ordinances). The compilation is newly published every school year and is available as a large book volume, a CD-Rom and on the World Wide Web on the Ministry's web page. The decrees concerning Holocaust education were issued in 1977, 1978, and 1996. They treat "Education in International Communication taking into account Germany's relation to Eastern European Countries,"¹⁰⁸ "The Treatment of National Socialism in the Classroom,"¹⁰⁹ and "The Memorial Day for the Victims of National Socialism."¹¹⁰ The titles of these decrees would suggest that they focus on very concrete issues and provide more specific assistance. This is not the case. The three additional decrees reiterate the government demands set out in the *Guidelines and Curricula*. They offer little pragmatic support. The decree on international communication, for example, mentions the Holocaust in one general phrase. The authors simply mention that a discussion "of the fate of the Jewish people as an extreme example"¹¹¹ is necessarily linked to a lesson on international relations. The decree does not explain this statement in more detail, nor does it suggest how "the fate of the Jewish people" should be discussed. Surprisingly, the decree on the "Treatment of National Socialism in the Classroom" is equally vague. In the introduction, the authors quote the former President of the Federal Republic, Gustav Heinemann, who stated of the Third *Reich*: "Such misery must not return. It is important to fight all new eruptions very vigorously." The teaching unit on National Socialism is thus viewed as a part of Germany's commitment to not repeat the past. The memory of the causes and consequences of National Socialism is, so this decree, one of the most important tasks of schools.¹¹² The authors justify the importance of this task with the growing success of extremist right-wing parties among teenagers and young voters. This publication is the only government text that explicitly addresses Neo-Nazism. In spite of the Ministry's constant emphasis on the democratic education of adolescents, it is notable that the Ministry almost completely ignores one of the most pressing problems in contemporary German society. Once again this underscores how little the Ministry focuses on the actual reality that teachers and students face in NRW.

Thus, like the *Guidelines*, this decree on the "Treatment of National Socialism in the Classroom" stresses vague concepts. The authors restate the importance of "coming to terms" with the past and demand that students are made to realize how the question of responsibility still haunts the German nation today. In a paragraph entitled "Coming to terms with the past" (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*), the authors condemn earlier attempts by German society to simply forget about the past and to "move on." They argue for the development of teenagers' historical conscience – in accordance with historians' demands and those of the *Guidelines and Curricula*. The school is expected to conduct lessons "against forgetting." The authors, however, hardly mention the horrors of the Holocaust, nor how these should be adequately and effectively conveyed. Teachers know that they must fight students' tendency to forget or ignore the subject. The decree leaves it up to them to determine how they should go about retaining students' interest for the past.

The most recent government decree, the decree on "The Memorial Day for Victims of National Socialism," is the first government text to address the fact that students are very

¹⁰⁸ "Erziehung zur Internationaler Verständigung – unter besonderer Rücksichtigung des Verhältnisses der Bundesrepublik Deutschland zu den osteruropäischen Staaten", *BASS* 15 – 02 Nr. 9.2, Runderlaß des Kultusministeriums vom 15.11.1977 (Frechen: Ritterbach Verlag, 2000).

¹⁰⁹ "Die Behandlung des Nationalsozialismus im Unterricht", *BASS* 15 – 02 Nr. 9.3, Runderlaß des Kultusministeriums vom 6.7. 1978 (Frechen: Ritterbach Verlag, 2000).

¹¹⁰ "27. Januar – Gedenktag für die Opfer des Nationalsozialismus", *BASS* 15 – 02 Nr. 9.12, Runderlaß des Ministeriums für Schule und Weiterbildung vom 28.11. 1996 (Frechen: Ritterbachverlag, 2000).

¹¹¹ Paragraph 3, *BASS* 15 – 02, 9.2.

¹¹² Paragraph 1, *BASS* 15 – 02, 9.3.

likely to ask “What does this have to do with me?” The decree thus argues that a lesson that attempts to remember the day Russian soldiers liberated the Auschwitz death camp should stress students’ personal relations with the subject. It suggests that teachers encourage teenagers to conduct their own research in their families and communities. It also proposes that teachers make use of memorials and museums and promote group projects on the subject. While these suggestions represent more practical pieces of advice, the decree does not tell teachers how to approach a visit to a Holocaust memorial, or how to properly guide students in their own research of the past. What if students discover very unpleasant facts about neighbors or their own family? It should be noted that teachers are not bound to follow these suggestions. This means that some teachers do not follow them at all. That teachers might not follow the governments’ educational suggestions is not critical in and of itself. Yet, if the government only spells out ideas for lessons that teachers might possibly follow, then the Ministry of Education cannot expect teachers to seriously heed their demands. Nor can the public expect that all children will have the same amount of knowledge about the Holocaust or that they will have learned about the genocide in the same exact way. The only obligatory directives this decree sets forth are to preserve the memory of the past and to illustrate the past’s link with the present political order: “Out of the memory of the victims grows the duty to resist new dangers for human dignity, freedom, lawfulness and democracy in the future.” The decree thus presents a logical and commonly accepted argument. If the horrors are not remembered, similar horrors cannot be prevented in the future. Yet, individuals will have different opinions on how the horrors of the Third *Reich* should be remembered. Teachers might not know how the memory of these horrors can best be preserved in the high school history lesson. Once again the government’s decrees offer little practical help. On the contrary, they increase the high expectations of Holocaust education that history teachers are expected to fulfill.

A teacher is not only bound by the very ambitious demands of the subject-specific decrees and *Guidelines* that treat Holocaust education. His or her teaching methods are also dictated by the material he or she is allowed to use. Teachers in NRW have to choose their textbooks and other teaching materials from the list of approved “teaching material” issued every school year by the State Ministry of Education: “Public Schools can only introduce and use those ‘learning materials’ that have been approved by the Ministry of Education. This is also true when they are not purchased by public funds but other resources.”¹¹³ This list is published in a small manual of 140 pages that also contains the law on “public funds for learning materials” (*Lernmittelfreiheitsgesetz*) and the procedures necessary to have additional teaching materials approved. The list contains five different history textbooks (all published relatively recently) that are approved for the use in the *Gymnasium*. Unlike other subjects, the history curriculum is very circumscribed in the materials that can be used. The law grants global approval to all other subjects to introduce additional teaching materials supplementing the textbooks.¹¹⁴ History and Political Science, however, are subjects exempt from these global approvals. The booklet does not further explain these exemptions. It seems as though the State Ministry wishes to keep the social sciences under stricter control than other school subjects. If history teachers wish to get additional material approved, they need to follow lengthy procedures that include an official examiner granting approval to the texts. This examiner is to make sure that the text offers unconventional interpretations of problems and does not dictate to students how to evaluate the subject matter. Furthermore, the text should do justice to students’ experiences and interests, so as to promote their learning motivation, and it should encourage students to think for themselves and come to reflected and rational judgments. The government is, of course, also concerned with the quality of the information presented in the textbook. Graphs, theories, and sources should be presented clearly and in a comprehensible manner. The textbook should also discuss the

¹¹³ Ministerium für Schule und Weiterbildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen (MSWWF) ed., *Lernmittelfreiheitsgesetz, Verzeichnis der genehmigten Lernmittel*, (Frechen: Ritterbach Verlag, 2000), p. 17.

¹¹⁴ MSWWF, *Lernmittelfreiheitsgesetz*, pp. 32-35.

newest scholarly findings.¹¹⁵ Finally, school funding limitations do not allow for a constant renewal of these textbooks, especially since textbooks are often published in an interdependent series that is to be used in successive grades. “New teaching materials can only be introduced if necessary pedagogical and subject-specific reasons demand a change.”¹¹⁶ Yet, the Ministry yearly publishes a list with new and supposedly better suited textbooks. Schools may easily be unable to keep up with the government’s ambitious rulings on teaching materials.

Holocaust education in German high schools is expected to form students’ democratic values. In the light of recent Neo-Nazi attacks on refugee homes, this task seems ever more important. Schools should not be solely responsible for dealing with a problem that seems so intricately linked with the country’s larger political and social destiny. They need the public’s and the government’s support. Yet, the analysis of NRW’s *Guidelines* on the subject of Holocaust education reveals that the Ministry of Education offers only very limited support to the State’s history teachers. The State government’s proscriptions for the history lesson seem strangely detached from reality. The experience of the Holocaust has had and still has influence on Germany’s political system and democratic values. However, there is a difference between pronouncing this general wisdom and really trying to comprehend what actually happened. The *Guidelines* does not explicate the latter issue. Ignoring how the Holocaust should be taught, the government officials restate empty phrases about history lessons’ goals. The *Guidelines*’ authors recognize that Holocaust education plays a vital role in the democratic formation of Germany’s young. Yet they hardly pay attention to the right-extremist threat that makes this democratic formation so important in the eyes of the German public. Neither do they recognize that the Holocaust is not only important to teach, but that it is an extremely difficult subject to discuss with students, especially with pubescent 10th graders.

This is where the *Guidelines*’ authors and scholars on Holocaust education differ. As discussed in the Introduction, scholars recognize that different teaching methods affect teenage students differently. The scholars also remind their readers how difficult it is to find a balance between effectively engaging students in the subject and adhering to proper historical analysis. Scholars acknowledge that determining how to teach the Holocaust is very difficult. The *Guidelines* seems to ignore this question, or to circumvent it by avoiding suggestions for concrete solutions to Holocaust education. How is a teacher to respond to students’ fears of Neo-Nazism? How does a teacher handle students with right-extremist views? What does a teacher say to a student who claims that he or she is “sick” of hearing about the mass murders? How does a teacher teach a seemingly inexplicable historical event to 35 students in three 45-minute class sessions?

These questions do not suggest that teachers are completely helpless. German teachers pass two state examinations and two years of practical training before they are allowed to teach. One would expect them to come prepared to their lessons. Yet, conducting a lesson on the Holocaust is not self-evident. The public criticizes schools for failing on the matter of Holocaust education. Teachers, however, are only criticized when students turn against the democratic order of the nation. The public only complains when the government’s expectations are not fulfilled. Critics do not see that the process of raising responsible citizens involves more than simply placing demands on teachers. The government’s failure to address specific problems inherent to Holocaust education might indicate that teachers are not in a position to fulfill all the tasks that the Ministry prescribes. Teachers then are not failing. The government texts may simply be inapplicable to their tasks. It is highly unlikely that trained teachers would turn to a booklet of vague statements to get support for a lesson on the Holocaust. They are more likely to try to overcome challenges of Holocaust education by themselves. An analysis of Holocaust education can thus not only consist of a summary of government expectations for the subject. One must ask those who are most responsible for Holocaust education—the teachers themselves—whether they expect more support. What

¹¹⁵ MSWWF, *Lernmittelfreiheitsgesetz*, pp. 23-25.

¹¹⁶ MSWWF, *Lernmittelfreiheitsgesetz*, p. 9.

problems do teachers face when preparing a lesson on the Nazi genocide? Do they think that the government prescriptions are realistic? Teachers will know much more about the how of Holocaust education than government officials.

How To Teach The Inexplicable? German Teachers and the Holocaust in the History Lesson

I cannot understand the Holocaust. I tell that to my students. I cannot explain what happened.

Renate Schäpers, teacher for History and German Language and Literature, Ahaus, January, 2001.

In 1977, the teacher and pedagogue Dieter Boßmann published the edited results of 3042 student essays under the title „*Was ich über Adolf Hitler gehört habe...*“ (“What I have heard about Adolf Hitler”).¹¹⁷ Students between the age of ten and twenty-three were asked to summarize their knowledge and opinion about the Third *Reich* and its problems in short papers. The results shocked the nation – the majority of the students had only superficial knowledge of the events and people involved and confused simple historical facts. The study made the headlines of newspapers in Germany and abroad. In his preface, Boßmann wrote of a catastrophe in education. His book is a summary of students’ knowledge. In its appendix, Boßmann also quotes teachers’ reactions to his study and their thoughts on how to teach National Socialism. One of the teachers congratulated him on his research: “I find your research idea very good.”¹¹⁸ Other teachers seemed equally delighted that their work, even though it did not seem to be very successful, received public attention. In their letters to Boßmann, they shared not only their gratitude for this recognition but their worries about how to teach the difficult subject of National Socialism. One teacher of a *Gymnasium* seemed to ask Boßmann for advice when she wrote: “At the moment I am discussing the rise of National Socialism in a tenth-grade history class and I muddle along through it (*ich wurschtele mich so durch*), the basis being the horrible textbook and my own material. I simply do not have a well thought-out teaching unit.”¹¹⁹ Another woman, a ninth-grade history teacher in the *Realschule* (the German secondary school leading to a high school degree that qualifies a student to begin vocational training), worried about students’ lack of interest in the topic: “I have had to realize that students are unable to grasp the dimension of what happened – just like we did not think that the inquisition or the witch-hunts were of concern to us.”¹²⁰ The teachers who turned to Boßmann for advice were struggling with two basic questions: How does one organize a unit on National Socialism and the Holocaust? And how does one reach teenagers to explain to them the continued relevance of a historic—seemingly removed—subject?

More than twenty years later, the *Government Guidelines and Curricula*, which is intended to direct teachers and set uniform standards for the teaching of the Holocaust, has been revised numerous times. Still, as the preceding chapter shows, today’s *Guidelines* only insufficiently addresses the concerns of the teachers quoted by Boßmann. The *Guidelines*’ authors offer little practical advice on creating and teaching a unit on the Holocaust. They repeatedly stress the importance of demonstrating to students links between past and present (students who today are even further removed from the Third *Reich* than Boßmann’s interviewees), but do not provide concrete examples on how to do so. Reading the *Guidelines*, one would expect today’s teachers to be equally as insecure about the subject as the teachers who commented on Boßmann’s survey. In fact, Matthias Heyl, historian and head of a Hamburg research institute for Holocaust education, points out that contemporary teachers still do not exactly know “which didactic methods work best for the difficult task of teaching the Holocaust.” He emphasizes: “One still gropes about in the dark”¹²¹ (*Man*

¹¹⁷ Dieter Boßmann, ed., „*Was ich über Adolf Hitler gehört habe*“ – *Folgen eine Tabus: Auszüge aus Schüler-Aufsätzen von heute* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1977).

¹¹⁸ Boßmann, *Was ich über Adolf Hitler*, p. 358.

¹¹⁹ Boßmann, *Was ich über Adolf Hitler*, p. 358.

¹²⁰ Boßmann, *Was ich über Adolf Hitler*, p. 358.

¹²¹ Jeanette Goddar, “Grundkurs in Empathie – Politische Bildung,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, December 13, 2000: 20.

stochert da noch sehr im Nebel). Yet, teachers face the outcries of the public when Holocaust education goes wrong. They also face the ambitious demands of policy makers. Finally, they must cope with a lack of concrete public support, advice, and recognition.

Every critique of the history lesson needs to include the opinions of those who are most responsible for it: the teachers themselves. It seems unfair to critique students' lack of knowledge and to cry out against educators' incompetence (as many recent newspaper articles have done) without listening to how teachers perceive their job. To try to grasp their definition of Holocaust education and its challenges, I contacted seven history teachers in two *Gymnasien* in my hometown and asked if they would be willing to talk to me. Ahaus is known as the "school capital" of the county. The two *Gymnasien*, one public (the *Alexander Hegius Gymnasium*) and one parochial (the *Bischöfliche Canisiuschule*), draw their 2000 students from the entire region, the northwestern part of Westphalia. As I had expected, the teachers were more than eager to talk to me.

Before I started reading about Holocaust education I had always thought that I had received a good history education, and that the problems mentioned in the newspaper articles analyzing nationwide polls did not exist in my town. Only as I learned more about the challenges of Holocaust education, about the state's expectations for teaching the Holocaust and about possible conflicts between the public's demands and schools' possibilities, did I start wondering about my own education again. Maybe my perception of this education was very subjective. Maybe my classmates did belong to the 65% of German students who did not know about Auschwitz and Treblinka. My teachers must have struggled with the same problems described in the secondary literature. How did they prepare for a lesson? How did they face their students when having to relate indescribable horrors? How did they manage to stress the Holocaust's continued relevance for the German nation?

My seven interviewees, two women and five men, did indeed have many questions and doubts about teaching the Holocaust. Yet, to my surprise, they were not helpless. After reading the *Guidelines*, the list of questions for teachers that I sketched out in my notebook focused heavily on the teachers' opinion of the government texts and their shortcomings. Did the teachers think the *Guidelines* was helpful? Did they think the government's high expectations could be implemented? Did teachers get enough instruction on how to approach a unit on the Holocaust? Was the *Guidelines* lacking? How could it be enhanced? Could one blame the *Guidelines* for the appalling ignorance among German students revealed by the polls? What kind of support did teachers expect from the government and from society?

As I learned quickly, the teachers did not expect support. They laughed when I mentioned the *Guidelines*. "Did you really read them?" most of them asked, astonished that I had been patient enough to decipher the Ministry's neologisms. "The language is simply hideous (*einfach scheußlich*)," complained my old history teacher, Dr. Günter Heidloff. Heidloff who recently retired also taught German language and literature. "The Ministry tells us to impart to our students a good sense of style using itself a horrible German." Yet, apart from criticizing and ridiculing the *Guidelines*' stylistic shortcomings, most teachers had no interest in further discussing its content. They found that the Ministry's proscriptions did not really apply to their jobs. I often seemed better informed about the Ministry's demands than did my interviewees. Consequently, I discarded my notes, and let the teachers talk freely about their experiences of teaching the Holocaust, their successes and worries. We had long and varied conversations. Not unlike the teachers whose letters Boßmann published in the back of his book, the teachers to whom I spoke seemed delighted that I was interested in their work. They were very open and honest in sharing their thoughts on their own teaching style and had no qualms about criticizing themselves. I learned that Holocaust education is a problematic issue in schools. Teachers do struggle in finding the right teaching methods, the appropriate material and enough time to teach the unimaginable.

Yet, my interviewees did not seem pessimistic. They were skeptical about the poll's bleak results and agreed that these did not accurately describe the situation in the *Westmünsterland*. In fact, despite their self-doubts, all of my interviewees were conscious of their responsibility as history teachers and their duty to form students' political conscience.

Although they derided the *Guidelines*, all of the teachers that I interviewed agreed with the government texts on goals and the ideal teaching methods of the history lesson. They did not question the theoretical recommendations for Holocaust education. Rather, they questioned how to implement these supposedly ideal teaching methods in practice and how to reach set goals. I learned that a general endorsement of the government's demands does not result in uniform history lessons—far from it. When I asked, “What should Holocaust education achieve?” or “Why is a unit on the Holocaust important?” I would get more or less similar answers. Yet, once I listened to the teachers' individual stories about teaching the Holocaust, I realized that their lessons differed starkly. Contrary to what I had thought, a standard lesson plan for a unit on the Holocaust—a plan that might ensure that all students learn from the same material in the same way—does not exist.

Teachers are well aware of the general principles to which the government expects them to adhere. And despite their disdain for the state bureaucracy, they fully believe in these principles. A survey conducted by the polling institute *Allensbach* in October 1998 revealed that 76% of teachers questioned thought it a primary goal to train their students' critical judgment. 73% of them also considered the development of a critical attitude towards the media part of their teaching objectives. Interest in politics, a friendly and open attitude toward foreigners, and acceptance of Germany's political system equally belonged on the list of what teachers wished to impart to their students.¹²² This list is very similar to the educational goals that North Rhine-Westphalia's Ministry of Education spells out in its *Guidelines*.

Although the majority of the teachers participating in the interviews claimed they did not refer to the *Guidelines*, they nonetheless formulated similar teaching objectives in regard to Holocaust education. Cornelia Trommer, a young history teacher at the parochial school, seemed surprised when asked if she intended to teach her students moral values – apart from simple historical facts. She thought that self-evident. “Obviously the facts are important,” she said, “without them one cannot discuss the issues critically. But this horrible right extremism... Well, we have to impart to our students certain values, of course. The lesson should also educate against xenophobia and should stress human rights.” Heidloff seemed equally surprised when he was asked if in his teaching unit on the Holocaust he had higher goals in mind. He thought the question unnecessary. “Yes, but that goes without saying (*ja, aber selbstverständlich*),” he replied. “Of course I always had a clear educational mission. One wants to teach them to loathe these kinds of crimes and wants to educate against racism.” Benedikt Giesing, a young teacher who had just finished his traineeship at the *Canisiusschule* (two years of teaching experience before being able to take the second *Staatsexamen*) and who was much more familiar with the state's prescription than any of his older colleagues, stressed similar educational goals. “Holocaust education should emphasize human rights and human dignity,” he insisted, “that is what the State's *Guidelines* and all the Ministry's decrees demand repeatedly.” He also saw a strong connection between Holocaust education and participation in German democracy. “You have to know *all that* [referring to what happened in the concentration camps] as a German.” He held that somebody who left school and had never heard the word “Auschwitz” before could not act as a mature and responsible citizen.

Other teachers drew similar links between democratic citizenship and the teaching of Nazi horrors. Heidloff explained: “The Third *Reich* serves as the perfect counter-demonstration against democracy. By teaching National Socialism, one can demonstrate to students that Hitler and his cronies defied everything we are proud of today.” Similarly, one of Heidloff's colleagues, Karl Schulte, welcomed the topic as a chance to illustrate the importance of democracy. He said: “That should be part of every education; that is the goal of the history lesson.” A history teacher at the public school, Winfried Terwolbeck, saw his task of teaching students about the Holocaust as directly linked to the German constitution, the *Basic Law* (*Grundgesetz*). He referred to two articles in particular, Article 1, which starts, “The dignity of

¹²² Institut für Demoskopie, Allensbach, *Schule – Was sollen die Kinder lernen, Eine Umfrage des Instituts für Demoskopie Allensbach für “GEO-Wissen,”* (Allensbach/Bodensee: Institut für Demoskopie, Allensbach, October 1998).

man is inviolable” and Article 20, which reminds every German to defend the constitution. “I want to teach them to take the *Basic Law* seriously. They have to understand where Article 1 comes from. That article is the first article in our constitution because of what happened. They have to understand that. They have to realize their responsibility as German citizens. Article 20 of the *Basic Law* obliges every German to remember. We have a duty to defend this *Basic Law*.”

The teachers’ obvious commitment to the teaching of democratic citizenship should delight the authors of the *Guidelines and Curricula*. Although the interviewees did not give much credit to the booklet and its contents, they agreed with the State Ministry on the general objectives that a history lesson, and consequently Holocaust education, should fulfill. Some of the teachers (those who seemed to have read the *Guidelines* in preparation for the interview) appreciated that the Ministry also considered the teaching unit on National Socialism as an important part of a democratic education. “Well, I know the Ministry continuously published new decrees to tell us that we have to treat National Socialism in our lessons. The topic is stressed very heavily,” conceded Heidloff, “but I don’t think that is bad; on the contrary. It’s a good thing, when the government demands that history teachers focus on National Socialism. No other historical subject more effectively demonstrates the value of our political system.”

The teachers might have welcomed their concurrence with the Ministry’s demands. The Ministry might be delighted to see that these teachers agreed with its general rules. In fact, the objectives of Holocaust education seem clear to the majority of Germans. In their speeches, politicians and other public figures refer to the importance of democratic training in the history lesson. Writers and filmmakers convey similar messages. Germans firmly believe in phrases, such as “This must never happen again” or “Germans must learn from history.” When first learning about Germany’s constitution, children are told that the *Basic Law* is a corrected version of the constitution drafted for the *Weimar* Republic. The makers of the *Basic Law*, Germans are reminded, corrected the mistakes of the past. Many Germans feel that they should contribute to this effort of rectifying past wrongs. They feel that they must be more democratic than other Europeans, more tolerant than other Europeans, more accepting of foreigners than other Europeans and better educated in history than their European neighbors. Thus, everybody would probably agree that learning about the Holocaust should be part of children’s political education. When teachers spoke about their “responsibility” of teaching the Holocaust, they were not referring to their responsibility as history teachers to provide children with knowledge about the past. They clearly referred to their democratic mission; their duty to educate children about democratic values. There is a public consensus in Germany about what Holocaust education should fulfill. Without referring to the Ministry’s *Guidelines*, teachers decide on their objectives exactly according to official state ideas. They do not need help setting their goals.

Teachers neither need help in conceiving of ideal teaching methods, nor do they expect such help. None of my interviewees (with the exception of the young trainee) had been instructed on how to teach the Holocaust during their studies at university. None of them thought that the *Guidelines* were the place to look for help. “No,” Cornelia Trommer shook her head energetically, “you learn that in the classroom. You learn together with your students what works and what doesn’t.” What worked in respect to Holocaust education seemed clear to everyone. Ironically, most of the teachers employed terms taken straight out of the Ministry’s texts. Karl Schulte explained: “The ideal history lesson needs to be ‘student oriented’ (*schülerorientiert*) and ‘action oriented’ (*handlungsorientiert*).” The authors of the *Guidelines* had used both terms to describe ideal teaching methods. In particular, younger teachers employed these adjectives throughout their discussions. While it was clear that these neologisms stemmed from the official state text, the teachers’ endorsement of student-oriented and action-oriented lessons was not a blind acceptance of state rules. It derived from their experience with students. Schulte maintained: “We have to respect students’ interests to a certain degree. When we design the internal school curriculum for history, student representatives can voice their needs.”

All teachers proudly shared memories of teaching methods that had worked particularly well and that seemed to have gotten positive feedback from students. Cornelia Trommer, one of

the two women interviewees, had encouraged students to research the history of the Holocaust in their own rural communities. “They worked on those projects with great enthusiasm,” she recalled. “I have to say, that went over well (*das ist eigentlich ganz gut ’rübergekommen*), more so than just studying the simple outline of the textbook. They were really surprised, too. ‘Oh, there used to be a house there where Jews lived,’ they would say. They hadn’t known about that, at all.” All of the teachers who participated in my interviews thought local history was an effective method to catch the attention of students and to convey to them how close the events were to their own lives. Peter Giesing, the trainee, even considered local history the best starting point that there was. The other young history teacher, Günter Sowa, who was employed by the public *Gymnasium*, shared this view. He had had good experiences with students walking around in the shopping district downtown and conducting mini-surveys on the Holocaust with passersby. On a weekday morning, he had sent students into the shopping area around the town’s Catholic church to ask men, women and children about their knowledge of the Holocaust in the *Westmünsterland*. He remembered that students had excitedly contributed to the questions for the survey and that they had been equally enthusiastic when summarizing their findings. His students had loved being “real” researchers. With his present course, Sowa intended to work in the town’s archives to evaluate newspaper articles of the time. Both Giesing and Sowa were adamant about adhering to these “action-oriented” teaching methods. Clearly, their opinions coincided closely with the teaching methods recommended by the state.

Similarly, oral history, a teaching method also favored by the *Guidelines*, found broad support among the teachers. Teachers in both schools, Karl Schulte, Winfried Terwolbeck and Günter Sowa, had all invited Ahaus’ one prominent concentration-camp victim, Johannes Sonnenschein (see Appendix), a Catholic pastor, who had been incarcerated in Dachau, to come and tell his story to their students. Terwolbeck also organized regular public discussions between teenagers and the local history organization (*Heimatverein*) and tried to bring other contemporary witnesses to his lessons. “The last time an older gentleman came and talked to the students,” he remembered, “one could have heard a pin drop in the classroom. They were so spellbound by his narration.” Giesing had had similar experiences when, in the past school year, he had invited Salomon Perel, a German Jew, whose story is told in the film *Europa, Europa*, to come and give a talk at the school.¹²³ He recalled: “I had never seen anything like this before. There was this one old man who filled a whole lecture hall of students, and for more than sixty minutes there was absolute silence.” The students had listened in surprised disbelief. Perel had completely captured their attention and, according to Giesing, had left a lasting impression. Giesing told this story with the pride and satisfaction of someone who had succeeded. He was confident that this teaching method was effective and worthwhile. One objective—to spark students’ interest in the topic and to encourage them to think about what happened—had been fulfilled. Giesing did not need *Guidelines* to inform him about the effects of different theoretical teaching methods. He had learned and was still learning about these effects in his daily life as a teacher.

Teachers continually tried to evaluate the effects of their teaching methods. For example, when asked about visits with their students to sites of concentration camps, exhibits or memorial museums, the interviewees described the emotional reactions they observed in their students. Like the life stories of eyewitnesses, these visits, according to the majority of teachers, had stirred students immensely. Heidloff, who had accompanied several classes on visits to both Dachau and Theresienstadt, recalled that his students would always leave these sites visibly moved. “Always, it would be very quiet on the bus. There was definitely true sadness (*echte Betroffenheit*). One could tell clearly. They wouldn’t be as silly and obnoxious as usual on the way back home.” Renate Schäpers, who had once guided a visit with students through the barracks at Dachau herself – instead of relying on the tour guide provided by the memorial site, recalled that only once they saw the barracks and bunks and once they tried to picture what it would have meant to share that space with more than 1,000 people, did students begin to grasp what had happened. “You cannot use words to explain that,” she insisted repeatedly.

¹²³ Agnieszka Holland, dir., *Europa Europa*, (New York: New Yorker Films, 1992).

All teachers agreed that not words and sheer figures, but pictures, original sources, visits to historical sites, documentaries, contemporary eye-witness accounts, local history and student directed assignments were the necessary teaching methods to teach teenagers about the Holocaust. Other methods, they stressed, would fail to impart to students how close and relevant the Holocaust still was. They would also fail to capture students' interest for the subject, a prerequisite for successful teaching. Consequently, when asked how he would design an ideal teaching unit on the Holocaust, Benedikt Giesing presented an ambitious list. He talked excitedly about visiting museums and exhibitions and having students conduct their own research projects and present their findings in "mini-lectures" to their classmates. Günter Sowa equally stressed the importance of "hands-on" history, even if that involved more time and preparation. "One simply has to take one's time with this subject", he maintained. "Then one just has to rush through postwar history. (*Man muss dann halt mit dem Rest eben einfach ein bißchen schlabbern*)."

If teachers want to implement all of the teaching methods recommended in the *Guidelines*, it is virtually impossible for them to adhere to the official curriculum, which obliges them to cover 16 different historical topics within four years. Can they then just simply ignore the *Guidelines* altogether and teach how and how much they see fit? When asked how to fit his ambitious lesson plan into the tight schedule of a tenth grade history curriculum, Giesing smiled and shrugged. He knew that what he imagined was probably impossible to implement in reality. Although he insisted, like Sowa, that history teachers would have to take more time teaching the subject, his tone suggested that he was unable to discard the government regulations entirely. Giesing realized that, as a history teacher teaching the Holocaust, he was caught between conflicting demands.

Although most teachers seemed to agree (consciously or unconsciously) with the teaching objectives and methods laid out in the Ministry's of Education *Guidelines*, they were thus all aware that these ideal teaching methods often conflicted with the practical constraints of their job, the time they had to teach, and the amount of material they were expected to cover during that time. In spite of the obvious effectiveness of Perel's visit, Giesing knew that he would not be able to invite Perel or other speakers every year. It had been very difficult for him and his colleagues to raise the necessary funds to make Perel's visit possible. Neither the history department's, nor the school's budget allowed regular scheduling of similar events. Likewise, Cornelia Trommer had only encouraged local research projects once in her career, despite their apparent success. Letting students work independently involved more time and preparation than her busy schedule permitted. Instead of simply following the outline in the history textbook she had to collect adequate material for the students, supervise the students' work, and ensure that students were still learning about all of the events with which they should be familiar at the end of the unit. Teachers were unable to fulfill all of the *Guidelines'* (or all of their personal) demands simultaneously and consistently. They did agree with the *Guidelines* on what was ideal, but they did not think that the *Guidelines'* approach was practical.

On the contrary, nobody expected to follow the government's prescriptions religiously. Renate Schäpers explained: "In practice, that is totally impossible. The teacher alone decides to what extent he or she can fulfill the government's outline for a lesson. Some of the author's concrete suggestions about teaching methods and content allow you to sort of guess what the authorities are getting at. But one is never able to completely take over their concept." The teachers felt more bound to the internal school curriculum drafted by the school's history department. This curriculum contained provisions that were far more concrete than those of the government. Dr. Heidloff mused: "One wishes that the *Government Guidelines* did give some more specific advice, especially about the exact material government officials expect us to teach." Clearly, the teachers did not need advice on the general principles that they were expected to convey. But they nonetheless missed practical advice, precisely what the *Guidelines* failed to provide. The daily routine of the school day often made it impossible for teachers to live up to the government's – and their own – standards. Their ideals were hampered by regulated school lessons, required tests and homework assignments, a lack of resources, and old textbooks. An additional problem

that the *Guidelines* addresses only in a short appendix was the coordination between subjects. Schäpers suggested: “There could definitely be more dialogue between the different departments that are responsible for teaching the Holocaust in one form or another [those are the History, German literature and language, Political Science and Religious Education Departments at the school]. That would definitely make the lessons more effective. But that is so hard to achieve. That requires so much organization.” And coordination and organization are difficult in a setting where all moves are precisely timed by the school bell, by grade report and *Abitur* deadlines, and vacation dates.

The teachers’ main concern was time—or rather the lack of time. All of the teachers complained of not having enough time to conduct a satisfying teaching unit on the Holocaust. Heidloff explained: “You simply are too rushed in the 10th grade. Two 45 minute lessons per week don’t allow you to watch and discuss longer documentaries or try other more interactive teaching methods.” Günter Sowa seemed equally frustrated. He had taken his students to short visits to nearby exhibitions. He regretted, however, that the tight and inflexible schedule did not allow him to make those visits more effective or to schedule more interesting excursions. He said: “I did go and looked at the *Wehrmacht* Exhibit¹²⁴ in Münster with my students. But when the exhibition opened they were still in the 9th grade¹²⁵ and National Socialism was not on their curriculum yet. So I had to do a crash course to introduce the photographs and their history. It’s frustrating. You can never go on a really topic-related excursion with students. That necessitates so much coordination. They would miss a whole day of school and then other teachers would complain that students are missing their ‘holy’ forty-five minute lesson...”

Another reason for the time crush was the ambitious history curriculum itself. Schulte made clear that a particular concentration on the Holocaust would be impossible, given the many standard topics that the history curriculum had to cover. The constant lack of time also made it impossible for teachers to fully prepare each lesson. The search and preparation of extra lesson material apart from the textbook takes time. Heidloff remembered: “Oftentimes, I would just take hand-outs I had used in previous classes. For a perfect lesson, you would have to prepare for a whole day. There was simply no time for that.” Terwollbeck said: “All teachers are permanently suffering from a lack of time. And in the history lesson, everything is treated too shortly and too superficially.” If the *Guidelines*’ recommendations are not being met, it is not so much a question of teachers’ reluctance to meet them. The daily school routine simply does not allow teachers to fulfill the *Guidelines*’ expectations.

The abstract and convoluted language of the *Guidelines* and the difficulty of implementing theoretical goals into daily practice require interpretation on the teacher’s part. This responsibility gives the teachers self-confidence – and doubts. And it makes for very different lessons on the Holocaust. Teachers are free to choose the main focus of their units on the Holocaust. This choice is determined by each individual, his or her interpretation of the Holocaust, and his or her personal experience. One of the female teachers was almost insulted when asked to tell some “anecdotes” about her teaching of the Holocaust. “Anecdotes? I refuse to use that word for this topic. I don’t associate any ‘anecdotes’ with teaching the Holocaust. That is the wrong word,” she insisted. Talking about the subject seemed to move her immensely. In our discussion it soon became clear that the topic was so important to her because teachers in her own high school had not treated the Holocaust. When her generation had gone to school, the Holocaust was still not part of the school curriculum. Her personal history thus informed her teaching methods and her mission: “I want to make clear to my students that the Holocaust was a singular and unique event in history,” she repeated with a firm tone in her voice. “I sacrifice a lot of time for that. As soon as one student brings up the argument, ‘but the Americans killed the Indians,’ I stop and then I discuss that,” she explained. “I think that it is my duty here to form their political opinion in that way. Discussions like that must be part of political education. We still have to ask

¹²⁴ A very controversial traveling exhibition that showed war crimes committed by Hitler’s army, the *Wehrmacht*, during the Second World War.

¹²⁵ Teachers in the German *Gymnasium* typically keep the same classes from 5th through 10th grade, when the students pass on to the “Upper Level” (*Oberstufe*) and select their courses to prepare for the *Abitur*.

questions about responsibility, guilt, and coming to terms with the past (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) today.”

Yet such discussions are not part of every teacher’s Holocaust unit. Her male colleagues focused on completely different aspects in their lessons on National Socialism. The older teachers seemed much more concerned with political questions than with the actual events of the Holocaust. “I don’t think the question of personal guilt is the essential question to ask,” explained Schulte. “I also don’t consider it necessary to spend a lot of time documenting the Holocaust. They realize pretty quickly that what happened was bad. It is much more important to show them how this could happen.” Consequently, his lessons typically focus mostly on the Weimar Republic and the shortcomings of its political system. “With that I spend a lot of time,” he said. Clearly, his lesson plan on the Holocaust was influenced by his own interpretation of history. The same was true for other male teachers. Schulte, Heidloff, and Terwolbeck seemed very reluctant to discuss the critical questions that Schäpers mentioned. Maybe these teachers belonged to a generation – their parents had grown up during World War II – that was hesitant to question Germans’ responsibility for the mass murders, especially in front of thirty fifteen year-olds. When he invited eyewitnesses, Terwolbeck explained, he always made sure that students would not ask “embarrassing” questions (such as “Why didn’t you do anything when they deported your Jewish neighbors?”) He said: “You know, it is not really for students to judge these people or to make them feel uncomfortable. That is really not their place.”

The youngest teachers were much more critical than their older colleagues. They also focused on different issues. For them it was important to teach students to handle information offered by the media. Sowa called that “media competence”. “I think the school is really the only institution where they can learn that,” he said. “I want my students to be able to critically judge what the Internet, TV and books are presenting to them.” In one of his classes he was about to have students evaluate and discuss right-extremist Internet web pages. His lesson plans differed starkly from those of his older colleagues. Sowa was possibly more self-confident in handling the new media, such as the Internet, than older teachers. Still more importantly, he and Giesing were quite removed from the Holocaust. They and their students belonged to the third generation born after World War II. The question “What does that have to do with me?” worried this generation more than inquiries about guilt. Consequently, younger teachers needed to search for methods that would give both them and their students a framework to approach this distant historical subject. Sowa explained: “I can’t tell them personal stories. But I hope that by analyzing movies with them, I can teach them about the past and make them realize how this past can be useful in their daily lives.” He hoped that after his lessons “students [would] be able to process information about Neo-Nazi groups much more critically.”

Teachers seemed to self-confidently choose teaching methods for Holocaust education on their own. Still, at the same time they were also quite insecure about appropriate approaches to teaching the Holocaust. How and with what materials does one teach about the mass murder of over six million human beings? Does one want to shock the students? Does one approach the subject very emotionally? How does one keep a critical distance? Teachers found it especially hard to decide if they should treat the topic emotionally or if they should rely purely on academic and rather neutral texts. They were extremely divided on the issue. Cornelia Trommer was convinced that she had no choice but to approach the subject emotionally. “There is an emotional side to the subject. That is completely obvious,” she said. In her lessons on the Holocaust, she would have her students look at pictures of the massacre. “Mostly, I don’t comment on these pictures,” she explained. “I just have them observe a moment of silence.” Trommer found it also very useful to show excerpts of the movie *Schindler’s List* in class. “The movie portrays the human suffering and the individual fate of people very well,” she held. Her colleagues Schäpers and Günter Sowa from the public school, however, vehemently disagreed. Schäpers insisted: “You must not sentimentalize this subject. That would trivialize it. I have to let the facts speak.” Similarly Sowa, although he was not quite so adamant, preferred a factual and scholarly approach. He reflected: “Sometimes, I even try to be a little cynical. I think that goes over well.”

As Sowa's comment shows, this attitude is closely related to the teacher's relationship to and perception of his students. Sowa thought it appropriate to treat the subject in a cynical way because he had observed that his students appreciated his approach. He remembered that a substitute had once asked his students to observe a moment of silence after a documentary on the Holocaust. His students had later told him that they had found that artificial and odd. His non-emotional approach was a response to his interpretation of his students' needs. Similarly, Trommer refused to show her students too "shocking" movies, such as *Night and Fog*. She thought some scenes would be too much for some of them to process. She remembered: "I showed that movie in an upper-level history course once. And one female student left the classroom. I could understand that very well." By contrast, Schäpers thought it "ridiculous" to spare teenagers the horrible truth of the Holocaust. She said: "They are really adults already, you know. And besides, they constantly watch war and horror movies on TV." Giesing thought it necessary to confront teenagers with the pictures of death camps and gas chambers. He maintained: "Today's children are media children. They are so numbed. We can't reach them otherwise."

Teachers also differed in their views on what was age-appropriate Holocaust education. Giesing, Heidloff and others affirmed that the subject was rightly in the tenth-grade curriculum. Heidloff explained: "Students do need to have some historical background to understand the events that led to the Holocaust. I know in Holland, they start teaching their students about National Socialism in 5th grade, when the students are only about 10 years old. I think that is too early. Children of that age are simply not able to reflect critically on the issue." Similarly, Giesing seemed very pessimistic about teaching the Holocaust to younger students. He remembered: "I tried to explain to a class of ninth graders that this can never happen again. They laughed at me. Clearly, they were not mature enough to understand the significance of what I kept repeating." Schulte and Terwolbeck, on the other hand, also thought it possible to teach younger students about what had happened. Schulte suggested: "You could give an overview of the history of the Jewish people when you discuss ancient cultures in the sixth grade history lesson. You wouldn't have to get into details, but you could tell them that the Holocaust happened." Terwolbeck also said that he had discussed the Holocaust with a class of sixth graders. Sowa was the most pessimistic of all my interviewees. "I don't think the history lesson really recognizes what teenage students need. I am convinced that our lessons, which mostly include cognitive teaching methods, really don't teach students anything. They might become good at memorizing. I don't think that is effective, however. You should take them outside and make them do things. Not have them sit in the classroom and memorize and repeat all day long." Terwolbeck, on the other hand, thought that constant repetition was the best way to ensure his students' learning progress.

Different attitudes toward their students also explained the teachers' very different assessments of themselves. Trommer seemed almost insulted when asked if she thought her teaching objectives were usually reached. "That is a very hard question to answer, Katharina. How would I know?" She reacted as if the question were not justified. It had apparently not occurred to her to ask her students about it. Similarly, Heidloff seemed unsure when he tried to answer. He speculated: "Do I think that my students 'got' what I wanted to convey to them? I think so. They should have. I mean, I hope." Sowa seemed particularly honest when he responded to this question. He had thought about the problem himself. "I do a feedback session at the end of the school year. Yeah, I don't know if they learned everything that I wanted them to learn or if they are honest enough to tell me that they didn't like something. I really don't know. Every single time when I finish teaching the Holocaust, I wonder whether I did it right this time. Every single time I am unsatisfied. I still don't know." Sowa's voice reflects the insecurity of all teachers teaching the Holocaust. They know what they are expected to do, even how ideally they should go about it. Yet they do not know how to relate these horrible events to adolescents who are both adults and protected children. One cannot expect Germany's teachers to find one standard answer.

The responsibility for a successful lesson on the Holocaust is that of the teacher alone. Indeed, all teachers refused to have the government dictate to them how to teach the Holocaust. Sowa shook his head when I asked how closely he followed the guidelines: "I

don't follow them closely at all. That is impossible. General rules would never apply to an individual student group." Consequently, a standard lesson on the Holocaust did not exist. Teachers needed to learn on their own how to apply ideal teaching methods in the classroom. I was surprised to find how much thought all of my interviewees put into the design of their lessons. Their experience in the classroom had taught them which teaching methods worked for teenagers and which ones did not. They talked about examples of successful lessons with pride and satisfaction. Most interviews left me with a very positive and optimistic impression of Holocaust education in my hometown. The teachers clearly knew what they wanted to do.

The teachers, however, were also frustrated when they were barred from doing what they knew was ideal. Their experiences clearly showed that the problem of Holocaust education is not a theoretical but a practical one. The teachers I interviewed were clearly not concerned about students' ignorance. Renate Schäpers stressed: "Students here know about the gas chambers, they know about the killings." My interviewees did not worry about their students graduating from high school without ever having heard the word "Auschwitz" before. They were also not very concerned with their students turning anti-democratic. What they were concerned about was how their students should learn about the Holocaust. Drawing up ideal lesson plans is not the most difficult task in Holocaust education. It is in the daily re-interpretation of teaching objectives, in the interaction with adolescent students, that teachers falter. In practice, teachers learn what teaching methods are successful and which fail. They also learn that each new student group reacts differently to a teacher's attempt to stress history's bearing on the present. Naturally then, a lesson that is conducted by individuals for an individual group of students cannot be regulated by government prescriptions. It is thus not surprising that teachers do not consult government texts when planning their lessons. Rather, they need to rely on their practical experience.

This experience suggests that teachers would be able to conduct a satisfactory lesson on the Holocaust if the school day was in fact less controlled. More precise teaching guidelines would definitely not promote better Holocaust education. Teachers already agree with the government – and with scholars of Holocaust education – on the ideal teaching methods and objectives of how to teach the Holocaust. Teachers should be given more time, more funds and more adequate teaching materials to teach the Holocaust in a way that they have come to see as ideal. My interviewees were clearly excited when they talked about trips to Holocaust memorials they had taken with students or when they described particular projects they had had their students conduct. If they had more time to spend on Holocaust education, they would rely on these successful teaching methods more consistently. If they had more time to spend on Holocaust education, they would be able to design a lesson according to their students' needs.

With more time to spend on Holocaust education teachers would have the opportunity to learn about their students' needs. Only one of my interviewees had had taken the time to ask students what they wanted to know, what they already knew and how they wanted to be taught. Similarly, the government texts as well as scholars on Holocaust education do not pay much attention to students' concerns. This seems ironic. For a study on education cannot be complete without considering the needs of its recipients. Students must have an opinion on what they are taught and how they are taught. A study on Holocaust education in Germany thus must also include students' assessment of this education.

Trying to Understand the Unimaginable: German Students and their Experience of Holocaust Education

Teaching the Holocaust is probably very difficult. I don't know. But I am also not a teacher.
Annika Proch, student, 11th grade, Ahaus, January 2001.

The Holocaust will never become completely clear to anyone. I mean, what happened is simply not conceivable.

Jürgen Kestermann, student, 12th grade, Ahaus, January 2001.

When the teacher and pedagogue Dieter Boßmann asked students to summarize their knowledge about Adolf Hitler in the mid 1970s, students' answers were marked by confusion and ignorance.¹²⁶ German high school students, Boßmann reported, confused simple historical facts, were poorly informed about the Holocaust, misused key terms and were unable to make sound historical judgments about the Third *Reich*. Several of the students' comments were especially alarming. A seventeen-year-old student wrote: "Hitler killed the Jews, because he only wanted Germans in his country. If today we didn't have that many foreigners, there would also be more jobs."¹²⁷ Another student mused: "It was bad that he introduced the concentration camps. He could have gotten rid of the Jews with some other method."¹²⁸ And his seventeen-year-old classmate asserted: "He only did his duty!"¹²⁹ All students were completely ignorant about the dimensions of the killings. They estimated that Hitler (not the Germans, of course) killed between 5,000 and 40,000 people. And they even wrote down these numbers with innocence and a clear lack of comprehension. One sixteen-year-old girl thought Hitler was only after "small shoplifters and the like."¹³⁰ Boßmann's interviewees clearly did not grasp the meaning of the Holocaust. They were unable to comprehend that Hitler and his followers had killed six million human beings on the grounds of an absurd and untenable ideology. (When they talked of "the Jews" they seemed to refer to a category of people that utterly differed from "normal" Germans.) All students talked about the Holocaust with a lightheartedness that, in the German public's eyes, demonstrated the deficiencies of German high school history lessons in the 1970s.

If one is to believe the German media, the situation has not really changed, in spite of the numerous educational reforms conducted by all German states in the past 20 years. According to a poll conducted by the polling operation EMNID in January 2000, 56 percent of Germany's sixteen year-olds did not know the meaning of the term "Holocaust". Of all interviewees aged 14 to 18, 65 percent had never heard the term before. 62 percent of the teenagers said they did not think that people who denied the murder of the European Jews should be prosecuted.¹³¹ The other prominent German polling operation, FORSA, conducted a survey in June 1998 for the German periodical *Die Woche*. This survey found that only 35 percent of German *Gymnasium* students were able to correctly estimate the number of total Holocaust victims. Only 15 percent of those students knew about the content of the Wannsee conference.¹³² These figures do seem shocking. Newspaper articles citing these polls quickly point to teenagers' attraction to right extreme groups and even place the blame on the schools. History lessons in contemporary German high schools still seem to fail to explain to their students the meaning and relevance of the Holocaust.

Yet, not all Germans are alarmed by these statistics. Mareike Ilsemann, a young German journalist, wrote that the primary issue was not students' ignorance, but rather inadequate

¹²⁶ Ed. Dieter Boßmann, "Was ich über Adolf Hitler gehört habe..." *Folgen eines Tabus: Auszüge aus Schüler-Aufsätzen von heute* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1977).

¹²⁷ Boßmann, *Was ich über Adolf Hitler*, p. 163.

¹²⁸ Boßmann, *Was ich über Adolf Hitler*, p. 182.

¹²⁹ Boßmann, *Was ich über Adolf Hitler*, p. 183.

¹³⁰ Boßmann, *Was ich über Adolf Hitler*, p. 169.

¹³¹ TNS EMNID *Umfrage zum Thema "Holocaust und Schule"* – *Pressemitteilung* (Bielefeld: August 14, 2000).

¹³² Forsa/*Die Woche*, "Kenntnisstand über das Dritte Reich unter den 14- bis 18-jährigen" (Berlin: June 1998).

teaching methods.¹³³ In fact, a second look at the results of the polls shows that the numbers of “ignorant” students are perhaps not so bleak. An article by the Berlin daily newspaper *taz* wrote in November of 2000: “It’s not all that bad.”¹³⁴ The author had checked with the conductors of the EMNID poll who explained that eighteen year-olds knew substantially more than did fourteen year-olds. Furthermore, the students’ alleged “ignorance” was due to their ignorance of the exact meaning of the word “Holocaust”, not to their unawareness of the events themselves. A closer look at the EMNID results also reveals that 45 percent of the 15 year-old interviewees had not yet had Holocaust education in school. Of all students asked, 53 percent thought that more time should be dedicated to teaching the Holocaust in the high school. These figures could indicate that the level of ignorance has less to do with students’ attitude or lack of knowledge but with the way the Holocaust is taught in their schools. Examining the FORSA poll more closely leads to a similar conclusion. Here, the interviewers found that 42 percent of Germany’s *Gymnasium* students described their interest in the topic “National Socialism and Third *Reich*” as “very large.” Similarly, a *New York Times* article, commenting on the launching of a new documentary series about the Holocaust on German public television, stressed: “evidence showed that young people still wanted and needed more information about their past.”¹³⁵

The press criticizes German students for not knowing anything about the Holocaust. Journalists ignore that German students are very interested in learning about the Holocaust, but that they feel that teachers do not spend enough time discussing the subject in school. Whereas the press focuses on students’ lack of knowledge, educators, such as Bodo von Borries and Kurt Pohl, are mainly concerned with theoretical learning objectives and methods. The government’s *Guidelines* takes a similar approach. Yet, all ignore an important set of questions: What do students want? What do students think works for them? The Holocaust—as determined by the *Guidelines*—first enters the history curriculum in the tenth grade of the *Gymnasium*. Students in the tenth grade are usually between fifteen and sixteen years old. One would think that they are old enough to have valid opinions on how they think the Holocaust should be taught.

Students’ ideas of an adequate lesson on the Holocaust are in fact quite precise. *Gymnasium* students acknowledge the relevance of the topic, they are aware of the important role that learning about Germany’s past plays in the formation of their political conscience, and they recognize their own responsibility in keeping alive the memory of the horrors of the Third *Reich*. Talking to *Gymnasium* students about the purpose of the Holocaust history lesson, one gathers the same response every time: “This must never happen again, so we have to learn.” Without ever having read the government *Guidelines*, students agree with state officials on basic teaching objectives. Students consider the Holocaust an important part of their education. The problem thus is not one of students’ unwillingness to remember the Holocaust or their unwillingness to learn about the genocide. Newspaper articles condemning students’ ignorance clearly miss the point. Students do want to know more; they think that they do not know enough about the Holocaust. It seems logical to ask the students themselves how the Holocaust could be taught more effectively.

After I had read scholars’ evaluations of history lessons, analyzed the government *Guidelines*, studied polling operations’ surveys, and spoken with teachers, I realized that one voice was clearly not represented in these different evaluations of teaching the Holocaust: my own. My primary knowledge about Holocaust education did not spring from reading or talking about it. I had myself been a *Gymnasium* student only a few years before and I remembered that I had had very clear ideas of how the Holocaust should be taught. My interest in the Holocaust clearly did not stem from the Holocaust education I had received in school, but from listening to my grandparents, from numerous novels I had read, and from

¹³³ Mareike Ilsemann, “Die Elfjährigen und die SS,” in ed. Frank Schirrmacher, *Die Walser-Bubis Debatte* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), pp. 394-397.

¹³⁴ Ralph Bollmann, “Hilflose Aufklärer”, in *taz, die tageszeitung*, November 4, 2000, pp. I-II.

¹³⁵ “German TV Series on Holocaust is Aimed at New Generation”, *The New York Times*, October 14, 2000, n. pag.

TV-documentaries. In ninth grade, I had suggested to my teacher that we read in class the biography of a member of Auschwitz-Birkenau's prisoner orchestra.¹³⁶ The story had simultaneously fascinated and horrified me immensely when I had read it on my own. I hoped that a class discussion about the events described in the book would help me understand them better. As a tenth grader, I was delighted when the whole school went to watch *Schindler's List* in the local movie theater.

As I was preparing my research for this thesis, I thought it possible that students would know what teaching methods would work best for them. Students would know how teachers could best reach teenagers and how teachers could best explain to them the continued relevance of "dusty" German history. A study on education can never be complete without considering the recipients of this education. Education is a dialogue. "No, one doesn't learn that [how to teach the Holocaust] at the University," Cornelia Trommer, one of the younger teachers at the parochial school, had told me. "One learns from the students, too. With the students." To find out if Holocaust education at the two *Gymnasien* in my hometown was successful or not, I had to talk to the students.

I sent out questionnaires to the history teachers in the upper levels of both *Gymnasien* in my town to distribute in their courses.¹³⁷ The anonymous questionnaires contained twelve questions that focused mainly on the students' experience in their lessons on the Holocaust. I asked the students if they had found their Holocaust education adequate, if all their questions had been answered, what teaching methods they considered especially effective, which ones they had found inadequate and if they could still remember tests or homework from that teaching unit. The first question also asked them to think of possible reasons for the results of the polling operations' nationwide surveys. Of the hundred questionnaires I sent out, 93 were returned to me. In addition, I interviewed 23 students – whose names I was allowed to quote – from both schools in hour-long group interviews. Before each interview, I asked the students to be completely honest with me. I promised them faithfully (*hoch und heilig*) that their teachers would never hear what they had told me. My analysis of the *Guidelines* and my new awareness of the difficulties involved in teaching the Holocaust had led me to adopt a very critical view of German high schools. I also believed that teenage students would rail against their schools and history lessons. I thus expected my interviewees to have very negative and critical views on the Holocaust education they had received.

The students' answers on both the questionnaires and in the interviews were critical. But they were not negative, not destructive. The students did not simply condemn their history lessons. They astonished me with differentiated and interesting answers. Students' responses to my questionnaire showed that they had had very different classes on the Holocaust. Some remembered that their teachers had encouraged them to find out what had happened in their own families and in their own towns. Some students had had essay questions, such as "The Holocaust – an industrialized mass murder?" or "What consequences has the Holocaust for our present lives?" Some students were told to think about anti-Semitism and racism in present-day Germany. Others could hardly remember if they had done any homework on the subject at all. On the whole, students seemed to be quite content with the Holocaust education they had received in 10th grade. 40 out of 93 students indicated that their history lesson had conveyed the events of the Holocaust "pretty well". Twenty students said their Holocaust education had been "extremely interesting", twenty had found it "so so" and only three students indicated that their lessons on the Holocaust had been "boring".

Still, students had many suggestions on how to improve the Holocaust lesson. Most of their criticism focused on the materials that had been used in their classes. Many students were very dissatisfied with the content of their textbook. They said it did not devote enough space to the Holocaust, was mostly concerned with the events of the war, and did not sufficiently depict the lives of victims, perpetrators, and 'normal' Germans. Students preferred to learn

¹³⁶ Fania Fénelon, *Das Mädchenorchester in Auschwitz* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1981).

¹³⁷ Although my research focused primarily on history lessons in the 10th grade of the Gymnasium, which is the last grade in the middle level, I had to conduct my survey and my interviews with students of upper level grades, as the 10th grades had not yet had Holocaust education at the time of my research.

from other sources, such as original documents, photographs, films and biographies. All of the students made thoughtful suggestions about how and why the Holocaust should be taught in school. At the same time, they were surprisingly aware of the problems inherent in Holocaust education. They realized that teaching the Holocaust was not “all that simple,” that it was difficult to make suggestions for improvement. While many of the students generally agreed on issues such as general teaching objectives and basic teaching methods, they were divided on the actual format and exact content of a unit on the Holocaust. When I asked, “What does an average lesson on the Holocaust look like in your school?” they all gave the same answer: “That depends on the teacher.”

The students revealed that they were well informed about the history of anti-Semitism, the discrimination against Jews in Imperial Germany, the Nuremberg Race Laws and the deportations and killings of Jews during World War II. Most of them still wanted to learn more. “You can never know enough about this topic,” many answers on the surveys read. As one student wrote, “You can never know everything. Every day, I discover new details about the Holocaust that I didn’t know before and that surprise me.” Most students justified this urge to learn more with the continued importance of the topic. One student stated in the conclusion to the questionnaire: “I should always be interested in the subject. The Holocaust is part of my country’s past and that should be discussed over and over and over again.” Another student seemed to consider the question about his interest in the topic almost superfluous. “Yes, of course, I am interested!” the answer read. “Even if it [the persecution of the Jews] happened half a century ago, one cannot ignore the topic’s present relevance.” Peter, a 12th grader at the *Canisiusschule* – one of my first interviewees – agreed: “That’s a topic that never stops. I mean, just think about the Neo-Nazis nowadays.” Axel and Holger, two students from the public school, were equally convinced about the topic’s importance for their own lives. “I really can’t imagine that the Holocaust will ever become a ‘normal’ historical topic,” Axel said. “I mean, as long as there are Neo-Nazis around, it will always be relevant.” Holger nodded: “Yes, with the whole discussion on right-extremism, the Holocaust is naturally still a very important issue.” Many students were truly afraid of the growing numbers of Neo-Nazis. Skinheads, to them, represented a real threat to their country’s future. For these students, talking about the Holocaust necessarily involved talking about contemporary right-extremism. Although contemporary right-extremism in Germany has many roots and is not always anti-Semitic, the media always evokes the Holocaust when reporting about right-extremist violence. The swastikas that Neo-Nazi groups flash on their marches through East German towns and other icons that these groups use reminded the students of the Nazi propaganda pictures in their history textbooks. In addition, most students felt that the Holocaust was directly linked to their identity as German citizens and their lives in the Federal Republic. They resented that in many foreign countries, ‘German’ equaled ‘Nazi.’ Peter, a junior at the Catholic *Gymnasium*, told me: “Every time my friends and I go to Holland,¹³⁸ Dutch kids come up to us and call us names, like ‘Nazi’ or ‘Skinhead.’ Once someone asked me if I had ever beaten up a Turk before.” Whereas all of my interviewees rejected these judgments as unjustified and prejudiced, they still seemed to feel guilty for their past. Only good education about what happened, they held, would give them the tools and the confidence to fight these prejudices. A student at the parochial school admitted: “I had always felt ashamed about my German nationality. The only way to deal with this shame was for me to more intensively study the Holocaust.” Like many of his peers, this student experienced life in Germany as closely related to the country’s history.

Yet, several of the answers on the questionnaires indicated that some students were quite “fed up” with the subject. Two students wrote that they had “rehashed” the topic extensively in class and that they felt no further need to learn about it. Their curt answers to all twelve questions – compared to the extensive paragraphs their classmates wrote as responses – also revealed that they were not particularly interested in my area of research, their history lesson. Another student sounded especially frustrated: “In school, we treat the topic way too often, and then people come along and say we don’t even know anything.” A student at the

¹³⁸ The Dutch border is about ten minutes west of Ahaus.

parochial school wrote: "At first I was really interested in the topic, but we kept talking about it again and again and then my interest sort of waned." Miriam, one of my interviewees from the public school, said she was quite surprised to find many of her classmates to be still so "into the topic". "Really," she said, "we have talked about it in *Reli* [religious education], German, in History and in 13th grade we will talk about it again. Can't we talk about something else one day?" These answers clearly illustrate the concern voiced by scholars that students who are continually subjected to Holocaust education might turn away from the subject entirely. These students exhibited what scholars called 'over-saturation' with the Holocaust. Holger acknowledged that students might easily become "fed up" with the topic: "That is definitely possible. One has to be careful, because then one would achieve the opposite effect of what was intended."

Still, Miriam and the few other skeptical students constituted a minority. Most of the students were clearly not "tired" of hearing about the Holocaust and believed that it was important to learn about it. Felizitas, Holger's classmate, stated firmly: "I can't even imagine that somebody would say they are 'sick' of hearing about the Holocaust. You just don't say that. You just can't think that. It's part of our past that we have to deal with." The writers of the *Guidelines* would probably be delighted to discover that students did indeed see a strong link between their own lives and history. Yet, the students made clear that their personal interest in the Holocaust had not been sparked by their high-school history lesson. When asked if the unit on the Holocaust had promoted or stifled their interest in learning about the Holocaust, most students answered: "Neither, nor." – "I have always been interested in the Holocaust," Kristin, a junior at the parochial school explained. "My mother and I have talked about it a lot. I don't think that the history lessons in school changed anything about my curiosity for the subject." Like Kristin, almost all of the students had seen *Schindler's List*, a movie that was hardly ever shown in the class. All students were familiar with one or several children's novels on the subject. Most had read *Anne Frank's Diary*.¹³⁹ Daniel, Kristin's classmate, had first learned about the Holocaust in Hans Peter Richter's children's novel *Damals war es Friedrich*.¹⁴⁰ "I didn't like reading when I was younger," he remembered, "but that book really fascinated me and all of a sudden I was really interested in the topic. And I started thinking about it a lot. Had I not read that book, I would certainly not have done that."

Other interviewees had first learned about Hitler and his followers in their families. "I learned so much about that time period by talking to my grandfather," Marius, Daniel's friend recalled. Christina, an older student, had first heard about Nazi crimes when she visited Hitler's vacation home in Berchtesgarden, Bavaria. "When we got to that house, my father sort of told me about Hitler and what he had done. But sort of the children's version of that." Similarly, Hartmut, a 12th grader at the *Canisiuschule*, had first learned about the Holocaust on a family trip. "I was still pretty young," he remembered. "During one vacation my parents took me to Buchenwald and to Theresienstadt. Obviously, I didn't fully realize what had been going on there, but then when I saw the mountains of glasses and hair and stuff, I did sort of get a queasy feeling in my stomach. And then I started to read." A visit to a memorial site had so impressed this student that he was motivated enough to find out what had happened on his own, long before the Holocaust was a topic in his history lesson.

Students said that even after they had had discussed the topic in school, they continued to consult sources outside their lessons to answer their questions. These sources included mainly novels and documentaries on the two public German TV channels. The students particularly liked the documentaries by Guido Knopp, a historian and chief editor of the history section at the second German public television channel (*ZDF*), whose series on the Third Reich, *Hitlers Helfer* (Hitler's Helpers), *Hitlers Kinder* and *Holokaust* (written with the German "k" to indicate that this term should not be a foreign term for Germans), had become very popular by the mid 1990s. "Those shows are so interesting," one student wrote on the questionnaire, "I think they are very well researched and you get so much information about details, about things you never knew. Also, they have eyewitness interviews in them." Biographies of Holocaust survivors seemed to stir the students immensely. Several of them

¹³⁹ Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl*, transl. B.M. Mooyart-Doubleday (Garden City: Doubleday, 1952).

¹⁴⁰ Hans Peter Richter, *Damals war es Friedrich* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1979).

wrote on the questionnaire: “They are the only people who really know how things were back then.”

These students, who seemed so dedicated to learning more, did not fit the image of the ignorant and irresponsible German teenager. These students would not be likely to join right-extremist youth organizations. The headlines of the articles citing the polls’ results therefore seemed oddly removed from the daily lives of *Gymnasium* students in Ahaus, Westphalia. Many students were thus sincerely surprised about the polls’ results. Kathrin, a student at the public school, remembered: “When I read about those statistics on your questionnaire, I really couldn’t believe them. You hear about it [the Holocaust] so much. It seems almost impossible for students to have never heard about Auschwitz before.” Some students showed similar surprise on the questionnaires. They could not think of reasons that might explain the FORSA and EMNID surveys. Obviously, they had grown up in an environment where the Holocaust was frequently talked about and where students were expected to know about it.

The majority of students, however, seemed not at all surprised. To them the polls’ results were completely plausible. On the questionnaires, as well as during the interviews, they came up with lists of logical explanations for the widespread unawareness of the past among German teenagers. “Young people are simply not interested in the past anymore,” many of them wrote on the questionnaires. They explained that to many young Germans the Third *Reich* was too far removed. Teenagers might not see a connection between the Nazi horrors and their own lives. “To be interested in anything that’s to do with school is simply not cool,” Axel mused. Many interviewees stated that history was perceived as “dusty” and “gray” among their peers. Most students, my respondents suggested, were consequently not interested in history and politics. To explain, one student wrote in big letters and quotation marks: “The past—who is interested in that?” (*Vergangenheit—wen interessiert das schon?*) His classmate pointed out: “We live in a fun society. Nobody takes the time to think about this ‘heavy stuff’ and nobody feels responsible for their past or their country, either.” Others said that adolescents did not want to be reminded of such “horrible things.” The students thus suggested that their interest in the Holocaust was extraordinary and had to do with their own private motivation to be well educated. Axel explained: “I mean, you do have to be interested in history, if you want to learn something in the history lesson. I was always very interested in history, so for me that’s normal. But not for others. And then when I correct my friends or want to tell them about the Third *Reich* for example, they say right away, ‘oh here comes the nerd from the *Gymnasium*.’”¹⁴¹ Many students thus did not think that the EMNID and FORSA surveys were necessarily misrepresenting the current situation among German teenagers. Not everybody, they knew, would make the effort to read or watch movies about the Holocaust in their free time. “In the lessons, I definitely realized that I knew much more about the Holocaust than my classmates did,” one student wrote on the questionnaire. My interviewees clearly felt that they differed from the crowd.

There are several reasons for their feeling so different from other teenagers. The students I interviewed had all grown up in fairly protected, tightly-knit, Catholic communities. Even students at the public school had obligatory religious education, went to mass regularly, and were heavily influenced by religious community life. Many students spent their afternoons participating in church-based youth groups, where political and social problems were frequently discussed. My interviewees also mostly stemmed from middle-class families. The *Westmünsterland* is a rural area. Many families still work on their own small farms, while simultaneously working in the service sector. Since *Ahaus* is the small center of the region, many of the students at the two *Gymnasien* are children of professionals who have established their practices or firms in the town. Their interest in history might be linked to the middle-class ideals of their parents who hope that their children will become well-rounded individuals. Given that all of my interviewees went to the most advanced German school

¹⁴¹ Whereas in the rest of Germany it becomes more and more common for all teenagers to spend at least six years of their high school education at a *Gymnasium*, in more rural areas, like Ahaus and its surroundings, it is still seen as a privilege to be a *Gymnasium* student.

type, one can thus expect that they were better educated than the average German teenager.

Still, the students' particular social and economic background does not necessarily imply that better-educated students are more interested in the Holocaust than others. Even though the students perceived themselves as different from the crowd, their answers might reflect the attitudes of teenagers overall: perhaps Germany's young in general are more interested in the country's past than the media maintained. My interviewees' answers suggest the same. They did not only blame their ignorant and unmotivated peers for the surveys' results, but also criticized the history lessons in school. Many said that if history lessons in school were more engaging, some of their less studious peers might show more interest in their country's past. Many students deplored the fact that the Holocaust was only systematically discussed in the 10th grade. Jürgen, Daniela and Christina maintained, for example: "One should teach that already to kids in seventh grade." Both Christina and her classmate Jürgen declared: "It is not surprising then that 14 year-olds don't know about it." Christina added: "Once I went to this demonstration against right-extremism in Dortmund¹⁴² with my youth group from home. And as we were standing there, this girl in my group comes up to me and asks 'Christina? But what are Nazis?' I was pretty shocked. But I guess it made sense. She just hadn't learned about Hitler in school yet." All my interviewees concluded that students who had never been taught about the Holocaust could not be held responsible for not knowing about it. Thus the majority of students in the middle level of the *Gymnasium* (grades 7 through 10) were not 'officially' expected to know about the Third *Reich*.

Yet, many students held that younger children as well should know about the Nazi horrors. Christina had been taken aback when she found out that several children in her youth group did not know about the Nazis. She thought: "I was lucky, my parents told me about what happened. But what about those whose parents don't talk about these things? They would only know about the Holocaust from talking about it in school." Jürgen agreed: "Yeah, if you wait 'til tenth grade to tell students about what happened, then it's too late. Teenagers will have already formed political ideas by then. You have to teach them about the Holocaust before they can be influenced by Neo-Nazi groups." But could a teacher confront twelve-year-olds with photographs of gas chambers and emaciated bodies? Daniela was convinced that a teacher could and should. "Of course," she insisted, "you have to tell them straight out what happened; if I were a teacher, I would be very tough. (*Ich wäre da knallhart.*) You have to show them reality." Her classmate Andreas was equally convinced that younger children would have no difficulties processing depictions of the mass murders. "I mean, just look at them, those kids sneak into R-rated movies all the time to watch slaughter and blood."

Other students agreed with the *Guidelines*' provisions. Younger students, they held, should not be subjected to a topic as cruel and horrific as the Holocaust. While it made sense to blame the delayed discussion of the Holocaust in the *Gymnasium* for younger students' ignorance, many of the interviewees did not consider it reasonable to treat the subject any earlier. Felizitas said: "It's one thing to go and watch a horror movie, where you know all the blood is just fiction. What the Nazis did was real. I don't even think some adults are able to process that." Axel agreed: "You want to make sure that the students really get what was going on. I mean, the subject is so important. For that, students just need to know some history and politics. They need to have reached a certain level of maturity for that." Felizitas nodded: "I was always interested in the Holocaust. When I was much younger I was disappointed that we wouldn't talk about it in school. But now I think it's good they have it the way they do. You just need to know what came before, in order to understand what happened." The students' disagreement here shows clearly that teaching the Holocaust involves questions that might not necessarily arise when teaching other topics in the history lesson. Even students could not agree when the Holocaust should be taught.

All my respondents agreed, however, that sixteen-year-olds should know about the genocide. Yet, the students said, even other 10th graders had not necessarily studied the topic in school. A student at the parochial school wrote on the questionnaire: "My cousin, for

¹⁴² City at the edge of Germany's main industrial region, the *Ruhrgebiet*, about an hour southeast of Ahaus by train.

example, goes to this other school in a town an hour away from here, and there they never even got to the Holocaust. Summer came before they had finished talking about the Weimar Republic.” Another student was unable to answer half the questions on the questionnaire. He or she wrote: “We did not get to talk about the Holocaust in 10th grade, so I can’t say anything about my personal experience of Holocaust education.” Thus, students might not know about the Holocaust, not because they are uninterested in learning about this past, but because they are never taught about it in school. Other answers on the questionnaires read: “Oftentimes the teacher doesn’t even talk about the Holocaust. The lesson just mainly focuses on how the NSDAP got to power. It seems like the Holocaust itself is only mentioned on the periphery. Most teachers probably just don’t treat it extensively enough.” Another student had heard of a teacher dedicating barely ninety minutes to teaching the Holocaust itself. “That is simply too short,” the student added. The students blamed teachers, but also other authority figures, such as parents and grandparents for students’ ignorance. “Maybe the older generation is still trying to repress the topic,” one student at the public *Alexander-Hegius Gymnasium* thought. “If adults don’t talk about it, how are we supposed to learn?” the same student wondered.

According to my interviewees, learning about the Holocaust was impossible if students themselves were not motivated to find out more about their past and if the schools did not teach them enough about the Nazi horrors. This suggests that history teachers who are committed to teaching their students about the Holocaust are utterly powerless when faced with apathetic students: No matter how interesting their lessons, no matter how much time they devote to the subject, their students might simply decide that Germany’s past is boring and does not concern their own lives. Students who are simply not interested in history would still leave school without detailed knowledge about the genocide of the European Jews. They would simply not listen. Yet, this is a wrong conclusion. My interviewees suggested that if teachers were more aware of how to spark and capture students’ attention, their lessons would also reach those teenagers who in their free time were less motivated to learn about the past. The reasons most students gave for the results of the polls showed that the situation was not hopeless. The history lesson, as they and their peers often experienced it, was not “student friendly”. Teachers had to take their students more seriously, listen to their interests and engage in the dialogue that education should ideally represent. Thus, what students spent the most time discussing, both during the interviews and on the questionnaire, was how they would conduct a lesson on the Holocaust, and how they thought a Holocaust lesson could be improved. Again, their answers varied. Like their teachers, they could not agree on one standard teaching unit about the Nazi horrors.

Most of the students’ criticism stemmed directly from their own experience in the classroom. They had seen what did not work for them and their peers and had clear ideas about how to conduct a lesson differently. All students wanted teachers to treat them as respected partners in a common endeavor: learning about the Holocaust. They wanted teachers to listen to their questions and their opinions. They wanted to be given a chance to work and think on their own. They also wanted to learn from and with materials and in settings that seemed attractive to their age group. Students wanted constructive dialogue during lessons. Their criticism thus focused mainly on teachers who did not respect them as mature individuals entitled to their own political opinions. “We had a teacher that would just write dates and facts on the board, and then we needed to memorize them,” Kristin, Marius and Daniel remembered. “Obviously, you didn’t want to learn history like that,” Daniel explained. Felizitas had had similar experiences. “We would read two pages out of the book for every single lesson. I don’t remember anything from that. We basically already knew: Ach, now Wade [last name of that teacher] is coming, now we can sleep for an hour.” Miriam, her classmate, sounded equally frustrated: “For homework, we just had to read four pages out of the textbook, and then the next day he would test us on those in class. And he would pick on us and pester us to death with questions (*der hat uns so richtig gelöchert*). I don’t think I learned anything in that class. One felt so pressured all the time. You just couldn’t learn like that.” A teacher who simply repeated historical facts to students that they in turn would have to memorize for later exams was clearly not conducting what my interviewees considered an

interesting history lesson. They would use adjectives such as “dry,” “dull,” “monotone,” and “boring” to describe this kind of lesson – a lesson that many seemed to have experienced.

“Dry,” “dull,” and “monotone” were the same words they used to describe some of the texts they had read. “The history textbook was sometimes so hard to comprehend. Couldn’t they make that a little easier?” There were too many “boring” facts in history books, many students grumbled. The word “facts” often combined with a negative adjective almost sounded like an insult out of their mouths. Annika, Miriam’s friend, held: “Especially the Holocaust is a topic with which you shouldn’t pay that much attention to facts.” In tenth grade she had had a teacher who had focused especially on the emotional aspects of Holocaust education. “Maybe I don’t know as much about the political stuff that was going on then,” Annika conceded. “But I am sure that I can relate to the topic emotionally and that’s what’s important.” Annika here curiously associated “boring facts” with “politics”. Many of the students indicated that they were not interested in the political background of the Third *Reich*, but wanted to hear about people’s stories, about their daily lives and feelings during the Nazi reign.

Emotion was a term that came up again and again on the questionnaires, as well as during the interviews. Students wanted to hear eyewitness accounts; they wanted to see pictures and movies. They thought that images especially would help them to empathize with the victims. Many repeated: “But one has to be able to somehow put one’s self into their position.” (*Man muß sich doch da irgendwie reinversetzen können.*) One student wrote on the questionnaire: “The pictures of concentration-camp captives we had in our history book really upset me. Before, I didn’t really have a sense of how horrible it all was.” (*Die Bilder sind mir so nahegegangen...*) Another student agreed that pictures were especially effective teaching materials: “I think that once one has seen a photograph of stacked, gassed human beings, one can hardly ban that again from one’s memory.” Students hoped that visits to memorials or to museums would bring them closer to the victims’ reality. “Only when I first visited Dachau,” Christina remembered, “could I grasp what it meant to share barracks with so many people.” Students were very concerned in learning what people, the Holocaust victims, as well as the perpetrators, had felt on a day-to-day basis. Consequently, they appreciated it when their teachers invited eyewitnesses to come and talk to their classes. A junior at the *Canisiusschule* wrote on the questionnaire: “When Sally Perel came and talked to us about his life, that left a lasting impression.” Jürgen, Christina, Daniela and Andreas, 12th graders at the same school who had also heard the talk agreed: “The guy was really impressive.” Andreas remembered: “Such an old man and so little and such an inspiring story-teller.” Students at both schools also vividly remembered the visits of the Catholic pastor Johannes Sonnenschein to their classes. Andreas recalled: “That’s the part of the history lesson on the Holocaust that I remember the most. It was so impressive to hear someone who had really gone through all this tell us about what he had done to stay alive. Students also appreciated it when their teachers showed them movies during a lesson. One answer on the questionnaire read: “If you show kids a movie that is really horrible, then they will naturally want to know how these things could have happened, then they will want to learn about the Holocaust.” Many students advocated that *Schindler’s List* be shown in history classes. Students wanted history to come alive. Politics – or rather what they perceived to be politics, the chronology of laws passed, of governments, parties and wars – was a dead subject to them.

The interviewees’ predilection for emotional teaching methods, however, was not unlimited. Many students disagreed with those who favored emotional approaches to teaching the Holocaust. These students recognized problems with some of the very teaching methods they and their classmates were proposing. “Yes, you do need to shock people to get their attention,” Felizitas maintained, when discussing the use of documentaries in the history lesson, “but then I guess you would also not want to show them every single gaudy detail. You couldn’t really start the unit on the Holocaust with showing them mountains of dead emaciated bodies.” The use of brutal images also might make students turn away from the subject entirely. Holger said: “I think that if you insist on showing the violence too much, then there is the danger of overwhelming students. And that’s not really what you want either.” Students also worried that the reliance on too many pictures and movies in class would get

rid of the scholarly aspect of the history lesson. They wondered whether movies and pictures were as reliable as their more neutral and objective history textbooks. A student at the public school said: “The media today is always out to influence us one way or the other. It is so easy to believe what you see on TV. Visual images are so effective. And we are not critical enough.” Some students were equally reserved about using eyewitness accounts as teaching material. “I like listening to my grandparents talk,” one student indicated on the questionnaire, “but who tells me that their stories are really true?”

Many of the interviewees also realized that a serious lesson on the Holocaust could not rely exclusively on the popular teaching methods sixteen year-olds would generally favor. A number of students answering the questions on the questionnaires agreed: facts, structure, and a certain overview of the events were essential for an understanding of the genocide. One could not exclusively appeal to students’ emotions. “I had heard and read a lot about the Holocaust before,” Kathrin remembered, “but only when I learned more about the concrete facts in the history lesson did I really get a sense of what happened.” A student on the questionnaire complained that many pictures of the genocide were often only used as a “moral sermon”. “They make you look at them to make you feel bad,” the student complained. Students wanted to learn and understand the feelings of the people involved. They did not want to be taught how to feel. “With this one teacher [a teacher who had told me during the interview that it was necessary to rely on emotional teaching methods], we had to look at pictures over and over and over again,” Andreas, a 12th grader at the parochial school complained. “That gets sort of boring after a while. What would you feel? Let’s look at picture number ten: What do you see? How does that make you feel? Isn’t it horrible? Let’s have a moment of silence, while contemplating this picture.”

Students were not interested in moral sermons. They wanted to come to their own conclusions by using more scholarly methods than simply looking at pictures. Andreas and his classmates’ contempt for the teacher who had tried to teach a unit on the Holocaust just by using visual material showed that students’ preference for pictures and films was not an immature desire to turn the history lesson into a more ‘child-like’ event. Axel remembered that his history teacher—a teacher who had told me that he relied especially on ‘action-oriented’ and ‘student-oriented’ teaching approaches—had tried to restage the Berlin Olympics in 1936 with the class. “We didn’t get that much out of it,” Axel said. “I think most of us took it more as a joke.” Students did not consider their history lessons a joke. They wanted to work like true historians. When I asked Hartmut and Jürgen how they would conduct a lesson on the Holocaust, they said they would analyze “tons” of primary sources. Daniela, their classmate agreed: “Yes and then you could spend the rest of the class period talking about the different opinions of different writers.”

In fact, the majority of students thought that discussion and students’ own active participation were the most important elements of the history lesson. “This way, you are so much more into it,” Miriam said. “And you will learn and remember so much better.” Andreas, Daniela, Jürgen and the other members of their history course were glad that their current history teacher let them discuss and read primary sources until they came to their own conclusions. Thus, a teacher’s attitude towards his or her class (as perceived by the students) was very important. Students did not want a “dictator” who would tell them the facts they needed to know for the next lesson. Neither did they want a teacher who treated them as children who were not capable of analyzing sophisticated material and arriving at their own judgments. They wanted a moderator for a class discussion—a guide who would help them to learn about the Holocaust and its background by themselves.

In the analysis of history lessons, the evaluation of the teacher-student relationship was crucial to all students. “You know, it really depends how a teacher gets it across (*wie die das so rüberbringen*),” almost all of them would say. It turned out that the verb “to get across” was hard for them to define. Daniela tried to clarify the expression: “Well it just means that they have some sort of structure in their lesson.” Felizitas said: “Our teacher now, he is so awesome. He will raise his voice when he talks about the topic and he’ll get really emotional and he sort of makes clear to us how important the topic still is.” Apparently, “getting it across” also had a lot to do with how students perceived and respected their teachers. Daniela explained: “Take for example this one teacher [the notorious teacher at the parochial

school who “only writes dates at the board”]: he has a lot of knowledge (*der hat echt Ahnung*) but then he can't really get that across. And then the other teacher [the teacher who, according to the students, relied too much on looking at pictures] she doesn't know what she's talking about. You can tell. She just reads in some book before she gives her lesson and then we are supposed to take her seriously.” Many students preferred younger, more energetic teachers. They thought that younger teachers were willing to honestly discuss the horrific events. One student wrote: “Maybe an older teacher would not want to talk about everything that happened. Or would hesitate to discuss difficult issues with us.” Daniela disagreed: “I think older teachers are much better at teaching the subject, you know.” Daniela continued: “Some of them have even lived through that time and then you can really believe them. They really know what they are talking about. But if a younger teacher comes along, you just sort of wonder, what gives her the right to tell us that we have to be moved or devastated.” Students did not want their teachers to be dictators, but they also wanted them to be authorities, whose superior knowledge they respected. When students said they wanted to be considered as equal partners in a class discussion, they clearly did not mean to say that they wished to see teachers as their peers. They wanted to be able to look up to them. They all strongly felt that imparting knowledge necessitated a certain aura of wisdom and intellectual superiority.

Students wanted to look up to their teachers as their superiors, but did not want them to be too removed from their own world. On the contrary, students harshly criticized teachers who had no idea of students' lives and interests outside of the classroom. “You definitely have to include local history,” Kathrin, an *Alexander-Hegius* student, said. “That really illustrates to you how close the events really are to us.” Holger, who had been listening, agreed: “Yes, and if teachers also discussed right-extremism in class, I think that would be the best start of a lesson there is.” The desire to learn more about the implications of the Holocaust for their own communities and the wish for the teachers to discuss the growing threat of Neo-Nazism in their lessons about the Holocaust was expressed by all interviewees. Only a minority of students indicated that their teachers had actually included local history in their lesson plans and even fewer said that the unit on the Holocaust had included discussions of right-extremist groups. The teachers had clearly not considered the problem of Neo-Nazism a pressing issue. “I don't think that's that big of an issue in our region,” Karl Schulte, a teacher at the *Canisiusschule*, had said, when asked if he had ever witnessed incidences of racism in his classes. Other teachers were equally confident that the Catholic influence in the *Westmünsterland* acted as a protective shield against right extremist influences. The students, however, strongly disagreed. Both their answers on the questionnaires and their comments during interviews revealed that they had witnessed open racism on numerous occasions and that they were deeply troubled by the frequent incidences of right-extremist violence, described every night on the TV news. Students saw adolescents, peers, committing indescribable crimes. Naturally they were touched and unnerved when they heard that a sixteen-year old had beaten a foreigner to death or had been involved in lighting on fire the home of Turkish immigrants. The problem of right-extremism was closer to their own lives than that of their teachers. Felizitas said that she was very afraid of rising right-extremism. “Sometimes, I try to push it away from me. But that's not really what you should do. You should talk about that in history class, especially when the Holocaust comes up.” She thought: “Someone who knows about what happened then can simply not do these horrible things.” Most of my interviewees' teachers had thus misinterpreted their students' concerns and had lost an opportunity to give relevance to and to raise interest in the removed historic subject that the Holocaust was often made out to be.

The students' suggestions on better teaching methods showed that there was a way for teachers to capture students' attention and to motivate them to learn more about the Holocaust. Yet, clearly the students' frequent disagreements also demonstrate that students did not have a perfect recipe for the ideal lesson on the Holocaust. Students disagreed on the “right” age for students to learn about the horrors of the Third *Reich*; on the attitude of the teacher during a lesson; on how old a teacher should ideally be to teach the subject; and on the appropriate teaching materials that should be used during a unit on the Holocaust. At the same time, however, students did not see flawless solutions. Despite their extensive

criticism, students did not univocally condemn their teachers' lessons. They acknowledged the difficulties of the teachers' job and also respected their teachers' limitations. Students knew of the hectic school day. "I do have a lot of questions about the Holocaust still," one student wrote on the questionnaire, "but there is just no time in school to answer all questions. Then you just have to read at home on your own." When I asked her how she would teach a lesson on the Holocaust, Annika said: "I guess you would have to make the lesson sort of interesting, but at the same time students would also have to learn something from you. I don't really know how you would do that. But I am also not a teacher." Similarly, a student, trying to describe the job he would do in a lesson on the Holocaust, wrote: "I guess you would have to make the lesson full of suspense and really exciting and fascinating, but at the same time you would have to cover absolutely every single detail. I guess that's impossible though. But I don't want to be a history teacher anyways. No way." Students were thus not as secure as their initial criticisms of their own history lessons might suggest.

Students realized that the question "What does the ideal lesson on the Holocaust look like?" was clearly a matter of personal interpretation. That explains why so many students answered, "Well that depends on the teacher," and why so many students who had had the same teacher had had such different experiences. If students cannot agree on how to teach the Holocaust, one can hardly expect teachers to find a teaching method that will successfully capture all of their students' attention. If those who are to be taught cannot agree on how they want to be taught, one cannot expect teachers to agree on a standard lesson on the Holocaust. Some teachers might be very successful with certain students, in certain classes. "Yes," Marius laughed, "that's a hard thing to define 'interest' (*Das ist ja so'ne Sache mit dem Interesse*). What works for me, might very easily not work for Daniel." All students seemed to realize that they could not expect their teachers to present to them a perfect lesson on the Holocaust. That might explain why 40 of the 93 interviewees indicated that their lessons on the Holocaust had been "pretty good" (*ganz gut*). One might interpret this statement as a statement of resignation: students simply did not expect more from a standard history class and that was why, in spite of their critiques, they still gave "good grades" to their teachers. The judgment "pretty good," however, might also be a concession that they did not know how to conduct a better lesson on the Holocaust.

Students made some suggestions on how to improve Holocaust education. In fact, the majority of the students answering the questionnaires mentioned one teaching method that only one of the teachers had talked about. One student wrote: "First, I would ask my students what they already know about the Holocaust to get the bigger picture. Then I would ask them what they want to know and how they want to learn it. And I would definitely let them work a lot on their own." This student and all those who advocated a similar approach unknowingly promoted a lesson that was "oriented toward the students" (*schülerorientiert*) as the *Guidelines* called it. Teachers might question the value of students' demands. When most students ask to watch more movies, to read more novels or to take more excursions to historic sites, a history teacher might easily worry about the scholarly and "serious" aspect of his subject. Students' demands are also not likely to be realistically implemented into the busy school day. Yet, curiously some of the students' "high expectations" coincided exactly with the State Ministry's expectations for Holocaust education. Students wanted to be taken seriously. As my research has shown, students did not demand a "fun" history lesson, they demanded one that would make the events of the Holocaust more understandable, more graspable.

The *Ahauser* students had long realized that the Holocaust was very relevant for the time in which they were growing up. They also knew that their responsibility as German citizens was to remember the horrors committed by their ancestors. Yet, my survey indicated that students still had many unanswered questions about the topic. Many asked: "Why did Germans cooperate with Hitler? How could this have happened? How much did Germans know? What happened to Holocaust survivors? Why?" These questions show clearly that students are deeply troubled by their past. Their interest is not superficial. They truly yearn to understand an inexplicable historic event.

If teachers took their students seriously and tried to answer their questions and if teachers responded to their students' interests, students would learn more effectively about the Holocaust. This is especially true since most students propose teaching methods for a unit on the Holocaust that educators have found to work particularly well. My interviewees wanted to learn in a scholarly fashion, they favored class discussions, group projects, and independent learning; students loved oral history and wanted to learn more about their own communities during the Third *Reich*. Carrie Supple, a British scholar on Holocaust education found that students who had heard about the Holocaust from eyewitnesses, from novels and through local history projects, had a much more sensitive and sophisticated understanding of the events.¹⁴³ Similarly, my interviewees remembered those lessons best in which teachers had invited eyewitnesses or shown a particularly impressive movie. Students mentioned over and over again the visits of Salomon Perel and the catholic pastor. They also remembered incidents where teachers had let them explore aspects of the Holocaust on their own. A student who had already graduated from high school and to whom I talked about my research told me: "I don't remember that much of what we did in our history class on the Third *Reich*. But I do remember that I had to give a report about the organization of a concentration camp. I worked so hard on that." Similarly, Kristin, the junior at the parochial school, recalled how their otherwise "dull" teacher had encouraged them to research their families' reactions to the Holocaust. "That was when I really started to notice that history concerns me and my family," she remembered. "I figured out how the facts of what we learned in class matched the stories of my grandparents. That was so interesting. It was just too bad that the teacher gave us that assignment and then we never got around to talking about it. It would have been really interesting to hear what the others had to say." Students are clearly interested in the teaching methods that scholars say are most appropriate to use in Holocaust education. Even teachers know that these teaching methods are among the most effective. The constraints of real life in the classroom, however, often do not allow teachers to heed students' proposals.

Still, Annette Kuhn, Professor for Modern History and the Didactics of History at the University of Bonn, stresses: "The interest of students fundamentally determines the success or failure of the learning process."¹⁴⁴ She continues: "The students' interest can only be taken into account in a communicative history lesson."¹⁴⁵ My research has shown that students have concrete ideas about the format of a lesson on the Holocaust. Even if students disagree among each other, even if some of their propositions do not seem feasible or useful, it still seems advisable for teachers to discuss the outline of a unit on the Holocaust with their students. Such a dialogue would ensure that students would receive a lesson that was partially planned by them. They might be less critical of their teacher if the class had decided together that watching *Schindler's List* would not fit into a particular teaching unit or that the movie did not illustrate the events accurately. They might be more motivated to learn about historical facts after having discussed with their teachers and peers that knowledge of facts was a prerequisite to understand and evaluate eyewitness accounts of the Holocaust. A lesson on the Holocaust that stresses dialogue about the content and format of the unit is very likely to sustain students' interest and to promote their knowledge and understanding of Germany's horrific past. It thus seems reasonable to give students a stronger voice in deciding on teaching methods. Their answers to my surveys and their comments during the interviews showed that they have mature and sophisticated opinions about how and why the Holocaust should be treated in school. Since the generation who has witnessed the Holocaust is dwindling, since survivors and perpetrators will soon no longer be able to preserve the memory of the Holocaust by themselves, younger Germans should be made more responsible for what they think they should learn.

¹⁴³ Carrie Supple, "Issues and problems in teaching about the Holocaust," in *The Holocaust and the School Curriculum: a European perspective* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1998), pp. 17-59.

¹⁴⁴ Annette Kuhn, "Schüler- und Schülerinneninteresse," in eds. Bergmann et al., *Handbuch der Geschichtsdidaktik* (Seelze-Velber: Kallmeyer'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1997), p. 357.

¹⁴⁵ Kuhn, "Schüler- und Schülerinneninteresse," p. 358.

Holocaust Education in Germany – A Defense against the Extreme Right?

Anyone who closes his eyes to the past is blind to the present. Whoever refuses to remember the inhumanity is prone to new risks of infections.

Richard von Weizsäcker, Ex-president of the Federal Republic of Germany, Address to the Bundestag, May 1985.¹⁴⁶

For 1999, Germany's Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, BfV*) reported 746 incidents of right-extremist violence in the Republic, a 5.7% increase in comparison to the preceding year. The Office also counted 220 cases of "right-extremist coercion" and 1,979 cases of "incitement to right-extremist violence." The total number of right-extremist criminal offenses amounted to 10,037 cases in total.¹⁴⁷ In August 2000, in Dessau, a town in Saxony-Anhalt, three young men (including two sixteen year-olds) killed a human being on account of his dark skin-color. The NRW Ministry of the Interior, in its preliminary report for the year 2000, similarly reported an increase in criminal offenses with right-extremist or xenophobic motives.¹⁴⁸ In August, seven adolescents between the ages of 17 and 23 attacked two foreigners and dangerously injured one of them in a train station in Düsseldorf. In the same month, a group of four skinheads assaulted two Africans in the center of the city after having insulted them with racist slogans.¹⁴⁹ The German periodical *Der Spiegel*, in an article published in September 2000, reported that in the same summer a horde of teenagers had brutally beaten a fifteen year-old classmate of foreign descent. The attackers had struck him to the ground, had urinated and spit on his face and had kicked his stomach with their heavy steel-cap boots. One of them, so the article, had told the ninth-grader: "You pig, had you been born earlier you would have had to wear a yellow star on your sleeve (*Kanakenschwein*,¹⁵⁰ *früher hättest du einen Judenstern am Arm gehabt*)."¹⁵¹ A few days earlier, two of the attackers had paraded a white Ku-Klux-Klan gown and a *Wehrmacht*¹⁵² steel helmet at school. When the author of the article asked one of these students about the Third *Reich*, the boy, Manuel, responded: "I don't know that much about it. Just that Hitler was kind of an asshole." In October 2000, a Neo-Nazi group bombed the synagogue in Düsseldorf, NRW's capital. According to a feuilleton article in the daily newspaper *Die Welt*, 17 % of male adolescents questioned for a year 2000 survey in NRW held anti-Semitic beliefs.¹⁵³

The *Spiegel* article seems to suggest that dismissal of the Holocaust's relevance and right-extremist violence are related. The reader is left to think that had Manuel known more about Nazi crimes or had he acknowledged the implications of his country's past he might not have participated in the beating. In fact, reports on xenophobic and anti-Semitic violence – in the German as well as in the foreign press – tend to include critiques of the German school system. History teachers are failing, reporters claim, and German high school students are ignorant and irresponsible. When the *ZDF* announced the launching of a new documentary series on the Holocaust, which was especially aimed at a younger audience, the *Los Angeles Times* delightedly announced: "With almost nightly outbreaks of right-wing violence [...] reunified Germany's first prime-time documentary on the Holocaust couldn't

¹⁴⁶ Richard von Weizsäcker, "Address to the *Bundestag* during the Ceremony Commemorating the 40th Anniversary of the End of the War in Europe and of National Socialist Tyranny, May 8, 1945," in ed. Geoffrey Hartman, *Bitburg—In Moral and Political Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 265.

¹⁴⁷ Office for Protection of the Constitution (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*), *Annual Report of the Office for Protection of the Constitution 1999* (Berlin: Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2000), p. 16.

¹⁴⁸ Ministry of the Interior of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia, "Zwischenbericht 2000," <http://www.verfassungsschutz.nrw.de>.

¹⁴⁹ Ministry of the Interior of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia, "Zwischenbericht."

¹⁵⁰ The German term "Kanake" is a pejorative word used to refer to Turkish guest-workers, it has become a synonym for many foreigners in Germany, however. The insulted boy was half Iranian and half German.

¹⁵¹ Sven Röbel, "Kollektives Schweigen" *Der Spiegel*, September 18, 2000, p. 134.

¹⁵² Hitler's army.

¹⁵³ Alan Posener, "Der neue, der hilflose Antifaschismus" *Die Welt*, November 10, 2000, p.33.

have come at a more propitious time.”¹⁵⁴ An article in *The New York Times* describing the new educational series simultaneously mentioned the firebombing of Düsseldorf’s synagogue and the growing numbers of right-extremist teenagers in the country. The newspaper applauded the channel’s effort to educate Germany’s adolescents and argued that “ignorance is an enemy.”¹⁵⁵

German politicians tend to look to education for a more effective weapon against right-extremist violence. Already in June 1995, long before the recent outbreaks of extreme xenophobic violence, Manfred Heger, the Bavarian minister of education, stated that it was the task of German schools to counter the lure of neo-Nazi and skinhead groups.¹⁵⁶ The historian and expert on Holocaust education Matthias Heyl observes that “hardly one politician’s speech for the past memorial days failed to remind Germans of the responsibility of educators”¹⁵⁷ to fight right-extremist tendencies among German students. Both the German public and foreign observers see prevention of right-extremism in Germany as directly linked to successful Holocaust education in Germany’s schools.

As my research has shown, officials at NRW’s Ministry of Education, teachers and students all agree: Holocaust education should indeed contribute to forming responsible democratic citizens who will loathe xenophobia and right-extremist attitudes. The state’s *Guidelines and Curricula – History* for the middle level of the *Gymnasium* as well as other state government publications regulating the high school history lesson repeat that the history lesson should teach students the basic facts about the Third *Reich* and that teachers are to make students aware of their responsibility to accept and defend the federal constitution. All teaching methods that the authors of the *Guidelines* propose are intended to promote this civic education. The teachers at the two *Ahauser Gymnasien* whom I interviewed in January 2001 all agreed that teaching sixteen year-olds about the genocide of the European Jews not only involves outlining the key dates of Hitler’s dictatorship on the blackboard. All teachers said they had higher, moral objectives in mind when planning a lesson on the Holocaust. Although all teachers sneered at the convoluted language of the *Guidelines* and claimed that they never consulted the government texts, they did use the same terms as the government officials to describe ideal methods for conveying the Holocaust to adolescents. Like the *Guidelines*, teachers thought that students should learn about the horrors mostly by looking at eyewitness accounts, at pictures and documentaries, and by visiting historic sites. Teachers also stressed the importance of local and ‘hands-on’ history; for if students and their lives were directly involved in the learning process, they held, students would be more likely to realize how closely related Germany’s recent past was to their identities as German citizens.

Students agreed. The survey that I conducted with 93 11th and 12th graders from both *Gymnasien* in Ahaus as well as my 23 follow-up interviews with some of the students who had answered my questionnaire showed that students recognized that Holocaust education was not just like learning about any other historical event. They saw that it was closely linked to their national identities. Students agreed that knowledge and understanding of the horrors were a prerequisite for mature participation in German democracy. Wolfgang Böge, a Hamburg history teacher writing about Holocaust education in Germany, found that his students had high expectations for the high-school history lesson on the Holocaust.¹⁵⁸ My findings confirm his experience. Government documents never explicitly mention the threat of right-extremist violence and teachers I talked to did not seem concerned about growing violent xenophobia in their region. But all of the students that I interviewed were deeply

¹⁵⁴ Carol J. Williams, “Amid a wave of Racist Violence, A Holocaust History Lesson” *The Los Angeles Times*, October 21, 2000, p. A2.

¹⁵⁵ Reuters, “German TV Series on Holocaust Is Aimed at New Generation” *The New York Times*, October 14, 2000, n. pag.

¹⁵⁶ Elinor J. Brecher, “After years of neglect, German students now study Nazi horrors” *Knight-Ridder/Tribune News Service*, June 14, 1995, n. pag.

¹⁵⁷ Matthias Heyl, *Erziehung nach Auschwitz* (Hamburg: Krämer, 1997), p. 140.

¹⁵⁸ Wolfgang Böge, “Aspekte der Praxis – Ein Überblick,” Paper delivered at the International Conference on Teaching Experiences and Teaching Material on the Holocaust in Buchenwald/Weimar, September 24-26, 2000, p. 8.

troubled by the recent outbursts of Neo-Nazi attacks on Jewish cemeteries and skinhead street violence. Even if Ahaus had never known open right-extremist criminality, my interviewees were afraid of Neo-Nazism's spread. They truly feared the possibility that the Holocaust might repeat itself. The media's representations of skinheads' marches through cities seemed to draw clear parallels between past and present. So students hoped, but were not confident, that Holocaust education in school would attenuate the right-extremist threat.

Yet, while students agreed on what Holocaust education should ultimately achieve, they were divided on how teachers should teach it. During the group discussions we had, they clashed on issues such as the appropriate age for teenagers to learn about the Holocaust, adequate teaching materials, the credibility of eye-witness accounts, the usefulness of fictitious renderings of the time period, and how much time should be spent on a unit of the Third *Reich*. When I asked students how they would teach a history lesson on the Holocaust, the outlines for their individual lesson plans looked very different. They clearly could not conceive of a standard lesson on the Holocaust.

Neither could their teachers. My interviews quickly demonstrated that although all educators agreed on the same ideal teaching methods in theory, they applied these methods very differently in practice. Teachers not able to religiously apply the ambitious regulations of the *Guidelines* to the busy everyday reality of a *Gymnasium* history lesson freely choose which aspects of the Holocaust they want to stress as well as the teaching methods and materials they will use. All teachers seemed to act quite confidently. Yet, that did not mean that they always felt confident. Moreover, not unlike their students, they disagreed on how old students should be in order to be confronted with pictures of dead emaciated bodies. Was it justifiable that fourteen year-olds had not yet learned about the Holocaust in school? Were only 10th graders able to maturely analyze the topic? Teachers were also quite divided on what materials to use. Some insisted that the topic be treated very emotionally. They wanted to make a lasting impression on students and thought that personal stories and movies, such as *Schindler's List* would best work to that effect.

Others adamantly refused to sentimentalize the subject. They wanted to let the facts speak for themselves. This disagreement on different approaches to the subject was directly related to teachers' different perceptions of their students. Some said that they treated them as partners and were interested in their input; others maintained a more conservative student-teacher relationship and were less concerned about their students' attitude toward their lessons. Most teachers, although they spoke with confidence and pride of their jobs, openly admitted that they had not yet found a perfect method for teaching the Holocaust. Nobody knew exactly how to explain the industrial murder of more than six million human beings committed by a civilized people – their own and that of their students – to a class of thirty German teenagers. Not surprisingly, the teachers' insecurity and their disagreements made for very varied history lessons. Although all seven teachers were bound to the same government proscriptions, although they all worked in the same town and used the same textbooks, although their lessons were closely supervised by their schools' history departments, their students did not learn about the Holocaust in the same way.

Scholars on Holocaust education acknowledge that the decision of how to teach the Holocaust is very difficult, more difficult than agreeing on global teaching objectives for the subject. That German students must learn to reject racism and that they must be taught to defend the Republic's democratic ideals is self-evident. Students accept this, teachers agree with this, and the German public and foreign observers repeat this over and over again. Still, teaching German students that some of their family members have possibly committed indescribable crimes, the memory of which they are expected to preserve forever, is a different matter. Scholars recognize that there is no standard lesson on the Holocaust; they confess that teachers are rightly insecure of how to conduct such lessons. Government officials, on the contrary, ignore that it does not suffice to state general principles for a Holocaust history lesson. Politicians continue to remind teachers of their responsibility to raise responsible democratic citizens and ministry officials publish more and more decrees that are hardly more concrete (or realistic) than their initial demands for teachers. Since it is so difficult to define practical aspects of Holocaust education can one rightly demand that

Holocaust education fulfill all expectations? Can Holocaust education make younger Germans better democratic citizens? Can Holocaust education really deter young Germans from joining right-extremist groups? Can Holocaust education in school actively fight racism?

Brandenburg's minister of education, Steffen Reiche, thinks it can. Shocked by the wave of right-extremist violence in the summer of 2000, his ministry launched a plan for statewide Holocaust education in all of Brandenburg's schools. Since October 2000, scholars, educators and officials of the ministry have been meeting regularly to determine details of the ambitious plan. Starting in the school-year 2001/2002, students in grades one through thirteen will learn about the Holocaust in their History, German, Religious Education and Political Science classes.¹⁵⁹ The ministry's speaker, Martin Gorholt, seems optimistic about the project. He told journalists in December: "If students are confronted with the Holocaust during their entire time at school, they might be able to influence peers who threaten to drift off to the extreme right and who will not listen to adults."¹⁶⁰ Reiche also seems confident that Brandenburg's new curriculum for Holocaust education can ensure that students "realize with every fiber of their hearts that the Holocaust must never ever happen again."¹⁶¹

Yet, scholars are very critical of Brandenburg's plans. Matthias Heyl, a Hamburg historian and expert on Holocaust education, warns politicians: "The best history lesson cannot be a vaccine against right-extremism."¹⁶² Similarly, Annegret Ehmann, a historian and the head of a non-profit organization that fights right-extremism among teenagers in Brandenburg, agrees: "Knowledge about the Holocaust does not necessarily change the right-extremist attitudes of teenagers." In the conclusion to his extensive study on students and historical awareness, the pedagogue Bodo von Borries maintains that the history lesson will not determine whether or not a teenager turns Neo-Nazi: "When small minorities commit violent crimes [...] they can not be deterred from committing these by a more intensive, more intelligent and more moral historical socialization [*Geschichtssozialisation*, here he is referring to the history lesson]."¹⁶³ The psychologist Christiane Hussels confirms von Borries' statement. She had followed a right-extremist adolescent for several years and had recorded his thoughts about the Third *Reich* at different stages of his life. The teenager was well informed about the Nazi horrors and he condemned them strongly – when he was employed and in stable relationships. Yet, as soon as his economic situation deteriorated he irritated his interviewer with Neo-Nazi slogans. Not a lack of knowledge had stirred his hatred, but precarious socioeconomic circumstances. In a speech to NRW politicians, Wilhelm Heitmeyer, head of a Bielefeld institute for research on violence, thus emphasized: "It is not proven that more information about the Holocaust makes young people resist contemporary right-extremism."¹⁶⁴

Instead, a student's political orientation seems to depend on many different social factors. In his study on Holocaust education in Germany, Matthias Heyl points out that a student's family plays a considerable role in forming his or her political attitudes.¹⁶⁵ Similarly, the head of the cultural division at the Federal State Department, Albert Spiegel, himself very committed to improving Holocaust education in Germany, holds: "Schools alone will never be able to convey the Holocaust adequately and effectively. The family, the public, and the media have to contribute as well, since schools represent only one source of information among many."¹⁶⁶ In fact, a survey conducted by the polling institute *Allensbach* for the magazine *Geo-Wissen* in October 1998 corroborates the scholars' beliefs. According to this

¹⁵⁹ Nicole Maschler, "Die Versäumnisse in der Schule nach Auschwitz" *taz, die tageszeitung*, January 24, 2001, p. 16.

¹⁶⁰ "Klassenfahrt in die Geschichte" *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, December 13, 2000, p. 20.

¹⁶¹ Posener, "Der neue Antifaschismus," p. 33.

¹⁶² Jeannette Goddar, "Grundkurs in Empathie Politische Bildung" *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, December 13, 2000, p. 20.

¹⁶³ Bodo von Borries, *Das Geschichtsbewußtsein Jugendlicher* (Weinheim und München: Juventa Verlag, 1995), p. 405.

¹⁶⁴ Wilhelm Heitmeyer, n. t., Speech delivered at the *Stadttorgespräch*, Düsseldorf, August 16, 2000, p. 12.

¹⁶⁵ Heyl, *Erziehung nach Auschwitz*, p. 126.

¹⁶⁶ "Schulen sollen mehr Wissen über den Holocaust vermitteln" *Associated Press*, September 25, 2000, n. pag.

survey, only 5 percent of the teachers in question believed that school has a considerable influence on students as opposed to 66 percent who thought that a students' friends and the media were mostly responsible for shaping teenagers' attitudes.¹⁶⁷

The teachers whom I interviewed had had similar experiences. Benedikt Giesing, the trainee at the parochial school, conceded that the high-school history lesson played an important role in training students' political consciousness, yet he also held: "Families are responsible, too. Students learn from their parents long before they learn from their teachers." Students confirmed this view. Axel, a student at the public school, was very pessimistic about the history lesson's influence on students. "You can't really do anything as a teacher," he said, "I mean if students keep hearing things like 'Oh those shitty Turks!' (*Ach diese ScheißTurken*) at home or from their group of friends, it's not their history teacher who will convince them that xenophobia is bad." All students agreed that friends and family as well as the media were largely responsible for a student's political opinion and social comportment.

It is thus unfair to put the burden of political education on history teachers and Holocaust education alone. As Heyl stresses in his study: "The public dangerously overestimates the possibilities of schools when it blames teachers for students' faulty evaluations of the Third Reich."¹⁶⁸ Alan Posener, a writer for the daily newspaper *Die Welt*, agrees: "Politicians conveniently avoid dealing with serious social problems by making teachers responsible for their resolution." The journalist claims that Brandenburg's plans for a standardized Holocaust education will not solve the state's problems. Scholars are, in fact, outraged that Germany's politicians are trying to utilize the subject for political purposes. Annegret Ehmann maintains: "A 'memorial lesson' to repair social problems such as right-extremism and violence among teenagers would be inappropriately 'instrumentalizing' the Holocaust." Heyl similarly warns that the slogan: "Yesterday Jews, today Turks" would be inappropriately tearing a singular historic event from its context; it would be belittling the disaster that happened.¹⁶⁹ The Freiburg professor and expert on Nazi history, Ulrich Herbert, agrees: "You don't need to know anything about the Third Reich to know that burning the apartment of a Turkish family is wrong."¹⁷⁰ To use Holocaust education to deal with Neo-Nazi violence, Posener concludes, "would be an easy solution that is hard to carry out (*Das ist das einfache, das schwer zu machen ist*)."¹⁷¹

Posener's criticism does not imply that he considers Holocaust education useless. On the contrary, he clearly states that it is an important subject: "Political education must happen in schools (*Politische Erziehung muß sein*) and enlightenment about National Socialism must be part of this education. That is self-evident."¹⁷² No educated German would deny that Holocaust education should be part of the history curriculum. Most Germans would agree that lessons on the Holocaust could be enhanced. Heyl's work at a Hamburg institute for research on Holocaust education, for example, as well as the growing number of educational Internet sites that intend to support teachers in planning a lesson on the Third Reich,¹⁷³ show that scholars are very committed to improving Holocaust education in Germany.

Despite their skepticism of what Holocaust education might achieve, the students to whom I talked had numerous suggestions of how to improve their lessons. Although many of these students had indicated that they had liked their history lesson, they had squeezed their suggestions for improvements with tiny letters into the blank space on my questionnaire. Students wanted to get to know the "life" side of history. They were intrigued by eyewitness accounts and attempted desperately to understand what had gone through the victims' as well as the perpetrators' minds. Some might criticize this predilection for "action"-oriented history as the students' desire to circumvent "boring" scholarly analysis. Yet, scholars'

¹⁶⁷ Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, "Schule – Was sollen die Kinder lernen?" (Allensbach/Bodensee: Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, 1998.)

¹⁶⁸ Heyl, *Erziehung nach Auschwitz*, p. 146.

¹⁶⁹ Goddar, "Grundkurs," p. 20.

¹⁷⁰ Ralph Bollmann, "Hilflose Aufklärer" *taz, die tageszeitung*, November 4, 2000, p. II.

¹⁷¹ Posener, "Der neue Antifaschismus," p. 30.

¹⁷² Posener, "Der neue Antifaschismus," p. 30.

¹⁷³ Examples of very resourceful sites are <http://www.gegen-vergessen.de>, <http://holocaust-education.de> and <http://www.fasena.de>.

research shows that the students' suggestions actually bring about the most desirable results. Carrie Supple, a British historian, observed that students who had listened to eyewitness accounts of Holocaust victims were more interested in finding out about the historical backgrounds of the events than students who had learned history out of a book. The same students also had a very differentiated picture of the historical agents involved. Instead of classifying people into mean Nazis and helpless Jews, they talked of individuals and came closer in understanding the individual side of the story. Similarly, Peter Schneider, a writer for *The New York Times*, observed in his discussions with German teenagers that students who had visited memorial sites were very open to questions such as: What do I have to do with this? What is my responsibility? Was my family involved somehow?¹⁷⁴

These questions were in fact part of the teaching objectives that most *Ahauser* teachers wished to achieve in their lessons on the Holocaust. Most of the teachers also agreed with their students on the ideal Holocaust lesson. They all were willing to visit museums, to show documentaries, to conduct local history projects and to discuss personal stories of Holocaust victims. When they told me about the rare incidences in which they had taken the time to invite eyewitnesses or to show and discuss a longer documentary, their eyes lit up in excitement. Teachers recognized that it was effective and useful to pay attention to their students' wishes. Yet, they often struggled to realize these wishes in practice.

Heyl suggests that teachers (who presently do not receive special preparation for Holocaust education at the university) receive better training to deal with both the practical and the theoretical challenges of Holocaust education.¹⁷⁵ I do not agree. If only practical restraints keep teachers from fulfilling what they and their students deem ideal, it seems advisable to ease these restraints. Teachers do not need more guidelines and more prescriptions. My interviews showed that teachers did not necessarily think they were unable or insufficiently prepared to teach the Holocaust, most of them simply complained about a lack of time. Teachers should be given more time to deal with a subject to which the public attaches so much value. More importantly, they and their students should be given enough opportunity to discuss what students desire to learn. After having talked to 23 *Gymnasium* students, I realized that the relationship between a teacher and his or her students might be the key to relieving some of the educators' insecurities around teaching the Holocaust. Students themselves might be a teacher's best advisors.

There can be no standard Holocaust history lesson. Still, students could tell a teacher what they desire to learn. They are more likely to remember the information for which they themselves asked. Catering to a student's interest is a sure way to increase a lesson's effectiveness. Moreover, students firmly believe that the history lesson has great authority. In a survey of 200 Hamburg students the history teacher Wolfgang Böge found that most students considered the school lesson much more reliable than the media.¹⁷⁶ Similarly, all of the 93 students who answered my questionnaire stated that for them the history lesson was the most reliable source of information about the Third *Reich*. Many maintained that they would give more credence to their history teachers than to their own grandparents. In addition, all of them rejected the media's accounts of the Holocaust as credible pieces of information. One student at the parochial school stated: "In the history lesson, everything is 100 percent true." A classmate confirmed: "Well the teacher studied that for years and years, so of course he knows everything." A history teacher may effectively combine students' interest with his or her expertise. If teachers treated in their Holocaust classes what students were most interested in, students would surely learn and believe in what they learn.

Were there sufficient time, teachers and students could discuss the plan for their individual unit on the Holocaust. They could discuss which projects to conduct or which movies to watch and why. They could argue about how emotional or how "factual" a lesson on the Holocaust should be. A teacher could agree with students' suggestions or not, and explain his or her views on an ideal lesson plan. Arye Carmon, an Israeli historian on Holocaust education, holds: "[...] no longer is it merely for the old to teach the young the meaning of life.

¹⁷⁴ Peter Schneider, "Was die Zwanzigjährigen der Holocaust angeht," <http://www.uni-marburg.de>.

¹⁷⁵ Heyl, *Erziehung nach Auschwitz*, p. 292.

¹⁷⁶ Böge, "Aspekte der Praxis," p. 8.

It is the young who, by their responses and actions, tell the old whether life as represented to them has some vital promise, and it is the young who carry in them the power to confirm them, to renew and regenerate, to disavow what is rotten, to reform and rebel. [...] Commemoration in general, and particularly regarding the Holocaust, must not be static; the remembrance of the past is of significance only when it is meaningfully connected with the realities of the present.”¹⁷⁷ Clearly, a history lesson on the Holocaust cannot be static. If German students are to learn that they themselves are responsible for the memory of their country’s past, then their own lives, their own fears, their own wishes must be respected in a lesson on this memory. This lesson should be a dialogue between two parties. If the young are included in the discussion of how they should best learn about their ancestors’ past, they will be more likely to really remember this past and realize the important role their generation plays in this national effort of remembrance. If young Germans are allowed to determine how to remember, they will not forget.

The state of Holocaust education in Germany does not seem as bleak as the media tends to paint it. Clearly, Holocaust education alone will not be able to fend off racism and xenophobia. Yet, if one listens to the voices of teachers and students, one realizes that the two parties most responsible for Holocaust education have thought and are constantly thinking about how to improve this education. Teachers as well as students are aware of the shortcomings of the high school history lesson. Yet, they are open to criticism and motivated to change what they can. Peter Schneider, a well-known German novelist here writing for *The New York Times*, was astonished to meet honest, interested and, as he says, “very pragmatic” young Germans who had no inhibitions about discussing their families’ past and about criticizing preceding generations. Similarly, Böge confirms that students are extremely interested in learning about the Holocaust and that they deal with knowledge about Nazi horrors responsibly and independently.¹⁷⁸ Most of the students I interviewed were very conscious about their responsibility to preserve the memory of the Holocaust. Their knowledge about the Holocaust, but more so their eagerness to know more and their willingness to spend time outside the classroom to learn about their nation’s past astonished me. The students I interviewed were clearly not irresponsible, merely “fun loving” teenagers. Nor were their teachers unprofessional, insecure or incapable of teaching the Holocaust. I was grateful for their honesty and was astonished about how much thought and how much of a teacher’s personality goes into the planning of a unit on the Holocaust. Instead of crying out against schools and blaming them for not solving Germany’s contemporary social problems, the public should acknowledge that students and teachers are in fact accomplishing a quite difficult task. They try to talk openly and honestly about the murder of more than six million human beings committed in their own country, by their own people, and to understand what this past demands of themselves as teachers, as adolescents, and as citizens of an important European country. Teachers and students might not have come up with the perfect way to teach and study the Holocaust, but their thoughtful comments about Holocaust education show that they are not blind to the past and to the responsibilities that this past entails.

The same year I read Anne Frank’s diary, I also read about twenty other children’s novels relating the sufferings of the Jewish people in Nazi concentration camps. I refused to think that my grandparents’ past was related to the horrible books lined up on the shelf in my childhood room. When I was fourteen, I listened in horror when a man on television¹⁷⁹ told the audience that as a child he had played in Himmler’s house, in a room whose furniture was made out of human body parts. I certainly wished an adult had been there to explain to me how this could have happened. In school, we never talked about all of the horrors described in my books or in the documentaries I watched on TV. I do not remember the

¹⁷⁷ Heyl, *Erziehung nach Auschwitz*, p. 289.

¹⁷⁸ Böge, “Aspekte der Praxis,” p. 9.

¹⁷⁹ The historian Guido Knopp had interviewed Martin Bormann’s son for his popular documentary series *Hitler’s Helfer* (Hitler’s Henchmen). Martin Bormann was head of the Chancellery and Hitler’s private secretary.

actual unit on the Holocaust in my 10th grade history class. Neither does my brother. Our textbook might have had about one and a half pages on the subject.

I do remember, however, that my classmates and I were much more interested in learning about the Holocaust than about any other subject, even those of my friends who would declare that they “hated” history. I also remember that we read Judith Kerr’s *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit*¹⁸⁰ and Max Frisch’s *Andorra*¹⁸¹ and that we analyzed numerous Nazi speeches in class. I remember visiting the Jewish cemetery in my town, a tiny square of grass with a few scattered tombstones, squeezed between two office buildings, so that I had never noticed it before. And I thought, it happened here, too.

My teachers certainly did not do a perfect job teaching the Holocaust. I am still angry that we spent what seemed eternities discussing colonel Claus von Stauffenberg’s attempt to assassinate Hitler in July 1944, but that my teacher did not once address the question “What did the average German do?” I had to come to the States and read Raul Hilberg to understand the average German, to understand my grandparents.

Yet, I still think that I graduated from high school with a solid knowledge and awareness of my country’s past. I feel self-confident responding to provocations by American students. “You know, your people killed my people,” one of them once said to me. I *knew* what my people had done. I also *knew* what this meant for me: I had to be open to foreigners, I would never boast about my country’s achievements, not even about my own. I needed to accept and understand other people’s points of view, I could not categorize people. I also realized that this American student must have had history classes that were less good than my own. He continued to recreate stiff stereotypes, whereas my teachers had taught me—more or less effectively—that to live as a responsible democratic citizen, one had to view people as individuals, not as Jews, not as Germans, not as Turks but as people. In his address to the German parliament in 1985, the then President of the Republic Richard von Weizsäcker asked of German teenagers: “Do not let yourselves be forced into enmity and hatred of other people, of Russians or Americans, Jews or Turks, of liberals or conservatives, blacks or whites!”¹⁸² – The Holocaust is a difficult subject to teach. It is not unteachable, however. In spite of various difficulties and short-comings, my history teachers seemed to have achieved what German leaders had asked of them.

¹⁸⁰ Judith Kerr, *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* (London: William Collins, 1971).

¹⁸¹ Max Frisch, *Andorra, a play in twelve scenes*, Michael Bullock, trans. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964).

¹⁸² Richard von Weizsäcker, “Address to the *Bundestag*,” p. 263.

Appendix

A. Questionnaire

Eine kürzliche Umfrage des Instituts Emnid ergab, dass über die Hälfte der deutschen Jugendlichen zwischen 14 und 16 Jahren mit dem Begriff Holocaust nichts anfangen können. Wie erklärst Du Dir dieses Ergebnis? Woran könnte das liegen?

Glaubst Du, dass Du über den Holocaust und die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden ausreichend Bescheid weißt?

Woher hast Du Dein Wissen über den Holocaust (Judenverfolgung)?

hauptsächlich aus dem Fernsehen und aus Filmen

hauptsächlich aus dem Geschichtsunterricht

hauptsächlich aus Gesprächen mit Eltern, Großeltern, etc.

hauptsächlich aus Büchern

hauptsächlich aus anderen Quellen:

Welche der obenstehenden "Wissensquellen" hältst Du für besonders zuverlässig? Warum?

Gibt es Bücher, Filme oder Dokumentationen zu dem Thema, die dich besonders beeindruckt haben? Welche sind das? Welche haben den größten Eindruck auf Dich gemacht und warum?

Wie hat Dir Dein Geschichtsunterricht zu dem Thema gefallen?

war langweilig

geht so

ganz gut

war total interessant

andere Eindrücke:

Hast Du noch Fragen zum Nationalsozialismus und der Judenverfolgung, die im Unterricht nicht unbedingt zur Sprache gekommen sind?

Erinnerst Du Dich noch an das Kapitel "Judenverfolgung" in Deinem Geschichtsbuch? An welche Stellen kannst Du Dich besonders erinnern und warum?

an Bilder

an persönliche Geschichten

an den Text selber

Wie gut haben diese unterschiedlichen Arten von Quellen und Textarten Deine Meinung nach den Holocaust wiedergegeben? War Dein Geschichtsbuch insgesamt interessant?

Kannst Du Dich noch an Hausaufgaben oder Tests zu dem Thema erinnern? Welche Aufgaben hat Dein Lehrer oder Deine Lehrerin Dir gestellt? Nenne bitte einige Beispiele.

Waren diese Aufgaben

sehr schwierig

langweilig

einfach

andere Eindrücke:

Waren bei dem Thema Holocaust und Judenverfolgung Referate, Projektarbeit und Gruppenarbeit Bestandteil des Unterrichts? Welche Art von Unterricht zu diesem Thema fandest Du am interessantesten und warum?

wenn der Lehrer oder die Lehrerin erzählt haben

wenn wir Stellen aus dem Schulbuch gelesen und besprochen haben

Projektarbeit

Filme

Referate

Besuch eines Museums oder einer Gedenkstätte

andere Unterrichtsformen:

Von welcher Unterrichtsart sollte es mehr geben? Und warum?

Stelle Dir vor, Du wärst Geschichtslehrer und müsstest in Deiner Klasse Geschichtsunterricht zum Thema Holocaust geben. Wie würdest Du das machen? Welche Unterrichtsmethoden würdest Du benutzen? Was und worüber sollten Deine Schüler vor allem lernen?

Hast Du Dich nach dem Unterricht über die Judenverfolgung mehr oder weniger für das Thema interessiert?

English Translation

A recent survey conducted by the polling operation Emnid has shown that more than half of German adolescents between the ages of 14 and 16 do not know the term "Holocaust." How do you explain this result? Name some possible reasons for it.

Do you think that you know enough about the Holocaust and the persecution and murder of the European Jews?

Which sources taught you most about the Holocaust?

mainly TV shows and movies

mainly the history lesson

mainly conversations with parents, grand-parents etc.

mainly books

mainly other sources (please explain):

Which of the above sources do you consider especially reliable? Why?

Are there books, movies or documentaries about the topic that impressed you in particular? What are they? Which ones left the biggest impression on you and why?

How did you like your history lesson about the Holocaust? It was

boring

so so

pretty good

totally interesting

other impressions (please explain)

Do you still have questions about National Socialism or the Holocaust which your history lesson did not address?

Do you still remember the chapter on the Holocaust in your history textbook? Which parts do you remember particularly and why?

pictures

personal stories

the text itself

In your opinion, how did these various forms of media represent the Holocaust? Was your history textbook interesting?

Do you still remember homework or tests for this topic? What questions did your teacher ask you? Please name some examples.

How difficult were these questions?

very difficult

boring

easy

other impressions (please specify):

Did the teaching unit on the Holocaust include reports, project work and group work? Which teaching method did you find most interesting and why?

when the teacher lectured

when we read and discussed parts of the textbook

project work

movies

reports

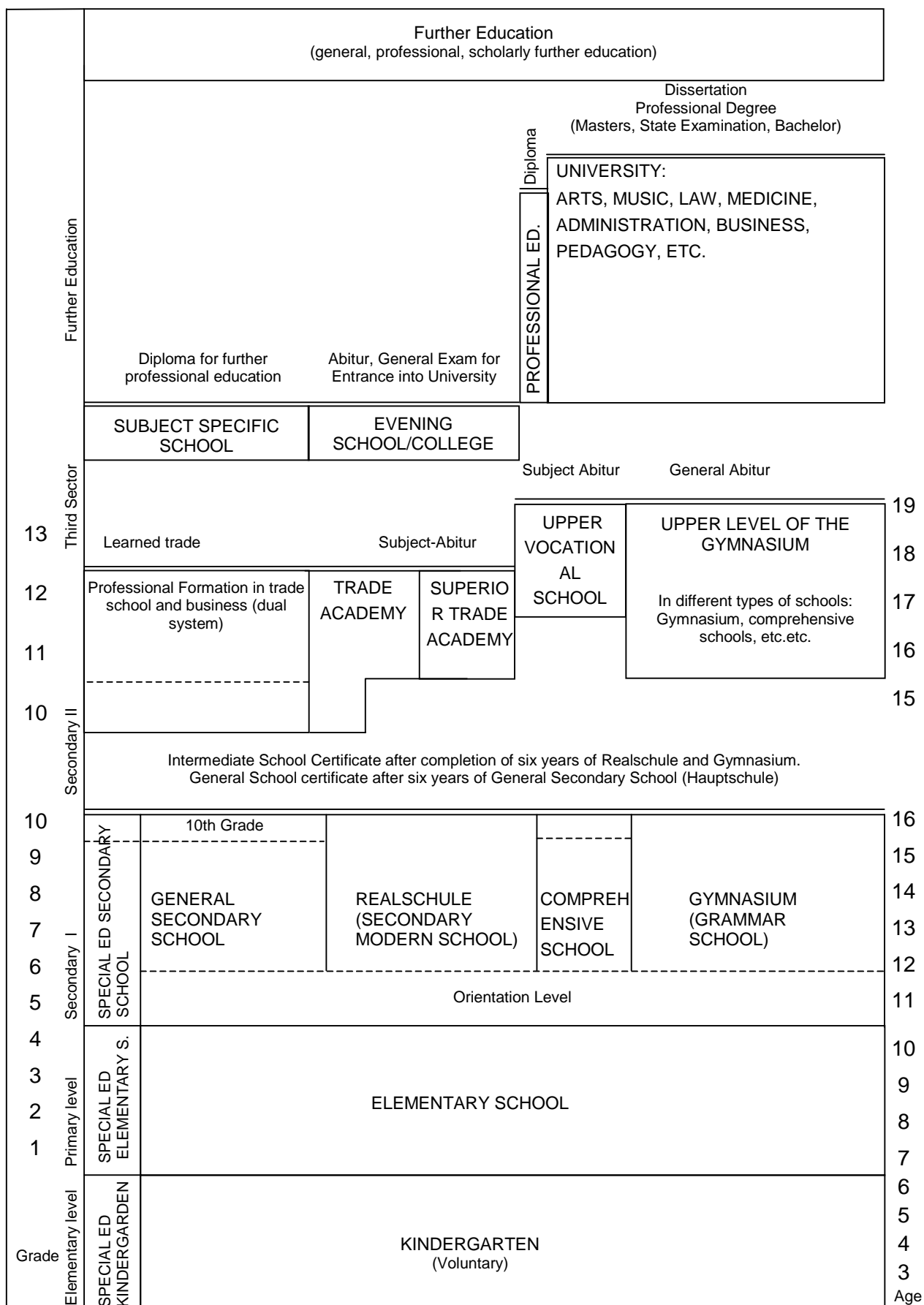
visits to museums or memorials

Which teaching methods should be employed more often and why?

Imagine that you are a history teacher and you have to plan and conduct a lesson on the Holocaust. How would you do that? What teaching methods would you use? What should your students learn especially?

After your teacher had completed the unit on the Holocaust, were you more or less interested in the topic than before learning about it in school?

B. Basic Structure of the Education System in Germany



C. Interview with Pfarrer Johannes Sonnenschein, Ahaus, March 2001.

Since many of my interviewees, both teachers and students, repeatedly referred to *Pfarrer Johannes Sonnenschein's* visits to their history classes, I decided to send him a questionnaire asking him about his experience with Holocaust education in both *Ahauser Gymnasien*. As a young cleric, *Pfarrer* Sonnenschein had been incarcerated in the Bavarian concentration camp Dachau. He is now retired, lives in Ahaus, and shares his experiences in the camp with adolescents in schools, with youth group leaders, and at church gatherings. Unfortunately, I did not think to interview him during my stay in Ahaus in January 2001. I received his answers in late March, so that I was not able to include them in one of my thesis chapters. I do think, however, that his views give a valuable perspective of Holocaust education in Ahaus. Sonnenschein argues that adolescents are not ignorant and not irresponsible and, he says, if they do not know enough about the Holocaust it is not their own fault. He seems very optimistic about Germany's young as well as about their teachers. His insightful comments thus corroborate my findings.

Author: Do you still remember particular situations, in which you discussed your experiences at Dachau with students and teachers? Did students have particular reactions to your stories? Did they ask surprising questions?

Sonnenschein: Many students cannot imagine the arbitrariness of the dictatorship. Questions such as "Why did the Germans let this happen? Why did they not demonstrate against the Nazis?" show this. Adolescents admit that they would not been able to deal with the misery in a concentration camp. They often ask me: "Did you never consider suicide?"

Author: What do you feel when you stand in front of a class of adolescents to tell them about your personal experiences at Dachau? Are you irritated when teenagers make insensitive or ignorant comments?

Sonnenschein: I don't remember ever having heard an insensitive comment. On the contrary, I experienced all students as very interested and extremely inquisitive. They thought that my accounts were credible and were always very impressed with what I told them. Since their ignorance is not their own fault, I don't have any reason to be irritated by it.

Author: What objectives do you pursue during your visits in schools?

Sonnenschein: Depending on whether I spoke in a Religious Education class or during a History lesson I wanted to encourage students to live their lives as a service to God, to stay loyal to Christ and to trust in God or [in the history lesson] I wanted to warn them of fanatics, racism, of political "rat catchers." I would tell them: "Do not trust every spirit, but determine whether or not it stems from God."

Author: What is your opinion of adolescents in Ahaus and Germany in general? Do you think that adolescents responsibly handle the German past? Or have you met teenagers with racist attitudes? Do you think that adolescents know enough about National Socialism and the Holocaust? Could one improve Holocaust education in schools? How?

Sonnenschein: Up to date there has been no right-extremism in Ahaus. Teenagers experience adults who act either responsibly or irresponsibly and indifferently, and are influenced by this behavior. It is desirable, although that may be difficult, to treat the topic in the history lesson in more depth and more elaborately. There is not enough time, however; in particular, one would need experts to treat the subject: qualified pedagogues, who are also trained in political science, sociology, and theology.

Author: What questions do adolescents ask you most often?

Sonnenschein: Why did National Socialism have such a massive following? Why did the church not fight more actively against National Socialist ideology?

Author: How do teachers react to your visits?

Sonnenschein: Teachers participate actively, they are very interested in what I have to say and ask me if they can record my accounts on tapes. One female teacher

said: "Today I learned a lot that I didn't know before." Oftentimes, I am asked to return in the following year. The faculty of one *Gymnasium* asked me to give a special evening lecture.

Author: If you were to decide how German schools should teach the Holocaust, what would you say? Which teaching methods should teachers use in your opinion? Which objectives should the lesson pursue?

Sonnenschein: Teachers must be better trained. The school library should have more literature on the topic. Teachers should take students to visits to concentration camp memorials. As I already said, there should be more time in the history curriculum to teach the subject in more depth.

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