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Marginalisation through commemoration: Trends and practices in Holocaust education in the United Kingdom

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This provocation reflects on trends in Holocaust education in the UK. It argues that an emphasis on cultivating memory means much teaching and learning about the Holocaust is commemorative rather than educational. In this pursuit it forwards five theses about the current condition of much teaching and learning about the Holocaust.

KEYWORDS Holocaust, Holocaust memory, Holocaust education, commemoration

According to the Dutch novelist and philosopher of history, Eelco Runia, ‘the prime historical phenomenon of our time’ is ‘the desire to commemorate’. As Runia notes, this impulse is made manifest in our cultures through multifarious means – from dark tourism to ‘monumentomania’ – to such an extent that one might say ‘we overindulge in commemoration without ever being satisfied by it’. What is telling and lamentable for Runia is how historians position themselves in relation to this predilection: ‘the discipline of history’, he argues, may be ‘pervaded with the desire to commemorate, but the infected historians hardly, if ever, commemorate the things they write about’. Accordingly, Runia opines that ‘the discipline is in the grip of a phenomenon it doesn’t quite understand’, for though ‘commemoration is all over the place’ it ‘is never taken as seriously as it should be’.¹

In this short piece, I wish to suggest that Runia’s diagnosis has applicability to the so-called ‘field’ of Holocaust education in the UK. Like commemoration, Holocaust education has also become a powerful and pervasive presence in contemporary society, used to justify and legitimate a range of social, political, and

¹ E. Runia, ‘Burying the Dead, Creating the Past,’ *History and Theory*, 46.3 (2007), 314–15.

cultural activity. It has also garnered critique from historians and scholars, though frequently commentary has been limited to sweeping generalities and presumptions about what Holocaust education is and does. At the same time Holocaust education has – in many quarters – itself become a tool for commemorative memory, and thus become part of the very phenomenon that Runia describes. If these are all good reasons to re-theorise Holocaust education, Runia also provides a prospective template for starting this process through his ‘ten theses about the desire to commemorate’.² I intend to follow this format and forward a more modest set of five provocative theses about current trends in Holocaust education. As I will show, these all work towards my core contention that present trajectories are actually contributing to a marginalisation of history.

I

Holocaust education, like commemoration, is ‘all over the place’ – both in the sense of its prevalence, and in terms of the general condition of the field.

Given the institutional position of Holocaust education, its political backing, and the various organisations which promote its practice (including my own employers), this statement may well seem nonsensical: on appearance, the field is extensive, organised, and taken with due seriousness. To be sure there is truth in this image. But there is distortion – not least because there is a not inconsiderable distance between how Holocaust education is perceived and understood by its champions and lobbyists, and how it is practised by teachers and experienced by school students. Furthermore, the field of Holocaust education and its proponents in cultural and political spheres must also accept partial responsibility for the ‘yawning gulf between popular understanding of this history and current scholarship on the subject’.³ Indeed, it is because of this reality that Holocaust education sticks in the craw of many historians.

As a body of practice, the majority of those engaged in Holocaust education ascribe to the pedagogical principles of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). In this respect, one would be hard pressed to suggest that Holocaust education is in the disarray which ‘all over the place’ implies; on the contrary, it would appear there is broad consensus. Yet whilst the IHRA principles have certainly acquired normative status, this has not necessarily translated into coherence in teaching practices or necessarily cultivated deep learning among students. This much can be seen by the empirical research conducted at University College London into teaching the Holocaust and students’ knowledge and understanding about it.⁴ The picture painted by that research is one where teaching practices are impeded by severe shortcomings, and students are beset by absent

² Runia, 314–15.

³ D. Cesarani, *Final Solution: The Fate of the Jews, 1933–1949* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), xxv.

⁴ A. Pettigrew et al., *Teaching the Holocaust in English Secondary Schools: An Empirical Study of National Trends, Perspectives and Practice* (London: Institute of Education, 2009); S. Foster et al., *What Do Students Know and Understand about the Holocaust? Evidence from English Secondary Schools* (London: UCL, 2016).

knowledge, misconceptions, and elemental misunderstandings. There are, of course, a number of reasons for this. Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that these realities themselves say something about the overall state of Holocaust education.

II

Holocaust education has become the key instrument in the creation of cultural memories, without due consideration of what connects and what separates educational and mnemonic activities.

Education and memory have a complex, nuanced, and multifaceted relationship. Sadly, this is often eschewed from dominant discourses around Holocaust education and Holocaust memory. Rather than recognise that education and memory are themselves conceptual frames and real-world enterprises whose constituent parts – teaching, learning, and remembering – are themselves multidimensional processes, it is often the case that statesmen, lobbyists, and even some educators recourse to sweeping generalisations and empirically unsubstantiated claims that education perpetuates memory.

This trend, whereby Holocaust education has been ‘increasingly performing memory’ has seen it develop ritual overtones.⁵ Accordingly, young people are expected to fulfil an inherent duty to the dead by remembering them, rehumanising them, and making solemn pledges to ‘Never Forget’ and ‘Never Again’. Moreover, since ritual requires a canonical version of the past, the space in which students can engage in independent thought is necessarily reduced in favour of transmitting a codified narrative. As commemoration demands consensus, encouraging young people to engage critically with cultural memories is neither a concern nor a priority.

III

To enable the performance of memory, Holocaust education storifies the events it seeks to refer to.

In his essay, Runia argues that the ‘poles’ of ‘diverging approaches to the past’ should be understood as being not between history and memory, but history and commemoration. For Runia, commemoration is an age-old exercise in ‘self-exploration’: one which is theoretically concerned with self-confrontation, but today invariably leads to the reinforcement and celebration of idealised identities. As such, commemoration seeks to domesticate the traumatic or sublime historical event by creating distance and difference, since ‘the more we commemorate what we did, the more we transform ourselves into people who did not do it’.⁶

⁵ A. Pearce, ‘An Emerging “Holocaust Memorial Problem”? The Condition of Holocaust Culture in Britain,’ *The Journal of Holocaust Research*, 33.2 (2019), 117–37. See also C. Pennell, ‘Taught to Remember? British Youth and First World War Battlefield Centenary Tours,’ *Cultural Trends*, 27.2 (2018), 83–98.

⁶ Runia, 316, 320.

In formal and informal educational settings, Holocaust history is often cast in monochrome tones. Individuals, communities, and societies who inhabited the world of the Holocaust become *dramatis personae*, posited into clearly demarcated groupings of victim, perpetrator, bystander, or rescuer, to the extent that their specific histories are either erased completely or else selectively represented. Furthermore, research has suggested that students conceive of the Holocaust ‘story’ as being abstracted from time and space, and instead simplified to centre on Hitler and the Nazis killing Jews (and others) on account of their difference.⁷

If this reflects an impulse to bring order to bear on the contingency of historical events, to make the fundamentally nonsensical aspects of continental genocide more intelligible so as to make sense and make meaning, they nonetheless constitute a form of domestication. And, critically, this domesticated story of the Holocaust is one that obviates violence and horror, and bifurcates dilemmas and dichotomies.⁸

This, as Frank Ankersmit has shown us, is symptomatic of commemorative practice wherein history is decontextualised in order to be *re*-contextualised.⁹ It is a process which enables the past to be constructed in ways that allow for progressive understandings of temporality to be retained and, therefore, ideas of humanity’s capacity to ultimately redeem itself to be maintained. Such modernist understandings of history are insufficient for meeting the challenges brought forth by genocidal histories.

IV

The stories proffered by and through Holocaust education are pragmatic and utilitarian. This has deleterious effects for knowledge and understandings of what history is.

Underlying much of what has been discussed so far are particular understandings of what history is and what it is for. We know, for instance, that when covering the subject, teachers overwhelmingly pursue broad civic aims like developing ‘an understanding of the roots and ramifications of prejudice, racism and stereotyping’ and students’ learning ‘the lessons of the Holocaust...to ensure that a similar human atrocity never happens again’.¹⁰ We also know that the vast majority of young people, even after studying the Holocaust, exhibits significant holes in substantive historical knowledge and understanding and remain largely oblivious to some of the core causal factors for the extermination of Europe’s Jews.

There is not a simple relationship between teaching practices and students’ learning. Knowledge is more complex than that. Crucially, since knowledge is culturally situated, the condition of young people’s awareness and depth of their understanding reflects wider socio-cultural approaches to the Holocaust and its memory. If the presentist approach towards much teaching, learning, and remembering the

⁷ Foster et al., 37–69.

⁸ D. Stone, ‘The Domestication of Violence: Forging a Collective Memory of the Holocaust in Britain, 1945–6,’ *Patterns of Prejudice*, 33.2 (1999), 13–29.

⁹ F.R. Ankersmit, *Historical Representation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 165.

¹⁰ Pettigrew, 76.

Holocaust duly raises significant questions about its epistemological consequences, it equally suggests that what much educational and mnemonic practice is actually doing is constructing a ‘practical or useful past’ – not a historical one. As Michael Oakeshott explains, the practical past is not forged from disciplinary investigation or ‘the conclusion of a critical enquiry’; it is ‘the present contents of a vast storehouse into which time continuously empties the lives, the utterances, the achievements and the sufferings of mankind’. Furthermore, through this very process, what is past is ‘transformed into fables, relics rather than survivals, icons not informative pictures’.¹¹ The predilection for Holocaust ‘lessons’ among politicians and educators, as caliginous as they may be, thus reveals a willingness to eschew history – or, at least, historical enquiry – for post facto imaginings of what history is presumed to mean.

V

Holocaust education needs to be better calibrated for ‘pedagogic memory-work’.¹²

My final thesis is part prognosis, part prescription. Whilst my remarks have been unavoidably general – and thus need to be viewed against examples of very effective educational approaches – I feel it nevertheless holds that the prevailing winds of Holocaust education are marginalising historical actuality. Given the research findings that we have, and in light of the way many Holocaust education programmes are set up, it seems hard to refute the primacy being placed on commemoration and the reality that this is having concomitant effects on what is known and understood.

Yet as much as this involves the marginalisation of historical content, it also entails the marginalisation of what this history amounts to and its elemental essence. After all, at its reducible core genocide is about human atrocity and learning about this is neither comfortable nor pleasant. But accommodating this reality into educational initiatives presses against what Runia calls our contemporary ‘soft-headed brand of commemoration’.¹³

Some twenty years ago, Nicholas Kinloch forcefully critiqued how much teaching about the Holocaust failed to ‘start and end with what happened and why; with the Shoah as history’.¹⁴ Kinloch’s concerns still largely hold, but they have been amplified by what has taken place in the interim. Over the past two decades, Holocaust education has become a global enterprise, endorsed by national governments around the world, and instituted into public life through such initiatives as Britain’s Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD). Holocaust memory, meanwhile, is frequently employed to legitimise political agendas and/or to critique them. In sum,

¹¹ M. Oakeshott, *On History and Other Essays* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund Inc., 1999), 36, 38, 43.

¹² A. Pearce, ‘Introduction: Education, Remembrance and the Holocaust: Towards Pedagogic Memory-Work,’ in *Remembering the Holocaust in Educational Settings*, ed. Andy Pearce (New York: Routledge, 2018), 11–13.

¹³ Runia, 317.

¹⁴ N. Kinloch, ‘Review: Learning about the Holocaust: Moral or Historical Question?’, *Teaching History*, 93 (1998), 44–6.

the Holocaust has a presence in social, cultural, and political life hitherto unseen, with little indication that this will abate any time soon. This places new responsibilities on how the Holocaust is taught, learnt, and remembered.

Pedagogic memory-work involves a more sophisticated way of understanding the nexus between education and remembrance, more informed awareness of what teaching and learning (at all levels) entails, and a greater appreciation of the forms and functions of cultural remembrance. Educating for pedagogic memory-work is more than just the provision of skills or competencies; historical knowledge – however ‘dirty’ and unfashionable the word currently is – is essential too, as is an acceptance of what distinguishes history from memory, and memory from commemoration. A pedagogic focus on remembering has the potential to be educative as a means of enhancing the critical consciousness of our contemporary and future culture and society. Given the challenges around us, working towards such ends is more imperative than ever.

Notes on contributor

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