

Review of Cowan P. and Maitles H. 2017. *Understanding and Teaching Holocaust Education*. London: Sage Publication 184 pp, £25.99 (paperback) ISBN 978-1-4739-1934-1

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This book should be read by anyone involved or interested in Holocaust education. The two authors have researched into and written about Holocaust education for over two decades. They are explicit that this is not “a practical guide” (142), mercifully refraining from easy quick answers based on “this worked for me” arguments; instead they set out “to broaden and develop teachers’ and educators’ understanding of the key issues in Holocaust Education” (192). The book is a professional dialogue: you are forced to reflect on your own ideas and assumptions, whilst, at times, you will also find yourself arguing with the authors. What more can you ask of a book on education?

The book has a clear structure: the 11 chapters consider issues as diverse as how to define the Holocaust and the impact of site visits. There are comments on the present day concerns in Holocaust education, such as how will the pedagogy change when there are no living survivors? Though writing in a Scottish context, Cowan and Maitles acknowledge the Prime Minister’s Commission Report (2015) *Britain’s Promise to Remember*, but do not examine how this report has set the agenda for filming survivor testimony and the relationship between remembrance and education over the last two years, and for the foreseeable future.

There is much to praise in the book; most important is their argument that education in itself is “not a panacea for racism or something that automatically instils or creates responsible and democratic citizenship” (143). Writing from a background in Citizenship education, the authors argue that if study of the Holocaust is to produce the desired outcome of socially aware citizens, then understanding of the Holocaust must develop within a Human Rights framework. They are explicit that it is essential that a range of disciplines are involved in helping students to understand the Holocaust. This multidisciplinary approach is a theme that appears throughout the book. What is refreshing is that throughout the book they emphasise the importance of substantive knowledge of the events of the Holocaust. They are critical of approaches that lack the “assurance of a historical foundation” (3) as “without this [substantive knowledge of the Holocaust] all forms of remembrance lack meaning and truth” (58) or the students engage “in a sensory, emotional experience rather than an educational one” (134). They also write about the importance of students using the term antisemitism to describe the hatred of Jews, rather than collapsing it into the more general concept of racism.

There are a number of areas where I do find myself in disagreement with the authors. One is over the definition of the Holocaust. They suggest a definition that included Jews as “the major victims of the Holocaust...alongside the genocide of the Roma and Sinti and the systematic murder of the disabled”

(7), between 1933 and 1945. This definition does imply that genocide of the Jews was a constant aim of the Nazi regime. This is despite Cesarani's (2016) point that Nazi policy towards the Jews during the 1930s was not consistently aimed at mass murder and, even up until 1941, the preferred policy towards the Jews was removal and forced migration.

I am also unconvinced by the authors' selection of victim groups. The Nazis did persecute a range of victim groups, but they did so for diverse reasons, in different ways and at different times. This important point is often lost in Holocaust education. Research carried out by the Centre for Holocaust Education showed that as students go through secondary education they add different groups to their understanding of Holocaust victims. They start with Jews as the victims, then generally add gay men, the disabled and then Roma and Sinti to their definitions. However this does not go hand in hand with a better understanding of the ways in which these groups were persecuted or even why the Nazis chose to persecute the various groups. Consequently, students are left with a vague sense of these groups as being in some way "different" (Foster et al 2016) rather than understanding that the Jews were persecuted because they were seen as an existential threat to Germany. If we are to respect the range of victims of the Nazis we need to be precise about the reasons different groups were persecuted and the ways in which this occurred.

The authors frame their approach as "learning about" and "learning from" the Holocaust. Whilst this mirrors the traditional formulation used in Religious Education teaching in England, it does not take into account that people come to study the Holocaust with their attitudes already formed. The Holocaust did not teach me to oppose racism, I learnt to do that from my left wing parents, in arguments on the school bus and protesting in the late 1970s. That brings us back to Cowan and Maitles' conclusion that we must view issues like this through Human Rights, a shared humanity and Citizenship: I won't disagree with that.

References

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