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HOLOCAUST AND GENOCIDE LITERACY IN CURRICULA, TEXTBOOKS AND PUPILS' ESSAYS

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Curricula and textbooks play a special role in guiding young people's understandings of the past, especially when it comes to events that defy explanation, such as those involving extreme violence and mass atrocities. However, informal media provide an ever-growing source of historical knowledge and understanding, which partly supplant formal educational materials and thereby raise two questions: What explanations of the Holocaust and mass atrocities do young people acquire before they engage in formal learning? And do curricula and textbooks adequately respond to gaps in intelligibility and coherency?

Education about the Holocaust has been a core requirement of educational policy not least since the Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust in 2000 and the Ministerial Declaration of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance in 2020, together with policy papers from a number of international organisations. These guidelines define awareness, historical knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust as prerequisites for the promotion of human rights and the prevention of future mass atrocities or genocides. This policy brief complements existing guidelines by drawing attention to specific ways in which authors of curricula and textbooks articulate understandings of these events. More specifically, it also exposes some of the challenges facing formal educational media by showing how learners articulate understandings of these events. If mass atrocities have posed an epistemological challenge to specialists of history for several decades, how can we expect young people to understand, explain and appraise them?

GENOCIDES IN EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS

While extreme violence and atrocity crimes are taught throughout Europe, they are subject to variable understandings and explanations at different levels of the curriculum, to national and regional differences, and largely exclude knowledge of non-European history. The relative plausibility of explanations of the Holocaust and other genocides or mass atrocities is illustrated below with examples taken from official state curricula and textbooks valid or in use in 2015 and 2016 and pupils' writings from the same period.

The Sample

This policy brief is based on the findings of a report by the Leibniz Institute for Educational Media | Georg Eckert Institute called 'Explaining the Holocaust and Genocide in Contemporary Curricula, Textbooks and in Pupils' Writings in Europe'. The report drew on summaries of forty-three official curricula, forty-four textbooks and 748 pupils' essays from twenty-two countries. It assesses the ways in which explanations of the Holocaust and other mass atrocities are articulated in curricula and textbooks as well as in essays written by fifteen-year-old school pupils largely before they engage in formal learning on that topic.

Mass atrocities before and after 1945

Teaching about the Holocaust is recognised as a central topic in schools throughout Europe, and features in history and social sciences curricula, in history textbooks and in pupils' writings in all countries. Teaching about other atrocities is less consistently represented in educational materials. While atrocities which occurred after 1945 are addressed in textbooks and by pupils in most European countries, these topics are addressed in less than a quarter of curricula (see Map). This finding indicates certain incongruencies within European curricula:

- Explanations of the Holocaust are not complemented by similarly thorough explanations of post-1945 atrocities in curricula and teaching materials.
- The events addressed in curricula are more Eurocentric than those addressed in textbooks and by pupils.
- The thematic foci of curricula are not in tune with those found in textbooks and pupils' writings.

Genocide studies and non-European atrocities in state curricula

Although two-thirds of curricula in the sample stipulate education about genocides or comparative genocide studies in general, they do not indicate either specific events or the scope, approach or goals of this field of study. Likewise, curricula, textbooks and pupils' writings do not systematically address non-European atrocity crimes such as those which took place in Latin America, although some address atrocity crimes in Africa and the Asia-Pacific region.

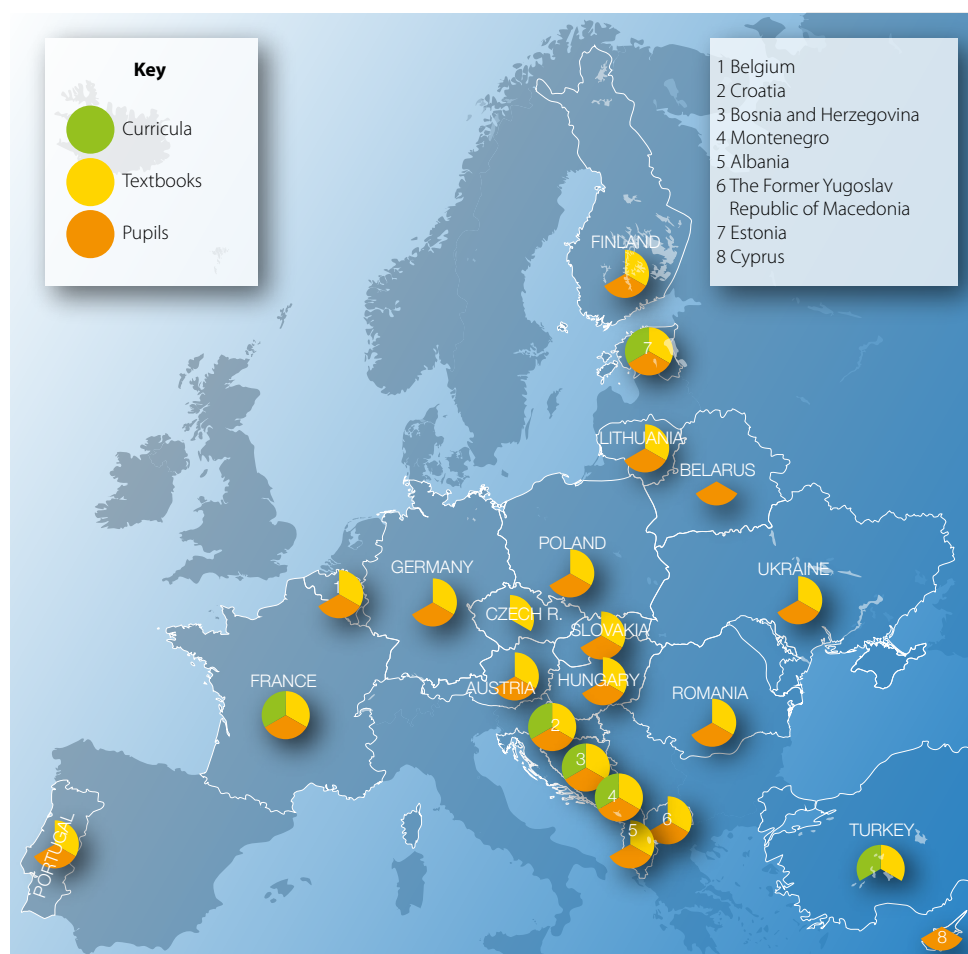
Comparisons of atrocities in textbooks

Textbooks generally compare different atrocity crimes in three ways: by allusion, when images of events or refe-

rences to the Soviet and National Socialist occupations are juxtaposed; politically, when authors explain atrocities conjointly as the responsibility of totalitarian or dictatorial state systems, most often in opposition to democracies; or quantitatively, when one atrocity is described as 'more well-known' than another or the 'most famous' or 'most horrific'.

Temporal and spatial horizons in textbooks

Textbooks contextualise atrocity crimes with dates which imply political and military interpretative frameworks, corresponding to the National Socialist regime from 1933 to 1945 or to the course of the Second World War from 1939 to 1945 respectively. By contrast, maps in textbooks depicting the effects of the Holocaust focus only on the period in which killing was most intense, from 1942 to 1944. Textbooks also depict atrocity crimes spatially within national frameworks and corresponding political regimes. Maps of Europe printed in textbooks are revealing in this respect because they depict either military manoeuvres across the continent during the Second World War or the sites of concentration and extermination camps used to implement the Holocaust. These temporal and spatial horizons are short-term and confined to political and military themes rather than long-term social and historical themes.



MAP – REFERENCE TO CONTEMPORARY ATROCITIES

Textbook explanations versus pupils' explanations of the Holocaust

While textbooks address only a narrow range of atrocity crimes but a wide range of explanations of their causes and effects, pupils discuss a wide range of atrocity crimes, but focus mainly on death and techniques of killing rather than on multiple forms and stages of persecution. Moreover, whereas curricula and textbooks define the meaning of the Holocaust inclusively as the persecution of both Jews and other groups (including Roma and Sinti, political dissenters, handicapped people and homosexuals), almost all pupils' essays adopt an exclusive understanding of the Holocaust by focusing on the persecution of Jews alone. In relation to this exclusive understanding of the Holocaust, pupils recognise protagonists in confrontation as 'peoples', 'groups', 'nations' or 'ethnicities' whom they qualify in racial and religious terms.

Intentionalism

Most pupils, but also many textbook authors, explain atrocity crimes primarily as the consequence of individual agency in terms of responsibility and motivation, and ascribe this agency to either inanimate national agents (personification) or human agents (personalisation). In short, intentionalist explanations outweigh structuralist or contingent explanations in educational materials.

Temporal and spatial horizons in pupils' writings

By associating genocides or mass atrocities with episodic events involving killing, pupils most frequently explain techniques of killing or immediate causes of death without acknowledging historical and political causal contexts. A large proportion of pupils' essays similarly make no reference to places or spaces in which atrocities occurred and are therefore both atemporal and largely nonspatial. However, among those who do situate atrocities in specific times and places, the common tendency is to name specific local sites in combination with an unspecific temporal framework. Moreover, pupils' essays often explain persecution by adopting perpetrators' racial and religious classifications and their concomitant justifications. One Montenegrin pupil describes Jews as a 'resourceful race'; another pupil in Banja Luka claims that 'people have a need for revenge and this is why mass crimes occur'.

The organisation of ideas and attitudes in pupils' writings

Many young people write descriptive chronicles, lists of bullet points or statements with neither narrative connections nor arguments explaining relations between causes, means and effects. While some pupils simply list names of atrocities, others list causes as 'racial, national or religious'. Moreover, in their accounts of atrocities, pupils generally adopt one of three attitudes towards atrocity crimes: a neutral standpoint including statements of facts with minimal articulation of the relations between them; a

moral and affective standpoint expressing indignation; or an expression of ignorance or disbelief in the face of the scope and intensity of violence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Incorporating findings of recent studies

Curricula and textbooks should cover the Holocaust and also extreme violence and non-European atrocities before 1933 and after 1945 in line with recent findings in the field of comparative genocide studies.

Comparing events in textbooks

Most textbooks invite pupils to compare colonial rule and other examples of mass violence without having introduced them to the means and ends of comparison. Therefore we recommended the creation of teachers' guidelines and corresponding sections in textbooks which outline how to compare atrocity crimes worldwide with respect to similarities, differences and historical continuities and discontinuities. Additional comparative measures might include:

- avoiding visual allusions by explaining images and icons;
- exploring methods of comparison beyond allusive and quantitative comparisons;
- avoiding lumping together different events as consequences of 'totalitarianism' or 'dictatorship' by clarifying differences between types of political systems or leadership and by contextualising the totalitarian paradigm of explanation;
- using glossaries and sections explaining the historiographical and analytical concepts used to explain atrocity crimes. These may cover: the origins of analytical concepts, their historical semantics; distinctions between the terms Holocaust, catastrophe, genocide, race, ethnicity, extreme violence, ethnic cleansing and massacre.

Developing temporal and spatial contexts in curricula and textbooks

Textbooks and curricula mostly contextualise atrocity crimes within the periods 1933 to 1945 or 1939 to 1945 in combination with maps which imply political and military interpretative frameworks. We recommend the extension of temporal frameworks to encompass multiple causes and effects and long-term societal processes during which prejudice, stigmatisation, exclusion, humiliation, disenfranchisement and expropriation precede deportation and mass death via starvation, forced labour, experimentation and further systematic killing. There is an equal need to increase geographical precision by showing how atrocity crimes unfold geographically, specifying administrative regions and interstate relations, but also the human and societal effects of extreme violence and atrocities by depicting the forced migration or return of people in maps.

Developing local and informal learning opportunities in line with young people's horizons of learning

There is a need to incorporate pupils' preexisting ideas about the Holocaust and mass atrocities into the learning process by addressing existing knowledge and explanatory patterns (such as the inclination to adopt perpetrators' own racially and religiously prejudiced explanations of their motivations and their moral mindset), and introduce them to explanations of prejudice, ideology, racism, nationalism, antisemitism and economic interest.

Developing pupils' temporal and spatial horizons via writing

Pupils' writings generally adopt episodic, or atemporal and nonspatial horizons, organised on the page in lists, or with bullet points and arrows. We recommend that the range of exercises in textbooks be expanded beyond description, document analysis, commentary, comparison and empathy to include structured writing exercises about historical causes, circumstances, cumulative processes and contingencies of the Holocaust and atrocity crimes.

Multiple causes and effects

Pupils tend to apply intentionalist explanations of mass atrocities or to adopt perpetrators' own racially and religiously defined justifications of their acts (in the form of confrontations between ethnicities). It is therefore necessary to furnish curricula and textbooks with presentations of and exercises about a range of possible explanations comprising the impact of:

- multiple persecuting and victimised agents and collective action;
- multiple causes, including economic interests, ideological prejudice, psychological states, political and military interests and socially sanctioned norms;
- the interests of national groups, nationalism and social, political, legal and economic institutions.

RECOMMENDED READING

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