

Toward a Philosophy of Holocaust Education: Teaching Values without Imposing Agendas

Alexander Karn¹
Colgate University

I WONDER ABOUT THIS WORD—transformative—which has saturated the recent literature on educational theory.² As teachers, most of us hope to make a difference in the lives of our students, but whether we accomplish this with any regularity is often left unclear. With a topic like the Holocaust, the stakes are greatly raised. If we fail to reach our students on this subject, where extreme violence unfolded in an atmosphere of intense moral uncertainty, then what chance do we have of helping them recognize the urgency of such moral choices in their own lives? By submerging our students in the horrors of the Holocaust, do we risk hardening them against the moral insights which can arise from historical contemplation?

To address these questions, I want to start with an anecdote from the classroom, since much of my thinking here follows from this incident. This exchange occurred in 2008, as I was winding down my first-ever undergraduate course on the Holocaust. Coming to the end of a long unit on the roles of perpetrators, victims, and bystanders, I evidently surprised a few students when I moved the discussion to the topic of Darfur. Drawing on several scenes from Claude Lanzmann's film, *Shoah* (1985), I asked students whether, or to what extent, they felt implicated in the violence emanating from Khartoum. Does our passivity create an atmosphere in which the killing is condoned? Have some of us adopted a stance similar

to the one taken by Germans, who saw their Jewish neighbors disappearing after *Kristallnacht* and said nothing? Are we, perhaps, walking in the footsteps of some Poles, who lived alongside the extermination camps, saw smoke and ash rising from the crematoria, but accepted the killing without grief?

Students initially met my questions with silence. After a long pause, a handful weighed in, insisting they were not responsible for the violence in Darfur and that it was unfair for me to foist this kind of guilt on them. "It's not our country," one student argued. "It's not for us to decide," another maintained.

Pressing harder, I asked the class to consider whether the Holocaust required us to rethink conventional notions of responsibility. One student, a senior who had performed exceedingly well in the course, suggested that learning about the Holocaust had been interesting and informative, but not an exercise which touched his core values or changed, as he put it, "the person I have always been."

I went home that evening feeling dejected, even as I tried to console myself with the thought that the exchange over Darfur had been something authentic. It bothered me that I had no reply for the last student, who had been so resolutely unbothered by my questions concerning our current ethical responsibilities. What had prevented me from overcoming his resistance to an emotional and transformative encounter with the material? Was I wrong to suggest a connection between the world of the Lager and the contemporary world of politics and conflict? How does one elaborate in a single semester a coherent philosophy of Holocaust education which transmits the facts, accounts for controversial issues, teaches the fundamentals of historical methodology, and highlights the moral dimensions of this terrible tragedy without introducing false and/or superficial analogies?

The Place of the Holocaust in the Liberal Arts

In the liberal arts today, the Holocaust requires no special justification as a topic for study. Few academics doubt the importance of the Holocaust as a historical subject or question its relevance for contemporary society. This is an event, as Thomas Fallace notes, which has "impacted the way foreign politics and international relations are conducted, [changed] the way modern warfare is conceived, and [shifted] the way in which ideas such as 'modernity' and 'rationality' are viewed."³ We ignore the lessons and legacies of the Holocaust at our own peril.

Forty years ago, however, this level of commitment to Holocaust education did not exist, nor did the sense of relevance highlighted by

Fallace. When the subject of the Holocaust did come up, it was usually treated as a footnote to the Second World War; it figured in that narrative as something dismal, irregular, and mostly incomprehensible. The trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961 pressed the Holocaust back into public view, but it was only in the second half of the 1970s, after NBC aired a highly popular mini-series on the subject (*Holocaust*, 1978), that college and university instructors began to offer specialized Holocaust courses on a regular basis.⁴ When they did, students rushed to enroll, often because they equated the subject matter with a novel approach to history that emphasized identity, emotion, and morality over memorization and recitation.

Though the topic no longer holds the same subversive appeal, Holocaust courses remain extremely popular with undergraduates today. These courses also tend to be seen as highly desirable by the instructors who staff them. In an article on Holocaust education in America, Stephen Haynes reports that courses on the Holocaust are almost universally taught by full-time faculty, more than fifty percent of them already at the rank of full professor. So, this is a topic to which both professors and students attach special prestige and importance. The Holocaust has attained canonical status, and its place in the liberal arts curriculum is rarely challenged today. Yet the current attitude toward Holocaust education seems to be one of reverence and due diligence without a great deal of sustained thinking regarding specific pedagogical aims. Among instructors, there is frequently an invocation which posits historical memory as a protection against new outbursts of genocidal violence, but Holocaust curricula, in general, offer little guidance as to what should be recalled, in what way(s), or toward what end(s). Of course, there are exceptions to this rule—and I have tried to engage some of that literature here—but as Fallace points out, Holocaust education in America is generally characterized by conflicting approaches, unclear objectives, and poorly conceived assessments of student learning.⁵

Holocaust History and the Risk of Indifference

Holocaust educators, especially those who claim that the subject has a special potential for transformative learning, cannot help feeling uneasy about this state of affairs. We know from at least one study that Holocaust courses, despite their appeal and prestige, routinely miss the mark in terms of student learning and intellectual development.⁶ Some of this clearly has to do with the quality and type of instruction being offered. In a survey of more than 200 colleges, Stephen Haynes found that Holocaust educators (particularly historians, who teach more than half of college-level courses on the topic) tend to be more rigid and traditional

in their pedagogy compared to their peers in other subject areas. Haynes writes, “There is probably no subject matter better suited to challenging students’ ingrained tendency to master knowledge passively. . . . Why, then, do [so] many university-level educators utilize pedagogies that challenge only students’ capacity for memorizing and recalling information?”⁷ Holocaust education should be more than an exercise in rote learning. Instead, teachers must challenge their students to receive their learning within an ethical framework, which means that educators must be ready to take their lesson plans outside the realm of moral and political neutrality. Unfortunately, as Haynes has shown, there is little evidence to suggest that Holocaust educators are implementing this kind of pedagogy.

Of course, students need to internalize the details of what happened in order to navigate effectively within the realms of politics and ethics. Consequently, the place of Rankean history (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*) ought to be secure in any Holocaust course. To take one example: students cannot properly comprehend the Holocaust and the evolution of the so-called “final solution” without delving into the details of the Wannsee Conference (1942).⁸ The Nazis’ extermination operation will not attain its full and proper proportions unless students can appreciate the intentions of the SS elite to kill every Jew in Europe (over 11 million was the official estimate), including those residing outside the Reich in neutral states and in unconquered/unoccupied territories (e.g., Great Britain, the U.S.S.R., Sweden, Switzerland, and Spain).

At the same time, students must be led to understand *why* specific events happened. For students to absorb the significance of Wannsee, they must also gain familiarity with the Madagascar Plan⁹ and the Evian Conference.¹⁰ In other words, students must be led to see a chain of events and decisions (and indecisions) which link the Nuremberg Rally in 1934 to the Munich Conference in 1938 to the killing operations which began at Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1942. They must be trained to see the conference at Wannsee as a pebble that generated a precise pattern of ripples on the surface of a pond whose edges were shaped by concrete historical circumstances. More than just a list of facts, history is a way of seeing and making connections between and among facts. While the question of objectivity pervades every historical topic to a greater or lesser extent, teaching the Holocaust entails an especially challenging encounter with ambiguity. We encounter a “gray zone”¹¹ which calls on us to make moral judgments while complicating and frustrating our ability to do so neatly or easily. Only in the context of the Nazi extermination camps, where human beings practiced a factory-like approach to mass murder, can the most pressing existential question—*Warum?* (why?)—understandably elicit the most thoroughly anti-historical response—*Hier ist kein warum*

(Here there is no why).¹² This conundrum—and not the claim that we can prevent future violence by studying its history—is what makes the Holocaust an essential topic for those in pursuit of a liberal education.

The point of rehearsing these issues is to emphasize a larger problem in the realm of Holocaust education concerning history and politics; that is, the dangers of their mingling as well as the risks of their not mingling.¹³ Educators have few problems accepting that history should strive toward objectivity, yet treating the Holocaust as something disconnected from contemporary politics and ideology seems irresponsible and even dangerous. Elie Wiesel highlighted this point in the report for the President's Holocaust Commission (1979) when he wrote of the need to study the Holocaust "for our own sake," yet his words require amplification.¹⁴ To explore what Wiesel meant, we should recall what he described as the risk of indifference. "Indifference to the victims," Wiesel wrote in the cover letter to the commission's report, "would result, inevitably, in indifference to ourselves." Given this risk, Holocaust education requires a two-fold commitment, one which follows history *back* to the causes of specific events and one which harnesses the past and projects it *forward* so that it enlarges the capacity of students to make (and keep) political and ethical commitments. This notion of bi-directionality (i.e., simultaneously moving backward and forward in time) must be at the center of everything we do as Holocaust educators, though it clearly invites complications into the classroom, which I will try to address below.

Holocaust History and the Problem of Activism

Before she died in 1990, the eminent historian Lucy Dawidowicz began to question what she saw as the rise of an "activist agenda" within Holocaust education.¹⁵ While conceding a potential link between historical truth and justice, Dawidowicz forcefully opposed Holocaust pedagogy that served, in her words, as "a vehicle for instructing [students] in civil disobedience and indoctrinating them with propaganda."¹⁶ Such instrumental approaches to the Holocaust, she argued, discouraged deep understanding by treating Nazi anti-Semitism as an example of a more general human tendency toward prejudice, bigotry, and social scapegoating. Employing "imprecise and tendentious analogies," too many Holocaust educators conducted their classes in a tradition of "peace education" which, according to Dawidowicz, encouraged lazy intellectual habits and shallow moralizing "inappropriate to the subject."¹⁷

Her critique of peace education, as one commentator noted, marks the culmination of Dawidowicz's "voyage away from the Left."¹⁸ At the same

time, her point about the distorting effects of sloppy comparisons speaks to one of the major debates within Holocaust studies. This debate, which revolves around the question of uniqueness, essentially divides Holocaust scholars into two points of view. In the first are scholars, like Dawidowicz, who see the Holocaust as a unique event whose comprehension is possible only within the strictest limits of contextualized inquiry. For these thinkers, there is no basis for comparing the Holocaust to other examples of large-scale violence or genocide. Dawidowicz maintained that teachers who approach the Holocaust through a comparative framework—e.g., through the lens of socio-psychological concepts like conformity and obedience—send their students down a path toward relativism by encouraging them to understand the mass murder of European Jews as a tragic example of peer pressure and out-grouping rather than as a concrete expression of “a cumulative tradition of hostility.”¹⁹ In other words, she worried that teachers guided by an activist agenda would approach Nazi anti-Semitism as an example of a more generalized social pathology rather than as a specific state policy and cultural pattern with a long history in the German-speaking lands.

Paul Levine expresses a similar concern in his essay, “From Archive to Classroom: Reflections on Teaching the History of the Holocaust in Different Countries.” Levine writes:

Particularly with the recent proliferation of interest in the subject, public and pedagogical discussion of the Holocaust has been characterized if not dominated by commentary on its vast and troubling *consequences* rather than by explications of its historical realities. Yet this rhetorical discourse dominated by memory is far too often a *move away* from the historical context and into empirical inaccuracy, misconceptions, and even mystifications.²⁰

Levine reminds us that there are no shortcuts to understanding between the past and present. This is particularly true when we confront the agonies of Holocaust victims. For example, it strains believability if we seek to establish unqualified parallels between the plight of European Jews after Wannsee and the experience of Muslim-Americans who have been exposed to prejudice since 9/11, although both scenarios offend and disturb us. On the one hand, the December 2010 arson attack against the Salman Al-Farisi Islamic Center in Corvallis, Oregon (following a “foiled terror attack” by a nineteen-year-old Muslim-American in the city of Portland), has a disturbing resonance for those who are familiar with the history of synagogue burnings in Nazi Germany.²¹ On the other hand, strong statements of condemnation by elected officials and members of the local community following the Corvallis mosque attack point to an altogether different context as compared to Nazi-era Germany.²² The same point

would apply to the attacks against synagogues in France in recent years²³ and the spate of fire-bombings in the 1990s that targeted refugee hostels in Germany.²⁴ All of this violence and intimidation targeting vulnerable minorities we rightly see as contemptible, but none of it unfolded in the context that produced Wannsee and Auschwitz. That the perpetrators of these more recent attacks have been pursued by the authorities, and in many instances arrested and prosecuted for their actions, reveals an essential difference between the current climate and the Nazi period, when Germans who victimized Jews did so with full expectation of impunity. We may feel pulled toward such comparisons as we attempt to develop in our students an empathic relationship to the past, but the problem with this kind of logic, as Deborah Lipstadt points out (echoing Dawidowicz), “is that it elides the differences between the Holocaust and all manner of inhumanities and injustices.”²⁵ Does this mean, then, that educators cannot use the Holocaust to teach values or to highlight the possibilities for injustice and violence where contemporary prejudices and bigotry still appear?

I argue the opposite. With respect to Holocaust education, there would be little purpose in trying to understand the evolution and operations of the death camps unless the horrors perpetrated and suffered there had some kind of universal implication. If the Holocaust did not point to what the Hungarian novelist Imre Kertész called “a general human potentiality in which we ourselves are included,”²⁶ then what business would we have training our eyes on its naked violence or the nakedness of its victims? Objectivity and particularity are rightly seen as the hallmarks of historical inquiry, but Holocaust history quickly devolves into obscenity unless we engage our emotions and political imaginations in a way that reveals the universal in the particular. A forensic approach to the subject—I mean an approach that maintains a clinical distance between the particularity of the past and the needs of the current moment—represents another kind of barbarism.

Philip Hallie, author of *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, hinted at something along these lines in the prelude to his study of righteous gentiles and the rescue of Jews (and others targeted by the Gestapo) in the French village of La Chambon. Reflecting on the genealogy of his project, Hallie writes:

Across all [my] studies, the pattern of the strong crushing the weak kept repeating and repeating itself, so that when I was not bitterly angry, I was bored at the repetition of the patterns of persecution. When I was not desiring to be cruel with the cruel, I was a monster—like, perhaps, many others around me—who could look upon torture and death without a shudder, and who therefore looked upon life without a belief in its preciousness. My study of evil incarnate had become a prison whose bars were my bitterness toward the violent, and whose walls were my indifference to slow murder.²⁷

To raise itself above what is merely obscene, Holocaust education must occupy a position between Hallie's two poles of bitterness and indifference. We must, therefore, move our endeavor into a domain where the stakes of comprehension are inherently ideological. To reach this balance, students must engage sources that move upward from the bedrock of historical facts onto the (admittedly) slippery slopes of present-day concerns.²⁸ Educators, for their part, must be ready to activate the consciences of students without loading inappropriate and unwanted guilt onto their shoulders. Finding a line between moralizing which "create[s] resistance in students because they feel they are being associated too much with the perpetrators"²⁹ and the arid pursuit of facts that heightens indifference is an urgent challenge for Holocaust educators. With all due respect to the scholars, like Dawidowicz, who have staked their tents in the uniqueness camp, Holocaust education must strive toward universals, otherwise philosopher Maurice Blanchot was right: "There is no reaching the disaster,"³⁰ and we should have nothing at all to say on the subject. There is no way of completely purging Holocaust history of the "agendas" which Dawidowicz scorned for their tendency to distort the truth. Whenever we fashion facts into evidence, there is a moral process at work, and deep engagement with the Holocaust will require the calibrations that serve as the foundation for normal politics. Unless we strive to inject that kind of relevance into our teaching, we are limited to the kind of storytelling which my high-achieving student found to be interesting and enjoyable, but not otherwise important to his development.

Of course, Wiesel was correct when he insisted that Holocaust educators must honor the victims, and we do that by committing ourselves to the highest standards of objectivity. Our commitment to objectivity is our best riposte to the deniers, minimizers, and revisionists who seize on postmodern skepticism to turn Holocaust history into a matter of opinion, conjecture, or theory. At the same time, we can teach the Holocaust for the benefit of the living. Certainly, we should take to heart Dawidowicz's warning about the dangers of imprecise analogies, but the Holocaust, even if it is *unlike* anything else in history, is nevertheless *about* the needs of those who study it. This makes Holocaust education an openly ideological enterprise insofar as any attempt to influence the future will be to a certain extent ideological. Unless the facts of Holocaust history are assimilated in a value system that allows (and urges) students to engage the challenges of an increasingly globalized society, our best efforts at explaining the past will have led our students into a dead end, where historical events can be described in the greatest detail, but nothing about them is especially meaningful.

History, Self-Understanding, and Values

In his slender, but also highly stimulating tract, *Why Read?*, Mark Edmundson condenses some of what I have sketched out here into a straightforward ethos. For Edmundson, a liberal arts education should “help students to live better.”³¹ Every course in every discipline ought to impel students toward a richer understanding of themselves and their world and, therefore, toward a more nuanced and more abundant palette of choices about how to proceed in life. Whenever and wherever it can, our pedagogy must highlight the pressing concerns of today and the “big” questions which concern truth, justice, the responsibilities and obligations of citizenship, and the possibilities, as well as the limitations, of freedom. A careful study of the Holocaust can accomplish this if we help our students to explore the facts against a backdrop informed by their own experiences and ideals. In a sense, the history teacher’s principal task (more important than relaying the facts, I would even venture) is to insist that students develop and test a set of moral principles which they can employ for this purpose. We must strive to teach the facts in an explanatory mode of rich contextualization, but at the same time, our teaching should help to generate values, too. If it does not, then we must relinquish any claim that our pedagogy holds a potential for deep and lasting personal transformation.

To what extent can Holocaust education teach values? The answer must take us beyond the usual justifications which one hears regarding the importance of teaching “tolerance.”³² To start, the ambiguity of this term invites problems. In most cases, students today know that they are expected to tolerate and respect difference, at least where difference applies to race, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, and most other hallmarks of contemporary identity. Yet the proliferation of “zero-tolerance” policies on campuses (e.g., regarding hazing, drugs/alcohol, hate speech, etc.) suggests that tolerance is not an unlimited virtue. Students are required to practice tolerance, except when they are mandated to exercise the opposite. More seriously, the absence of explicit content means that tolerance cannot be extended to others without a normative framework to set its boundaries. In the classroom, this formula invites the sort of indoctrination against which students rightly chafe. Thinking back to the resistance I encountered from my students after suggesting that they might have an ethical obligation to oppose the genocide in Darfur, I can better understand some of their frustration. Ceaselessly confronted by the pressures, crises, and looming catastrophes of the twenty-first century, surely some of my students felt they were being dragged toward a commitment that did not reflect their worldview. My attempt to send them on a guilt trip over

Darfur not only failed to deepen their understanding of the Holocaust, it tripped a switch which led them to reject my proposal of a salient link between past and present. My misstep had been to propose a shortcut between historical facts (i.e., the Holocaust sources we had considered in the previous weeks) and the values that I have adopted for myself in order to make sense of the world (i.e., my frustration and despair over the unchecked violence in Darfur). Reaching for a connection, I mistakenly took my values and principles to be universal, and nothing can be more obnoxious or obstructive to fair and profitable inquiry.

Still, I maintain that Holocaust education can (and must) lead to a fertile discussion of values, so long as educators take care to lead with historical facts rather than their own political worldview. We must refrain from judging historical actors (not to mention our students) against our own idiosyncratic standards, no matter how well we feel they serve us. Instead, our mode of inquiry should be geared toward uncovering and interrogating the cognitive structures of the historical actors—I mean here the ideas and words they relied on to formulate their self-image and make their way in the world—so that our students become accustomed to performing these same operations on themselves.

Holocaust-era memoirs are an especially good resource for this kind of exercise. If we look back to the early and mid-1930s through the lens of these texts, we can see political affiliations in Germany shifting wildly and crystallizing around dangerous ideas, yet there does not appear on the surface of things any obvious spike in moral depravity to explain these changes. Germans who fled the political center beginning in 1930 concluded no deals with the devil, even if they ended up fastened in his clutches later. Sifting the evidence, it makes better sense to say, as Christian Meier has suggested, that the German center parties were “unequal to the challenges” of their time.³³ Germans who abandoned the liberal center rarely expressed any desire to see others directly brutalized, but instead they lacked the intellectual tools and the emotional capacity that might have allowed them to make sound predictions about the consequences of their political choices.³⁴ Some, undoubtedly, were motivated by a revanchist sentiment that blended easily with anti-Semitism, but relatively few harbored the “exterminationist” fantasies that some scholars have ascribed to the nation as a whole.³⁵ For most of the middle-class Germans who lined up behind the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (NSDAP), their failure can be attributed to poorly developed habits of mind rather than sadistic immorality. Most had no interest in seeing their neighbors physically harmed, yet a great many (indeed, tens of millions) failed to understand or acknowledge how National Socialism’s core values threatened the “preciousness” of life that Hallie attempted to recover

through his study of Holocaust rescuers and that Wiesel wanted to salvage when he urged contemplation of Nazi crimes “for our own sake.”

When we delve into the sources that treat ordinary Germans in the period leading up to the Holocaust, we encounter many individuals who were unable to anticipate the dangers of the emerging dictatorship because they failed to question key assumptions of their own era. Their impatience with the democratic process mingled with a conviction that national survival depended on prospects for imperial conquest and a return to hegemonic standing in global affairs. Many were enticed by a *volkish* discourse built on a stringent, racially defined conception of community interest. Others put economic recovery above protection for ethno-national and political minorities. We can detect a combination of such sentiments in Melita Maschmann’s memoir (*Account Rendered*, 1963), in which she tries to explain to a Jewish friend how she came to align herself with the Hitler movement.³⁶ Maschmann writes: “Whenever I probe the reasons which drew me to join the Hitler Youth, I always come up against this one: I wanted to escape from my childish, narrow life and I wanted to attach myself to something that was great and fundamental.”³⁷ She continues: “I believed the National Socialists when they promised to do away with unemployment and with the poverty of six million people. I believed them when they said they would reunite the German nation, which had split into more than forty political parties, and overcome the consequences of the dictated peace of Versailles.”³⁸ Maschmann makes no reference to anti-Semitism or racial bigotry. Rather, she focuses on her immaturity and the easy seduction of her adolescent worldview by the theatrics of Nazi hyper-nationalism. While we must be cautious about taking Maschmann at her word—we know that many Germans were deluded about their acquiescence to the regime and the scope of their collaboration—we can find many others in the literature who appear to be similarly dislocated as the Nazi revolution accelerated after 1933.

The diary of Victor Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness*, further illustrates this combination of shallow self-understanding and superficial political calculation among ordinary Germans.³⁹ Reading Klemperer’s entries, one is repeatedly struck by the Germans who either underestimated the Nazis’ base of support or, as if Hitler’s chancellorship had not entailed a radical break from democratic values, imagined that a withdrawal of popular support could still domesticate the new regime. Writing on June 13, 1934, Klemperer recalls a conversation from the previous day with a Dr. Bollert, the director of the state library in Dresden, where Klemperer, a professor of French, had utilized the archives. Bollert, who according to Klemperer had begun to append “Heil Hitler!” to the bottom of his correspondence, attempts to reassure the latter about his party affiliation

by suggesting that there are many cultured Germans whose attachment to the NSDAP stems from pragmatism rather than deep conviction. Bollert insists: “You won’t believe me how few National Socialists there are. So many people come to see me. First with their arm stretched out, Hitler salute. Then they feel their way into the conversation. Then when they’ve become certain the mask [of loyalty] falls.”⁴⁰ Whereas Bollert remains convinced that the Nazis’ early success hinged on political pantomime (i.e., Germans playing at enthusiasm for the sake of protecting their career interests), Klemperer sees something more sinister, a state of affairs marked by intellectual and emotional anesthetization. As Hitler’s foreign policy achievements accumulated, Germans were lulled into a deeper acceptance of the Nazi regime. On June 20, 1935, Klemperer describes the effects of British appeasement, a sign of external legitimization that allowed ordinary Germans to minimize the social costs and violence of the Nazi revolution:

The enormous foreign policy success of the Naval Agreement with England consolidates Hitler’s position very greatly. Even before that I have recently had the impression that many otherwise well-meaning people, dulled to the injustice inside the country and in particular not properly appreciating the misfortune of the Jews, have begun to halfway acquiesce to Hitler. Their opinion: If at the cost of going backward internally, he restores Germany’s power externally, then this cost is worthwhile. Conditions at home can always be made good later.⁴¹

The formula here (i.e., well-meaning people, dulled to injustice) becomes a constant theme in Klemperer’s diary entries after 1935, the year in which the passage of the Nuremberg Laws accelerated the “social death”⁴² of German Jewry. Nazi mythmaking and a public discourse that glorified ideological combat gave Germans a way of seeing totalitarian infringements and the legal codification of racial discrimination as acceptable and/or necessary trade-offs for their nation’s rising international prestige. Eventually, the notion that Hitler’s proposed route to prosperity and security is something unalterable, a historical turn necessary for Germany to regain its hegemonic status, emerges as a talking point for virtually every one of Klemperer’s non-Jewish acquaintances. On May 27, 1936, Klemperer writes: “Frau Hirche telephoned, and yesterday was here for coffee. Her husband was unemployed and receiving dole for a year... They are not well disposed to the Nazis, but even they repeat the nonsense that is hammered into everyone and is current among Jews as well: But after them there would be the Communists and that would be even worse!”⁴³ By the summer of 1936, Klemperer concludes that the Nazi revolution has succeeded in crowding out all other political alternatives and that ordinary Germans lack either the will or the critical

faculties (or possibly both) to effectively challenge the regime: “The saddest thing about it is that everyone now reckons only with the extreme governments: NSDAP or Communism—as if there were nothing in between.”⁴⁴

Klemperer’s diary helps us to understand what kept so many Germans in conformity with the Hitler regime. Their failure stemmed from a mixture of intellectual, emotional, and moral shortcomings. However, the values they were missing in these crucial years leading up to the Holocaust had little, if anything, to do with tolerance, as is often premised in current curricula. One can imagine how Frau Hirche would have responded had Klemperer challenged her to inject more tolerance into her political calculations. Probably her response would have revealed the same recalcitrance my student showed when challenged to care more deeply about the fate of the Darfuris. Both individuals show signs of a similar paralysis, though reaching them to make this apparent proves to be difficult. Like the dictum “never again” or the suggestion, invoked by some Holocaust educators, that history could one day repeat itself, the charge of intolerance is too facile, and in any case it proves to be ineffective. The success of the Nazi program owed itself to the well-timed introduction and near constant reinforcement of a cognitive structure that squeezed acceptance and compliance out of ordinary Germans as they confronted emotional and moral challenges for which they were not adequately prepared. If we could somehow peer into the heads of ordinary Germans—and how else can we approximate such a procedure except by carefully scrutinizing the kinds of sources I have introduced here—we would see a web of beliefs, opinions, perspectives, and filters which shaped (and limited) their thinking, making the possibility of violence appear as a remote, but also acceptable risk. Even as the regime began to burn leftist publications in the streets and arrest its political and racial enemies, German Jews still occasionally found reassurance in a kind word or gesture from a Gentile acquaintance.⁴⁵ Where the issue of tolerance appears at all, it is only a small and isolated factor in a long and complicated equation. Like my students who balked at the notion that they held any responsibility for the Darfuris, the ordinary Germans whom Hitler courted understood themselves as sophisticated and rational actors, not as hatchlings in need of instruction on the finer points of tolerance. It is a mistake to treat either group as if their attempts to navigate in the world and produce meaning were somehow pre-determined by a callous indifference to the fate of others. Instead, we need to wrestle more seriously with the forces of inertia which keep people pent up inside their own cognitive structures, and in that way, beyond the reach of any transformative influence.

Moving Beyond Indoctrination

Again, we cannot impugn the morals of our students simply because they have not made the same political commitments which we have. When I stated that Holocaust education must always be an ideological enterprise, I did not mean to suggest that classroom instruction should aim at political indoctrination. To the contrary, I wish to make the opposite claim here. Even if I were interested in swinging their support to my side, the best evidence points to the inability of educators to influence students' political beliefs.⁴⁶ Whether Holocaust educators understand themselves as storytellers, philosophers, social scientists, or as social reformers, current data suggests that students are mostly impervious to their teachers' political pitches. From classroom observations and interviews with students and teachers, Ronald Evans has concluded, "The teaching of history and social studies generally may be having little impact on student beliefs or thinking, except on knowledge of the content studied."⁴⁷

While Evans' research pertained to secondary schools, others working on similar questions at the college and university level have arrived at more or less the same conclusion. Despite fears expressed in conservative circles that liberal professors are eager to brainwash their pupils, the most recent research in this area suggests that professors "have virtually no impact on the political views and ideology of their students."⁴⁸ According to Jeremy D. Mayer, co-author with A. Lee Fritschler and Bruce Smith of *Closed Minds? Politics and Ideology in American Universities*,⁴⁹ the notion that college students can be persuaded to accept the political positions which their professors hold, whether liberal or conservative, "is a fantasy."⁵⁰ When it comes to shaping the political views of young people, professors ought to take note of these findings: "[I]t is really hard to change the mind of anyone over fifteen." Parents and family, according to Mayer et al., are the most effective in this endeavor, followed by news media and peers. Professors, it turns out, are among the least influential forces.

Mack Mariani and Gordon Hewitt reach a similar conclusion in their work on the perceived intrusion of liberal agendas into the academic curriculum. Based on their survey of thirty-eight private colleges and more than 6,800 students, Mariani and Hewitt report: "We find little evidence...that faculty ideology is associated with changes in students' ideological orientation. The students at colleges with more liberal faculties were not statistically more likely to move left than students at other institutions."⁵¹ This finding offers a mirror image to the ordinary German phenomenon described above. Just as the Germans who moved to the right in 1930-1932 did so on their own accord after making political calculations which reflected their values and cognitive structures, the students polled by Mariani and

Hewitt remained firm in their commitments and orientation based on their own calculations and value systems rather than those modeled by their instructors. It is true, of course, that Germans feared bad consequences (at least after 1933, when the first Nazi concentration camps were opened) from ideological non-conformity that American students today obviously do not face, but it is not only political terror which keeps people locked into patterns of thought. The inability to conjure a cosmopolitan concern for strangers exposed to real danger can be the result of creeping relativism (i.e., "It's not our country") and moral abdication (i.e., "It's not for us to decide"), just as easily as it can be the consequence of extreme coercive pressure.

For Holocaust educators, this should serve as an invitation to reexamine and reconfigure our aims. For teachers who hoped or expected that the subject would offer a chance to pour their own values and worldviews into the empty vessels seated in front of them, the news here is bound to be disappointing. Current educational theory and cognitive psychology both strongly suggest that we will not gain traction with our students if we persist in seeing their value systems as incompletely articulated or improperly formed. If we think that by getting under their hoods and applying a few wrenches to that apparatus we can tune them specifically for the political roads we prefer to travel, then we will need to prepare ourselves for more failed encounters like the one I described at the outset of the essay. We can and ought to stress the formulation of values, but we cannot stress our own values to the exclusion of others. This approach does not nourish our students so much as force feed them what is likely to come back up again undigested.

The content of Holocaust education must revolve around a methodology that allows students to conjure and experiment with new and deeper self-understanding(s). Teaching the Holocaust effectively means freeing (and urging) students to ask questions about historical epistemology (i.e., the ways in which historians come to know what they do), as well as questions which speak directly to the challenges of the current moment. The idea behind this philosophy is to teach the past in a manner that equips students to see the ramifications of their choices in contrast to the Germans who, by virtue of their own choices, allowed themselves to be fastened in a system designed to achieve national revitalization and racial purification at any and all costs.

Thinking back on the highly capable and obviously driven student who after fifteen weeks in my class assured me that nothing we had explored together changed his basic way of seeing the world (including his way of formulating in-group and out-group relationships), I want to conclude by tracing a middle road for Holocaust educators. Throughout this essay, I

have tried to position myself between those, like Dawidowicz, who see the Holocaust as a singular event and those who want it to serve a universal purpose, but may rely too heavily on false analogies and their own political priorities to give it a sense of deep relevance. History teachers, as the most recent data show, cannot further their own agendas by using the Holocaust as a instrument for political indoctrination, but they can still lead their students toward new ways of thinking about the world and their place in it. Although history teachers are not typically focused on the instruction of values, I would submit that there is a fundamental importance in being able to examine one's own cognitive structures at arm's length in order to make sure these can support a life worth embracing. Just as teachers in Germany once helped to create an intellectual environment that supported the *volkish* racism on which the Nazis capitalized so effectively, teachers today can engage their students in intellectual exercises that unpack and perhaps even explode some of the assumptions of our own age. This could include the way we insulate ourselves against the pain felt by others by taking refuge inside the construct of the nation or the way we dull ourselves to injustices that do not directly affect us by invoking the same obstacles—time and space—which we routinely claim to have surmounted through the “whiz-bang” technologies that are so often hold up for adoration in our culture. What questions might I have posed to my class in order to narrow the distance between Germany in the 1930s and Darfur today? How might I have engaged my much too satisfied student in order to make the Holocaust something more than an interesting and momentarily arresting diversion?

The right line of questioning would have moved toward Darfur gradually. It would have focused first on the way Germans adjusted themselves to the “incremental nature”⁵² of Nazi persecution and the way that rational actors who saw themselves as embodying a full measure of tolerance became consumed by the fear of a looming, but also amorphous enemy (i.e., Bolshevism) to the point that they were ready and willing to sacrifice the democratic achievements and principles of the Weimar period. It would have turned on the various ways in which people who were not inherently evil nevertheless accommodated an evil regime, or conspired with it, because they saw their political choices at that moment as being limited by pressures which they took to be external, but were mostly conjured from within themselves (e.g., the injury to national “prestige” which so many Germans internalized). The link between daily life in the Nazi era and the slow-motion tragedy unfolding today in Darfur does not rest with the cardinal sins that shout out for approbation—we are rarely confronted in the classroom by expressions of visceral hatred—but rather with a question of values that has made these eruptions of ethno-national

violence seem a normal and ineradicable part of life. Supposing, as every history teacher surely does, that the past helps to create the present, we can and should ask our students what values and what understandings of global responsibility ought to prevail in the wake of the Holocaust. What core values will we posit in opposition to indifference? The Holocaust must bring teachers and students to the bar of self-judgment, otherwise we risk losing ourselves in its shadows.

Notes

1. The author wishes to thank Daniel Bouk, Daniel Epstein, Robert Nemes, and Jenna Reinbold for suggestions offered in response to an earlier draft of this essay. Comments from anonymous readers at *The History Teacher* also played an important role in the process of revision.

2. The theory of transformative (transformational) learning is closely associated with the work of Jack Mezirow, whose book, *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000), summarizes twenty-five years of work in the field of adult education. Mezirow's influence can be seen in much of the recent literature on critical thinking and reflective learning practices. See, for example, Fernanda Duarte, "Addressing Student Cynicism through Transformative Learning," *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice* 7, no. 1 (2010): 1-15; Judi Apte, "Facilitating Transformative Learning: A Framework for Practice," *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* 49, no. 1, (April 2009): 169-189; Alfredita Tahiri, "Fostering Transformative Learning: The Role of Professors and Students of the University of Prishtina," *Interchange: A Quarterly Review of Education* 41, no. 2 (2010): 149-159; and Omiunota Ukpokodu, "The Practice of Transformative Pedagogy," *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching* 20, no. 2 (2009): 43-67.

3. Thomas Fallace, *The Emergence of Holocaust Education in American Schools* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 174.

4. Stephen R. Haynes, "Holocaust Education at American Colleges and Universities: A Report on the Current Situation," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 12, no. 2 (Fall 1998): 283. Exactly why this surge of interest occurred when it did is a complex question. Surely, it had something to do with the success of the mini-series *Holocaust*, which NBC aired in 1978, but there is more to the story, too, which others have already pursued in a more sustained and interesting way than I can venture here. See, for example, Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

5. See pps. 155-157 in Fallace, *The Emergence of Holocaust Education in American Schools* for more on "The State of Holocaust Education in America."

6. Haynes, 282-307.

7. *Ibid.*, 303.

8. Wannsee refers to the meeting outside Berlin in January 1942, where Reinhard Heydrich and others in the upper-echelon of Hitler's SS corps first committed to paper a detailed plan for pursuing the eradication of European Jews.

9. The evacuation of German Jews to Madagascar was first suggested in 1885

by Paul de Lagarde. Rejected by Europe's Zionist leadership, the plan entered public discourse once again in the 1920s. In 1937, Poland sent a delegation to the African island to explore the possibility of relocating its Jewish population there. In December 1939, Germany's foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, mentioned the plan in a peace proposal which he sought to ratify with the Vatican. For more details, see Christopher Browning, "Madagascar Plan," in *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, ed. Israel Gutman (New York: Macmillan, 1990).

10. At the behest of Franklin Roosevelt, representatives for thirty-one countries and twenty-four NGOs met in Évian-les-Bains (France) for eight days in July 1938 to consider plans for assisting Jews fleeing German persecution. Despite expressions of sympathy by most of the delegates, only the Dominican Republic agreed to adjust its immigration quotas in order to accept more Jews.

11. The "gray zone" is a reference to Primo Levi's essay of the same name. See Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Vintage International, 1989): 36-69. Here, Levi confronts the tendency of historians to oversimplify their subject matter in their quest for moral clarity. Inside the death camps, Levi recalls, one entered an "indecipherable" world without any recognizable precedent: "[T]he enemy was all around but also inside, the 'we' lost its limits, the contenders were not two, one could not discern a single frontier but rather many confused, perhaps innumerable frontiers, which stretched between each of us" (p. 38).

12. This is another reference to Primo Levi's writing. See *Survival in Auschwitz* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 29.

13. Charles Maier has written thoughtfully about the role of values and ideology in Holocaust historiography: "The question becomes how history can mediate ideology methodologically. By mediate I do not mean just cover over, or state indirectly. I mean incorporate but transcend." See Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 61. Elazar Barkan has also addressed the place of politics in the construction and interpretation of history in a special issue of the *American Historical Review* devoted to historical reconciliation. Discussing the possible contributions of scholars to historical commissions explicitly oriented toward conflict mediation, Barkan writes, "Historians understand that the construction of history continuously shapes our world, and therefore it often has to be treated as an explicit [and] direct political activity, operating within specific methodological and rhetorical rules." See Barkan, "Introduction: Historians and Historical Reconciliation," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 4 (October 2009): 907.

14. The commission report is available online at: <<http://www.ushmm.org/research/library/faq/languages/en/06/01/commission/>>.

15. See Lucy Dawidowicz, "How They Teach the Holocaust" in *What Is the Use of Jewish History?* ed. Neal Kozody (New York: Schocken Books, 1992): 65-83.

16. *Ibid.*, 66.

17. *Ibid.*, 77.

18. Neal Kozody, "Introduction" in *What Is the Use of Jewish History?* ed. Neal Kozody (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), xviii.

19. Dawidowicz, 69.

20. Paul L. Levine, "From Archive to Classroom: Reflections on Teaching the Holocaust in Different Countries," in *Testimony, Tensions, and Tikkun: Teaching the Holocaust in Colleges and Universities*, ed. Myra Goldenberg and Rochelle L. Millen (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2007), 117-118.

21. NPR reported extensively on both the foiled attack in Portland and the subsequent fire at the Islamic Center in Corvallis. See <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=131646007>>.

22. It is encouraging that 150 students turned out for a rally on the campus of Oregon State University to decry the burning of the Corvallis mosque. See “Rally at Oregon State Draws 150 to Decry Mosque Burning in Aftermath of Portland Bomb Plot,” <http://www.oregonlive.com/pacific-northwest-news/index.ssf/2010/12/peace_rally_at_oregon_state_draws_150_to_decry_mosque_burning_in_aftermath_of_portland_bomb_plot.html>.

23. See “French Synagogue Attack in Lyon,” BBC, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/1894719.stm>>.

24. William Drodziak, “Fire Kills 10 at Refugee Hostel in Germany,” *The Washington Post*, 19 January 1996.

25. Deborah Lipstadt, “Not Facing History,” *The New Republic*, 6 March 1995.

26. Quoted in Christian Meier, *The Uses of History: From Athens to Auschwitz* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 159.

27. Philip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), 2.

28. Richard Evans has addressed this linkage between historical facts and the ideas and theories which historians use to orient themselves in their own time. See, for example, “Historians and Their Facts” in Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999). The forensic approach to history that I have tried to outline here appears in Evans’ writing as “documentary fetishism” (p. 73).

29. Didier Pollefeyt, “Developing Criteria for Religious and Ethical Teaching of the Holocaust” in *Testimony, Tensions, and Tikkun: Teaching the Holocaust in Colleges and Universities*, ed. Myrna Goldenberg and Rochelle L. Millen (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2007), 181.

30. Maurice Blanchot, *Writing the Disaster* (1980), trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 1.

31. Mark Edmundson, *Why Read?* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004), 31-32.

32. In his preface to a new resource for Holocaust educators, *Why Should I Care?* by Jeanette Friedman and David Gold, Michael Berenbaum, former Project Director of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, instructs readers that “[w]e study this intolerance to teach tolerance.” See Friedman and Gold, *Why Should I Care? Lessons from the Holocaust* (New York: Gihon River Press, 2009).

33. Meier, 155.

34. Of course, Jews were subject to widespread acts of persecution in the early years of the Nazi era, both at the hands of German civilians and by officials who held posts inside the regime. As Marion Kaplan puts it in her extraordinary study of Jewish daily life in Nazi Germany, “individual Germans took advantage of the legal defenselessness of Jews.” Among the incidents she documents is the case of a Jewish property owner who had been severely beaten by one of his tenants. His subsequent request to the police for intervention was ignored. See Marion Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 21.

35. I am referring here to the work of Daniel Goldhagen in *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).

36. Melita Maschmann, *Account Rendered: A Dossier on My Former Self* [1964], cited in *The Nazi State and German Society: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Robert G. Moeller (New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2010), 47-49.

37. *Ibid.*, 49.

38. *Ibid.*

39. Victor Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years, 1933-1941* (New York: Random House, 1998).

40. *Ibid.*, 69-70.

41. Ibid., 127.
42. Kaplan, 5.
43. Klemperer, 166-167.
44. Ibid., 174.
45. Kaplan, 39.
46. See Ronald W. Evans, "Teacher Conceptions of History Revisited: Ideology, Curriculum, and Student Belief," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 18, no. 2 (Spring 1990): 124.
47. Ibid., 125. Evans allows: "[A] few teachers may be having a more profound effect?"
48. Quoted in Patricia Cohen, "Professors' Liberalism Contagious? Maybe Not," *The New York Times*, 3 November 2008.
49. A. Lee Fritschler, Bruce L. R. Smith, and Jeremy D. Mayer, *Closed Minds? Politics and Ideology in American Universities* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2008).
50. Quoted in Cohen.
51. Mack D. Mariani and Gordon J. Hewitt, "Indoctrination U.? Faculty Ideology and Changes in Student Political Orientation," *PS: Political Science and Politics* (October 2008): 773.
52. Kaplan, 6.



"Dr. Charles Richard Drew, M.D., C.M., Med.D.Sc.—Professor of Surgery, Howard University, Chief Surgeon, Freedmen's Hospital, Washington, D.C.," Charles Henry Alston, 1943, NARA.