European Review, Vol. 10, No. 1, 53–61 (2002) © Academia Europaea, Printed in the United Kingdom

The Holocaust: remembrance and education*

HERMANN VON DER DUNK

Nicolailaan 20, 3723 HS Bilthoven, The Netherlands.

The war-generation dealt with the Holocaust as a part of the spectrum of crimes inflicted by the Hitler regime on humanity. The postwar generation, which bore no responsibility, even as neutral witnesses or accomplices, saw it as a special monstrosity; Auschwitz has been integrated into their cultural heritage. In education this means that an obligation of remembrance can provoke reactions of boredom, irritation or worse, since youth is confronted daily with other problems. But remembrance should not be marginal in school history.

Remembrance is a vital part of human life. Without it we can have no identity, because remembrance is the bedrock of a cohesive society and of a people with shared values and beliefs. However, if remembrance and memory contribute to the forming of our values, then our values and interests also influence our memory. This is the source of the well-known phenomenon of historical myth. If the past, thanks to remembrance, is part of our lives, it exists only because of the present and our images of the past.

Documents and other artefacts of former eras exist independently of our awareness but only our conscious efforts can keep the memory of former generations alive. If we failed to commemorate them, they would seem not to have existed at all and that is the real inducement for remembrance. So perhaps we commemorate, first of all, in the hope that one day we ourselves will be remembered by those who come after us.

Atrocities and genocide have been committed throughout the history of the human race. But *remembering* anguish and terror is not the same as *commemorating* them. I use the words, *remembrance* and *remembering* to mean individual recollections of past events. Such memories may be important or trivial, they may be pleasant or unpleasant, and they combine to form an unstructured mixture. *Commemoration,* however, is a conscious and deliberate act, and it serves a very specific purpose; the commemoration of cruelty and massacre serves to

*An abridged version of a lecture at the International Task Force Conference in Amsterdam in May 2001.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798702000054 Published online by Cambridge University Press

strengthen the bonds of solidarity among victims and their descendants. Usually this means a nation or a people. But commemoration serves another purpose as well. It was introduced to serve as a warning to prevent a recurrence of the atrocities of the past. At the same time, by commemorating the victims and their suffering, we also draw attention to the real or perceived perpetrators and this, in turn, may stir up feelings of resentment or antipathy and may even be seen as an exhortation to revenge. The commemoration of one war has often sown the seeds of another.

After the Second World War, a woman asked the famous Dutch writer, Abel Herzberg, himself a survivor of Bergen-Belsen, how we could prevent our children from becoming victims in the future. Herzberg replied ‘That is not the question, madam, the question is how to prevent them from becoming murderers’.

Of course, this is an issue that education has to address. In times of crisis, the fear of falling victim to a real or imaginary enemy can easily blur the distinction between defender and aggressor, or even – and this is the most puzzling moral question – the distinction between potential victim and potential murderer.

It is generally agreed today that the Holocaust marked a significant turning point in the history of genocide. It has been described as a unique phenomenon, which changed our concept of human nature. Never before in history has a massacre aroused such universal outrage and bewilderment, or prompted so much research

The reason is obvious. Never before had so many millions of helpless men, women and children of all ages been murdered so brutally and systematically eradicated like vermin. People were killed for no other reason than that they belonged to a particular race, to which their executioners had denied the right to life. It was a massive bureaucratic operation, millions of people were arrested, deported and killed within the space of only three to four years and the tragedy went largely unheeded by the rest of the world, which was embroiled in a devastating war.

Later we learned that executions under the regimes of Stalin and Mao claimed even more lives, yet we regard those massacres as belonging to a long history of cruelty. They were campaigns to wipe out political opposition, although untold thousands of the victims were not dissidents at all but were killed under false suspicion or simply because of their social background. They perished in slave labour camps in barbaric conditions. They were exposed to harsh treatment, famine, disease or brutal deportations. But the difference is that their oppressors were not aiming to destroy the condemned as quickly and efficiently as possible, nor were their victims condemned on the grounds of race.

However, different generations have different perceptions of traumatic historical events. Attitudes to the Holocaust illustrate this point particularly well. Today, most of us regard it as something that defies comparison with anything that has been seen before or since, but this was not how people reacted at the end

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798702000054 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the war or shortly afterwards, when the full horror of the death camps was exposed.

We can distinguish the different reactions of three generations with regard to the Holocaust. First, there was the war-generation that experienced it at first hand, the relatively silent generation. Then came the postwar-generation, a generation that became shocked. Now, a third generation has emerged. For them, the Holocaust is an intrinsic part of their general knowledge, because they grew up in a world in which Auschwitz was an established and well-known fact. In the Western Hemisphere at least, Auschwitz is the subject of literature and films, television, newspapers and journals. There have been widely publicised plans to build museums and memorials, such as the Auschwitz memorial in Berlin, and it has also been in the news in connection with war damage and restitution claims. It is part of the world of young people today. New information continues to emerge and make headlines, such as the documents that seem to implicate IBM in collaborating with Nazi Germany or Daniel Goldhagen's book, which was an international best-seller. Although criticized severely for oversimplification, methodological shortcomings and lack of originality, this book nevertheless created a sensation, which would not have been the case if it been about the Crusades instead of the Holocaust.

First, I have to say more about the differences between the three generations. The distinction I am making is very general, and cannot be precise since each generation flows into the next like ripples on a stream. Even so, any given generation shares a certain body of knowledge and a particular set of attitudes, and the prominent positions in public affairs, politics, business, education and culture are normally occupied by people aged roughly between 35 and 65; in that sense they form a generation.

The war generation was the silent generation. It had been witness to the tragedy, and yet had no real knowledge of what was in progress; the architects and perpetrators of the Holocaust had concealed their intentions behind a screen of lies. The executioners *would* not speak and the victims *could* not speak. That silence continued, even after the war, when the full extent of the horror came to light. It is true that war criminals were brought to trial, everything was documented, witnesses – both perpetrators and victims were heard – and the proceedings were widely publicised.

Yet this did not really and completely break the silence. Both perpetrators and victims continued to suppress their past and people were preoccupied with their own problems and grief, with the aftermath of bombardments, the loss of soldiers and civilians, the unprecedented destruction, the chaos, and the millions of refugees and displaced persons. Attention was focused on all the crimes of the Nazi regime, its concentration camps and its reign of terror. The world was left with a human and moral tragedy of unprecedented proportions. So, for the war

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798702000054 Published online by Cambridge University Press

generation, the genocide of Jews and Gypsies was only one chapter, albeit the most shameful, in the annals of Nazi atrocities.

Those who at once drew a distinction between the Holocaust and the rest of tragedies of the war were mainly the Jews themselves. Governments and the public could not, or would not, distinguish between different types of victims and crimes. One of the reasons was that, when the Nazi regime was implementing its 'final solution', the Allies, other governments and nations in Europe and abroad, as well as Zionist and Jewish organizations in Palestine and America, distrusted, underestimated or simply ignored the information they were receiving. It is cheap to pass judgement in retrospect, as we still often do. But we must acknowledge that there were understandable reasons for their disbelief and their failure to act. Indeed, the very idea of a 'final solution' was flatly preposterous and these groups were also embroiled in a war that consumed all their time and energy. In any event, the generation that actually witnessed Auschwitz could not, or would not, grasp its enormity, and did not prevent it.

In the years immediately after the war, commemoration focused on acts of heroism, on military operations and resistance to the Nazi oppressors. Its aim was to repair the damage that had been done and restore national unity and morale. This is not to say that people were unaware of the special plight of Jews and Gypsies, and I would like to stress this point. But the Holocaust was seen as one of the many Nazi atrocities, and the world was not particularly disturbed.

The second generation comprised those who were children during the war or who were born in the first decade after it. Their knowledge or memories were fundamentally different – in the 1960s they sought influence and partnership in a new, prosperous society, but they had grown up with the story of what their parents had suffered and they were inculcated, as we have seen, with a heroic vision of the war and an aversion to fascism and National Socialism

The situation in Germany was special, the older generation were not only responsible for Hitler's rise to power, but also had the responsibility of building a new democratic society after the ordeal. Among these people were a fair number of war criminals, relatively few of whom had been brought to trial. So here, most of all, we can speak of a silent generation, a generation that turned its back on an unpalatable past and concentrated on the events of the day (for obvious reasons I am now referring only to West Germany, where, unlike East Germany, the encounter with the past was not orchestrated by a party dictatorship). However, in the 1960s, in Germany as elsewhere, a postwar-generation emerged that could not be blamed for the past, and that claimed a role in public affairs. Chancellor Helmut Kohl's controversial remark in Israel about the 'grace of late birth', perhaps a slip of the tongue, epitomizes the sentiments of this German postwar generation. Germany, unlike other countries, could not recast its wartime role to create an heroic image. The silent generation on the whole had avoided any real

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798702000054 Published online by Cambridge University Press

confrontation with its history, and instead had filled the inexplicable time-gap by highlighting the brighter periods of German history and philosophizing on the nature of man. In any event, it glossed over its role in the Third Reich.

The postwar generation, however, now began to ask questions. A new issue also came to the fore, or at least one that had never before been clearly identified. Because traumatized survivors were often unable to function normally, their children also had to bear the burden of the past. Why were their parents unable to talk to them? What had they been through? Or, especially in Germany, what had they done?

The Eichmann trial of 1961 marked a distinct turning point. Israel wanted to show the world how the Jews had suffered in this catastrophe and it did that very well indeed. The world gradually came to see the Holocaust as the crime of crimes. Moreover, Eichmann changed the world's image of the executioner. He showed that mass-murderers were not necessarily sadists or brutal butchers. He himself had been a conscientious and industrious office clerk, he had simply done his job and it was all the same to him whether he was planning railway timetables or transporting human beings to the gas chambers. I do not believe this image of the office-clerk is quite correct, but it was the only way for the accused to deal psychologically with the enormous burden of their past. But that image, however debatable seemed convincing. The 'banality of evil' to quote Hannah Arendt's famous phrase, generated an endless debate on human nature and especially the psychology of the mass-murderer. The postwar generation thus became immersed in a discussion of this aspect of Nazism and racism, which soon gained more attention than the war itself because, after Eichmann, other war criminals were also brought to trial. More documents came to light and new information emerged about the darkest and most gruesome aspects of Nazism.

Film also became an important factor in shaping people's perceptions of the war. The American *Holocaust* series of the 1970s had a tremendous impact, greater perhaps than historical publications or even the trials of Eichmann and other war criminals. It was certainly an eye-opener in Germany and its impact is best illustrated by the fact that the word 'Holocaust' gained universal currency. It had hitherto been used only by Jews themselves, and mainly in religious circles. There had previously been no standard designation for what many people, ironically enough, still referred to as the 'final solution'.

Film's impact highlights one of the biggest problems of commemoration: the commercial exploitation of emotion and compassion. Its sentimentality and false heroic patina successfully transformed the incredible horror, making it suitable for mass consumption. By that it paved the way for public recognition of a tragedy that had long been swept under the carpet

I would emphasize the important and intriguing point that, despite this film, no *new* information came to light, nor were there any unexpected discoveries. The

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798702000054 Published online by Cambridge University Press

basic facts had been known since 1945/46. People knew already and were astonished that even the most relentless killers could also be gentle fathers, kind to animals, and lovers of classical music What matters is the public's *change of focus*. People looked at the same facts now through different eyes. The postwar generation were bewildered by the abominations of the past, which they learned from the war trials, television, films and literature, they were morally outraged, perhaps also because they could afford to be outraged, even in Germany. In the public mind, fascism came to be identified with racism and genocide, not with dictatorship and military aggression as it had been for the older war-generation. Moreover, the 1960s were marked by a clash between different generations, a cultural revolution inspired by the radical left, an assault on the postwar Establishment, which of course was synonymous with the war generation And it was within the context of this much wider movement that new attitudes to the Holocaust evolved.

The postwar generation of the 1960s naturally moved into influential social and political positions in the 1970s and 1980s, it is therefore not surprising that the commemoration of Nazi crimes and the Holocaust ranked high on their list of educational priorities. This, of course, contributed to another phenomenon – a more conducive climate gradually encouraged victims to break their silence. Although there had been moving testimonies almost from the start, most survivors felt unable to bridge the gap between their lives in hell and their return to normal life. But it was not only their children who wanted to know. Public opinion was ready and interested. The media had undoubtedly played an important role in bringing about this change, but the media simply expressed the views of opinion-formers and reflected changing values and attitudes.

The generation that lived through the war was gradually disappearing and people nearing the end of their lives are often inspired to reflect on their past. In so doing, and trying to tell their truth, many – both victims and others – have written personal accounts of their experiences, thereby adding to the body of literature on the genocide, the war and its aftermath.

The world has never had access to so much information about the past, thanks to emancipation and modern technology Never has so much attention been paid not only to material damage but also to the emotional plight of the survivors. Psychologists have specialized in helping Jews and others suffering from what is now known as 'camp syndrome'. Some consider the Holocaust unique, if only because of the manner in which it was carried out and because it was conducted on purely racial grounds, but no less unique is the world's response to it and the nature of commemoration, however controversial, since the late 1960s. This response, however, also generates commercialization and trivialization,

For the third generation, the post, postwar generation – roughly speaking the under-40s today – the Holocaust and the official commemoration of war crimes

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798702000054 Published online by Cambridge University Press

are already part of their cultural legacy. This does not mean they have become indifferent or uninterested, although it depends, of course, on the personal background of the individual. But time has passed and the last survivors of the war generation are now at least in their 70s. In about 20 years, almost none will still be alive. In those circumstances, commemoration will become a theoretical exercise, or even a ritual, certainly for young people, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Our curiosity about our great-grandparents' generation is mainly a genealogical question; on the whole, we do not identify with them emotionally as we still can with our grandparents.

This is where we are at the moment. The fundamental question is why we commemorate the Holocaust in this rapidly changing world? We cannot mouth platitudes or express noble sentiments to avoid giving an answer. A guiding principle is that we must commemorate the Holocaust as a universal disaster, not just a tragedy suffered by Jews and Gypsies. The reason for commemorating it universally, even by those without ethnic or genealogical ties, is obvious: *this must never happen again*. The task of education is to expose the Holocaust as a monstrous absurdity and to guard against a recurrence.

However, the overthrow of Nazism did not put an end to cruelty and genocide. In 1946, there was another pogrom in Poland – anti-Semitism and racism did not disappear, although most countries banished them from the official public domain. After the fall of Communism, we were appalled by the magnitude of the killings under the Stalinist and Maoist regimes, starting a debate of who was worse, Hitler or Stalin? In the 1990s, the world again witnessed ethnic genocide, in Africa and Yugoslavia. All over the world atrocities are committed against people purely on the grounds of religion or race, even though the means are more conventional and less sophisticated than those used by the Nazis. This casts serious doubt as to whether people can learn from the past. Xenophobia is increasing, and so is racially motivated crime, even in established democracies, and through modern information technology this means that everyone knows.

The concern with *material* damage, to the victims today seems to follow the understanding of the *psychological* harm people have suffered. This inevitably means that, both now and in the future, commemoration will be affected, if not contaminated by material and even political interests. Emphasizing the Jewish catastrophe is likely to cause irritation or allow suppressed animosity to erupt, particularly in societies where anti-Semitism is firmly entrenched. The formal taboo on anti-Semitism might partly disguise this irritation. The same is true of the narrow-minded tendency to brand as anti-Semitic any criticism of Jews or Israel. Commemorating bloodshed might then fan the flames of antipathy and distrust. Even though the second and third postwar generations are not to blame for what happened in the past, it is difficult not to generalize. Young people are particularly prone to think in black-and-white stereotypes, but politicians, too, are

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798702000054 Published online by Cambridge University Press

often tempted to use the past as a moral weapon and for the purpose of blackmail. The history of the Federal Republic of Germany illustrates the dangers of a disreputable past and a country's susceptibility to moral blackmail.

History provides an interesting but little known example. When the religious wars in France at the end of the sixteenth century appeared to be drawing to a close, lawyers made a very sophisticated distinction between forgiving – *pardon* – and forgetting – *oublier* They felt it was impossible to *forgive* the slaughter on both sides. The only way the wounds could heal was by forgetting the whole business and proclaiming a general amnesty. We have seen the same approach being taken more recently after civil war or the fall of a dictatorship After the Second World War, all countries took a similar stand, choosing to forget or play down their collaboration with Nazi Germany for the sake of maintaining national harmony. The facts were revealed only when the postwar generation came to play a more influential role in society. It emerged that several countries were guilty of war crimes, and that their treatment of Jews in the recent past was sometimes nothing to be proud of either. In the end, unlike the lawyers in France, the world chose *not* to forget. This means that now, half a century later it owes *pardon*.

Hence, education that focuses on the Holocaust as an isolated outrage has two inherent dangers. First, by focusing our attention on Auschwitz and the unsurpassed evil of Nazism, we might lose sight of the atrocities committed in other countries, Secondly, it would offer a welcome pretext for not addressing our problems today and for our lack of success in tackling racism, xenophobia and neo-Nazism. The only way to avoid these pitfalls is by relating what happened in the past to what is happening in some countries today.

There is no historical evidence that some nations have an innate disposition to commit acts of barbarism, but there are traditions, circumstances and, above all, political systems that can transform normal human beings into murderers. They can persuade them that it is a duty to their country, even a virtue to kill people who belong to a particular race, religion or ethnic group. I therefore believe that we should not treat the Holocaust as something outside history: we can regret this, but we cannot deny it. It is important for schools to devote more attention to history. Without sufficient knowledge of history remembrance becomes a dangerous caricature.

There is also a third danger of remembrance, especially remembrance in which Auschwitz is presented as an isolated phenomenon. We need to consider the psychological response of the present generation to the constant repetition of the same moral issue and historical event. It could ultimately trigger a rebellious reaction, perhaps even arousing sympathy for the Nazi ideology. It would be naive to deny that accounts of cruelty can provoke ambivalent feelings and can cause copycat behaviour as well as aversion and dismay. This is especially true in deeply divided societies.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798702000054 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Violence on television is an example of copycat behaviour, influenced by political and social circumstances. Dangerous ideological propaganda or instructions for terrorist actions on the Internet could become a serious problem. Moreover, it is a universal truth that young people tend to reject their parents' values and views, particularly concerning events, which to their mind, occurred before the Ark.

History has therefore to be rewritten by each new generation. It seems that young people need to revise standard images in order to develop their self-awareness and cope with the present and future. Does this mean that commemorating the Holocaust is a dubious enterprise? Could it turn out to be counterproductive? It is impossible to say what things would be like today without memorials and without all the testimonies and reflections on this unspeakable crime; however, commemoration and all the information at our disposal have heightened people's awareness of genocide all over the world and increased the recognition of universal human rights and other fundamental moral issues. Although we have not managed to put an end to genocide and other atrocities, we have not accepted defeat by resigning ourselves to them. We have to pass on to future generations the legacy of our experience and moral values. Even if we cannot mould them according to our wishes and ideals, we are nevertheless in a position to influence them. Without remembrance they would be ephemeral. One of the most striking differences between man and the rest of the animal kingdom is not some moral distance, but that human beings know that they have grandparents! Although we are never carbon copies of our ancestors, nor would we like to be, we would be nothing without their experience and wisdom. It may be beyond our power to change human nature, and we probably cannot prevent the remembrance of genocide from encouraging copycat behaviour in certain circumstances, but what we can do is foster political systems and political cultures that make it less likely to occur.

About the Author

Hermann W. von der Dunk is Emeritus Professor of Contemporary and Cultural History at the University of Utrecht. He has written on *Conservatism, the Past and the Shoah* as well as other aspects of history and, most recently, *A History of European Culture in the Twentieth Century*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798702000054 Published online by Cambridge University Press