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Teaching history and human rights to professional groups at concentration camp memorials

Reflections on the 'History of Nazi Germany, Institutions, Human Rights' project*

Staff members of state institutions as target groups for educational work at memorials

The trainees and employees of state institutions are, unlike students, not necessarily target groups for historical and political education at memorials. Even in a professional context, they usually have limited engagement with the history of the Nazi era. In their training, employees of state institutions receive only rudimentary exposure to the perspectives on their current work that could be gained from such engagement. Memorials dedicated to the remembrance of Nazi crimes are places in which the effects of institutional and state actions during the Nazi era can be explained and the challenges currently facing the employees of state institutions can be discussed.

In order to develop educational programmes that encourage a critical examination of past events as well as reflection on current professional practices, it can be useful to define thematic areas which place past and present issues in relation to each other. Depending on the target group and the subject matter, different topical references can be made at the historical sites of Nazi crimes, including explicit and implicit references to human rights. Ideally, the selected thematic areas will have a connection both to the events during the Nazi era and the current experiences of the individuals involved in the educational process.¹

In the course of educational activities with the employees of state institutions and other professional groups, it makes sense to raise the question of what responsibility was borne by the respective professional group or institution in the Nazi era.² Members of

¹ Cf. the articles in: Barbara Thimm/Gottfried Köbeler/Susanne Ulrich (eds) (2010): *Verunsichernde Orte. Selbstverständnis und Weiterbildung in der Gedenkstättenpädagogik*, Frankfurt am Main.

² Regarding educational activities at memorials for specific target groups, cf. http://www.kz-gedenkstaette-neuengamme.de/fileadmin/images/Publikationen/Studienzentrum/2012/Flyer_Berufsgruppenorientierte_Angbote.pdf; <http://www.ghwk.de> (> Bildungsangebote > berufsgruppenspezifische Seminare für Erwachsene; Wolf Kaiser. *Nationalsozialistische Täter. Ein Kommentar aus pädagogischer Sicht*, http://www.gedenkstaettenforum.de/nc/publikationen/publikation/news/nationalsozialistische_taeater/ (each accessed 3.10.2012); Alfons Kenkmann, 'Polizei und Verwaltung im 20. Jahrhundert – Historisch-politische Bildung am Beispiel der Erinnerungs-, Forschungs- und Bildungsstätte Villa ten Hompel in Münster', in: Stiftung Topographie des Terrors (ed.), *Gedenkstätten-Rundbrief Nr. 90* (1999), pp. 3-12; Alfons Kenkmann, 'Der Beamte als "germanischer Kavalier". Historisches Lernen am Beispiel von Verfolgung und Verwaltung', in: Ibid./Bernd A. Rusinek (ed.) (1999): *Verfolgung und*

professional groups who bear legislative or executive responsibility in an institutional-governmental context can be prompted to critically reflect on their own professional practices by examining the way these institutions behaved during the Nazi era.³ Connections can be made to their respective everyday work, and the institutional influences on the participants as well as ethical questions relating to each professional group can be discussed. Against the backdrop of historical events and with an understanding of these events, the participants can look at the actions taken by the professional groups relevant to them. The scope of action and personal responsibility of the historical agents can be debated along with the characteristics and legal foundations of institutional acts of violence under the Nazis.

Other thematic focal points may include factors of conformist and non-conformist behaviour, the diffusion of responsibility through the division of labour, questions of social affiliation and group identity, and the effects of state and institutional authority. An approach oriented on different professional groups makes it possible to sound out the relationship between the individual and society, but it also deliberately makes state institutions an object of examination. It explores the opportunities for and limits of autonomous action in dictatorial and democratic systems, or more specifically, the conditions for criticism or resistance in institutional contexts in relation to both the Nazi era and the present day. Examining the social conditions for institutional action is useful for determining one's own scope of action. Resistance within Nazi state organisations⁴ is applauded in retrospect as resistance to an inhumane dictatorship. However, human rights can be violated even in a democracy whose fundamental legitimacy is not in question. It is sensible, therefore, to ponder the potential positive effects of non-conformist behaviour even today. How do the employees of state organisations react to orders, and how can they determine whether an order is questionable from an ethical or human rights point of view? How do group processes within an institutional framework influence the actions of individuals?

In reference to the Nazi era, these questions on the borders of organisational psychology, social psychology and institutional history are a central theme particularly in so-called perpetrator research, which has developed into a study of the Nazi '*Volksgemeinschaft*' (people's community) as a community of exclusion and persecution.⁵ Apart from the

Verwaltung. Die wirtschaftliche Ausplünderung der Juden und die westfälischen Finanzbehörden, Münster, pp. 151-167.

³ Oliver von Wrochem, 'Historisch-politische Bildung in NS-Gedenkstätten. Überlegungen zu reflexivem Geschichtsbewusstsein und berufsgruppenorientierter Arbeit', in: Ibid. (ed.) (2010): *Das KZ Neuengamme und seine Außenlager. Geschichte, Nachgeschichte, Erinnerung, Bildung*, Berlin, pp. 285-299, especially pp. 287f., pp. 291-298; cf. Peter Koch/Oliver von Wrochem (eds) (2010): *Gedenkstätten des NS-Unrechts und Bundeswehr. Bestandsaufnahme und Perspektiven*, Paderborn et al.

⁴ Detlef Garbe, 'Institutionen des Terrors und der Widerstand der Wenigen', in: Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg (ed.), *Hamburg im 'Dritten Reich'*, Göttingen 2005, pp. 519-572.

⁵ Frank Bajohr/Michael Wildt (eds) (2009): *Volksgemeinschaft. Neuere Forschungen zur Gesellschaft des Nationalsozialismus*, Frankfurt am Main; Michael Wildt (2007): *Volksgemeinschaft als Selbstermächtigung. Gewalt gegen Juden in der deutschen Provinz 1919-1939*, Hamburg; Markus Brunner et al. (eds) (2011): *Volksgemeinschaft, Täterschaft und Antisemitismus. Beiträge zur psychoanalytischen Sozialpsychologie des Nationalsozialismus und seiner Nachwirkungen*, Gießen;

changed legal parameters and social conditions, can continuities in the structure of institutions be identified which encourage conformity and the shifting of responsibility to the next highest level of the hierarchy? The experiences of the seminar participants can be integrated here, and borderline situations from their professional lives can be discussed. The purpose of this is, among other things, to look at the mechanisms of discrimination, the deprivation of rights, and exclusion in the context of institutional action. This is where the examination of human rights issues within the 'History of Nazi Germany, Institutions, Human Rights' project based at the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial comes in. Addressing human rights issues entails more than just looking at the Declaration of Human Rights and conventions for the protection of human rights,⁶ it also involves analysing the above-mentioned dimensions of structural discrimination, the deprivation of rights, and exclusion within institutional organisations as well as exploring the connections between institutional crimes of the past and the human rights challenges facing institutions today. This should encourage the participants to identify and make use of their own opportunities for action in the context of examining rights violations by and in institutions. The approach described in more detail in the following is aimed at the target groups already mentioned as well as information disseminators from all parts of society, teachers and anyone else interested in the actions of state institutions in the Nazi era and the present day.

Content, issues and goals of the seminars developed in the project

The 'History of Nazi Germany, Institutions, Human Rights' project involved devising educational resources for the members of state institutions. Over the course of two and a half years, seminars were developed and tested on the role of the police, judiciary and public administration in the Nazi era and after the war as well as on current human rights issues in a professional context. Within the project, 48 seminars were held with employees of the judiciary, police, public administration and the German Armed Forces (*Bundeswehr*); there were also two training sessions for information disseminators as well as three pedagogical workshops and two conferences. The project was additionally presented at third-party events. Nonetheless, instead of providing a conclusive answer to the question of combining historical learning and human rights education, we can only describe possible approaches.

Experiences with (explicit) human rights education at memorials⁷ are a relatively recent development, and we do not think that this approach is suitable for every situation and

Frank Bajohr, 'Die Zustimmungsdiktatur. Grundzüge nationalsozialistischer Herrschaft in Hamburg', in: Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte (ed.), *Hamburg im 'Dritten Reich'*, Göttingen 2005, pp. 69-121.

⁶ Cf. Monique Eckmann, 'Exploring the Relevance of Holocaust Education for Human Rights Education', in: *IBE Prospects*, UNESCO 40 (2010), No. 1, pp. 7-16; a definition of human rights education in a European context can be found in the 'Guidelines on Human Rights Education for Law Enforcement Officials', OSCE/ODIHR 2012, pp. 11-13, available at <http://www.osce.org/odihr/93968> (accessed on 18.10.2012). The OSCE manual contains numerous suggestions for human rights-related work with law enforcement groups.

⁷ Regarding the basic challenges of human rights education based on historical issues, cf. FRA – European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (ed.) (2011): *Die Vergangenheit für die Zukunft entdecken. Die Rolle historischer Stätten und Museen in der Holocaust- und Menschenrechtsbildung in*

every target group. For the employees of state institutions, however, human rights issues are of topical relevance in our opinion.

The starting point for our project were the thoughts on human rights education formulated in the 'Teaching Human Rights' funding programme of the Remembrance, Responsibility and Future Foundation, in which the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international agreements are interpreted as a response to the experiences of World War II, forced labour and the Holocaust. The aim of this funding programme is to foster the creation of innovative educational resources which more closely combine human rights education with historical learning.⁸

The seminars that were developed in the project follow up on the thoughts concerning historical teaching for specific professional groups. Historical events during the Nazi era are a jumping-off point for examining human rights. The seminar modules address current issues facing the respective target groups, with human rights representing an important connection – but by no means the only connection – to the present day.

Firstly, the modules that were developed provide an insight into the actions of the police, public administration and judiciary in the Nazi era as well as their participation in the regime's policy of exclusion and extermination. Secondly, they trace the continuities and changes in these institutions before 1933 and after 1945. And thirdly, they make it possible to apply these findings to the discussion of contemporary human rights issues.

The respective professional groups, their role in the Nazi era and their participation in Nazi crimes are all used as starting points in the seminars. In guided exhibition tours and working groups at the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial, we provide an introduction to each topic through historical documents, biographies, photos, films and audio examples, and we explain the personnel and structural continuities and ruptures in each institution after the war. This makes clear that state institutions were pillars of the Nazi regime which only changed slowly after the end of World War II, with personnel continuities hampering such change.⁹ The participants look at examples and materials in

der EU, Luxembourg; Rainer Huhle (ed.) (2010): *Human Rights and History: A Challenge for Education*, Berlin.

⁸ Quoted in http://www.stiftung-evz.de/fileadmin/user_upload/EVZ_Uploads/Handlungsfelder/Handeln_fuer_Menschenrechte/Menschen_Rechte_Bilden/20130820_EVZ_Broschuere_MRB_en.pdf (accessed on 20.08.2013).

⁹ For an introduction to the role of these three institutions in the polycratic Nazi state, we would like to mention a few fairly recent publications. Administration: Sabine Mecking/Andreas Wirsching (eds) (2005): *Stadtverwaltung im Nationalsozialismus. Systemstabilisierende Dimensionen kommunaler Herrschaft*, Paderborn; Uwe Lohalm, 'Garant nationalsozialistischer Herrschaft. Der öffentliche Dienst', in: Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg (ed.) (2005): *Hamburg im 'Dritten Reich'*, Göttingen. pp. 154-187; Sven Reichardt/Wolfgang Seibel (eds) (2011): *Der prekäre Staat. Herrschen und Verwalten im Nationalsozialismus*, Frankfurt am Main. Police: Wolfgang Schulte (ed.) (2009): *Die Polizei im NS-Staat. Beiträge eines internationalen Symposiums an der Deutschen Hochschule der Polizei in Münster*, Frankfurt am Main; *Ordnung und Vernichtung. Die Polizei im NS-Staat* (exhibition catalogue), Dresden 2011; Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial (ed.) (2013): *Polizei, Verfolgung und Gesellschaft im Nationalsozialismus*, Bremen. Judiciary: Nikolaus Wachsmann (2006): *Gefangen unter Hitler. Justizterror und Strafvollzug im NS-Staat*, Munich.

which the employees of the police forces, judiciary or public administration are the agents, or which deal with current developments in these institutions. Other components of the seminars include the rehabilitation of the judiciary after the war, denazification in the civil service, and the lessons that the international community drew from Nazi crimes and the experiences of World War II, resulting in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on Genocide of 1948. These consequences changed the social framework and legal basis for the actions of individuals and states, and they also had repercussions on the opportunities for and limits on action in institutional contexts.

In the seminars, current human rights issues are discussed using examples from each professional field and viewed in the context of international agreements for the protection of human rights. The conflict between state (institutional) rights of intervention, or interests in intervention, and individual rights to freedom is also addressed. The current employees of public authorities are also given the opportunity to look critically at the mechanisms of conformity.

In connection with this, it is especially important to consider the role of state institutions in society and the actions of each individual employee – in other words, the question of the opportunities for action and the structures of action within an institutional framework.¹⁰ Focusing on developments and changes in the institutional framework of the Nazi state can sharpen awareness of current threats to basic and human rights which are inherent in institutions as well as societies. In reference to this, Jan-Philipp Reemtsma writes: '[...] it is about the awareness of a threat which, since it has shown you that it was an illusion to believe the process of civilisation was irreversible, you know will always remain current'.¹¹

One finding from the seminars was that many participants initially believed that everything changed suddenly from one day to the next in 1933. In fact, however, the encroachment on basic rights and the recoding of accepted standards and measures of value was a process accompanied by a reorganisation of state institutions. It makes sense, then, to look at the mechanisms by which a society 'becomes increasingly felonious or, more precisely, normatively recodes what it considers desirable and objectionable, good and bad, proper and criminal'.¹² It is also useful to address the erosion of the tools of a normative state and the expansion of the tools of a prerogative state as a stealthy process comprising a sequence of decisions for which specific people were responsible. In this way, the seminar participants can explore the level of individual and institutional

¹⁰ Cf. the preliminary considerations by Ulla Kux at the 3rd International Conference on Holocaust Research, 'Helpers, Rescuers and Networkers of Resistance', 27-29.1.2011 in Berlin, available at <http://www.konferenz-holocaustforschung.de/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/Workshop1-Kux.pdf> (accessed on 3.10.2012).

¹¹ Jan-Philipp Reemtsma, 'Wozu Gedenkstätten?', in: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 25/26, 2010, pp. 3-9, quote on page 9.

¹² Harald Welzer, 'Für eine Modernisierung der Erinnerungs- und Gedenkkultur', in: *Gedenkstättenrundbrief* 162 (2011), pp. 3-9; cf. Dana Giesecke/Harald Welzer (2012): *Das Menschenmögliche. Zur Renovierung der deutschen Erinnerungskultur*, Hamburg, p. 21 and pp. 178f.

decisions which influenced events as a whole and reflect on the scope of action available in a professional context from both a historical and a contemporary perspective.

One consequence of the systematic injustice practised by the Nazis – and by state institutions – is that employees of state institutions today are urged to orientate their actions on basic and human rights. They have a constitutional obligation to protect these rights, but at the same time they are authorised to intervene in the rights of others. This can sometimes lead to a conflict of interests between basic and human rights on the one hand and the goals of the institution or its individual employees on the other. As executive bodies of a state, state institutions implement guidelines, on the basis of a division of labour, which are ordered by superior authorities or specified by legal regulations. As the experiences of the Nazi era show, these employees have considerable scope of action in terms of how such guidelines are implemented. Therefore, one goal of the seminars is to convey how unlimited authority on the part of state institutions can endanger basic and human rights and facilitate a relapse into institutional structures of violence. Therefore, the seminars aim, above all, to encourage the participants to reflect on and become sensitised to institutional injustice and, as a result, think about how institutional actions must be shaped today so that human rights are protected.

When we refined the educational materials developed in the project, the guiding questions were: Which topics lend themselves to combining historical and contemporary issues, and how can these temporal levels be linked in a sensible way?

During the conceptual phase, it became apparent that the educators conducting the seminars needed to be familiar with many different subjects and have an insight into the current curricula and topics addressed by institutions. Therefore, in the first phase of the project, we visited the educational establishments and familiarised ourselves with their syllabuses. We then established an advisory board made up of educators in history and human rights as well as people from the participating institutions to consult with us on the design of the seminars. To acquaint ourselves with the target groups, their professional requirements and their existing knowledge and attitudes, we also held group and individual interviews with future seminar participants in advance. We had at least two days for each of the seminars themselves. In our opinion, a shorter period of time would not be enough to reasonably combine the topics of Nazi history, institutions and human rights, especially if the historical site itself and its post-war history are to be taken into account as well.

The materials we developed are modular. In addition to devising a method for starting the seminar with a reference to the present day (Module A), we developed three modules on the institutional history of the police, judiciary and public administration which look at the systematic integration of these bodies in the Nazi system of injustice as well as their rehabilitation and denazification after the war (Modules B to D), and five other modules in which past and present perspectives on institutional behaviour are placed in relation to one another and linked directly to current human rights issues (Modules E to I).

Module A presents a method of starting the seminar in an associative way by using the example of the Sinti and Roma people to reveal and question the preconceptions and existing mental imagery of the participants.

Module B covers the institutional history of the police and consists of two components which are suitable for working with all groups: a controversial and topical introduction to the seminar regarding the interpretation of Nazism, and a film dealing with the perspectives of the children and grandchildren of SS perpetrators. The module also includes units on the role of the police forces in the Nazi era, the question of their scope of action and their participation in deportations.

Module C focuses on the role of the judiciary and penal system in the persecution of minorities under the Nazis as well as the behaviour and scope of action of the staff of penal institutions. The module is a good building block for seminars dealing with the history of the Nazi judiciary and penal system.

Module D looks at the supporting role of public administration under the Nazis using the example of welfare and personnel policies, but it also shows what forms resistance could take. It traces the continuities and careers of individuals in Germany after the war and addresses denazification in the civil service.

Module E deals with the response of the international community to the crimes of the Nazis. Using the Allies' policy of denazification and the Nuremberg Trials as starting points, the module introduces the Convention on Genocide, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights regulations. Selected articles and current examples of human rights violations are viewed in relation to historical experiences.

Module F revolves around social practices of exclusion and discrimination. Resentment towards the Sinti and Roma people as well as past and present forms of antiziganism are examined, and questions are asked about continuities in the exclusion of these groups on the part of the state.

Module G looks at the use of preventive detention during the Nazi era and its development to the present day. Since both the seminar participants and society as a whole generally exhibit very little sympathy for those held in preventive detention, this example can be used to prompt a discussion of the importance of democratic principles and the question of the universality of human rights.

Module H is concerned with forced labour and its economic role in the functioning of the Nazi regime. It looks at compensation practices after 1945 and the way in which former forced labourers have been treated to the present day. A particular focus is placed on the role of state authorities in relation to forced labour and compensation practices.

Module I revolves around the past and present situation of child refugees, which is viewed in relation to the actions of administrative officials under the Nazis and in the

present day. The history of the 'Kindertransport' rescue effort in the Nazi period is examined in connection with current reasons for refugee situations. Reference is also made to the current regulations applicable to refugees.

The modules are suitable as an introduction to the respective topics or for a more in-depth study of them. The modules usually build on each other and can be combined to create multi-day seminars.

In multi-day seminars on 'The Behaviour of the Police in the Nazi Era', Module B – which deals with the history of the police – can be easily combined with an exploration of the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial and its exhibitions. Building on this, Module E can look at the ramifications of Nazi crimes as well as current regulations for protecting human rights, especially the prohibition of torture. To supplement this, the tension between the need for security and the right to freedom can be discussed based on the example of preventive detention (Module G).

Alternatively, Module A and Module F, dealing with the topic of 'Antiziganism', could be combined for seminars with police employees, ideally in conjunction with Module E with a focus on current human rights issues arising from the practice of police custody.

In seminars on the topic of 'Administrative Behaviour in the Process of the Nazi Policy of Exclusion and Extermination', a visit to the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial (or a comparable memorial) can be taken as the starting point for explaining the development of administrative actions under the Nazis (Module D); the seminar can also address questions relating to the denazification of the civil service and current human rights issues in connection with current administrative actions (Module E). The subject of forced labour and compensation practices (Module H) is suitable for more in-depth study or as a seminar on its own. Alternatively, the topic of antiziganism (in a combination of Modules A and F) could be covered in two-day seminars with administrative employees.

Multi-day seminars on the subject of 'The Nazi Judiciary and Penal System' can provide an introduction to the persecuting bodies of the Nazi regime and the cooperation, by means of a division of labour, between the judiciary, penal system and police forces in the persecution of political opponents, so-called 'community aliens' and supposed criminals. Topics to cover here could include individual detention sites in Hamburg, such as the former concentration camp and prison in Fuhlsbüttel from 1933 to 1945, as well as the legal foundations for imprisonment. Visits to the sites of historical crimes of justice can be embedded in the seminar. Module C on the scope of action of judicial employees under the Nazis could also be integrated. Module G on preventive detention can build on this, with support from Module E on rehabilitation, denazification and human rights, particularly the unit covering the treatment of prisoners in the Federal Republic of Germany. We have also addressed the continued use of the grounds of the former Neuengamme concentration camp by the Hamburg penal system from 1948 to 2006 and the public debates regarding a worthy memorial.

The participants have different views on the examination of issues of contemporary relevance at a concentration camp memorial; in any case, this approach does not correspond to what is usually expected from a visit to a memorial. With a solid educational underpinning, references to present-day concerns can break through routine ways of thinking and open up the possibility of new associations. Nearly all of the modules make explicit reference to human rights, though this is just one of several references to the present day. It is important to convey why current human rights issues are being addressed at a memorial. This particularly applies when a seminar deals with current human rights violations by members of the respective professional group. The question that immediately arises is: Why is this being talked about at a memorial? In such cases, the participants often identify with their professional group and feel personally attacked. To ensure a successful transfer between past and present human rights content, we began to closely intertwine the different time periods. This makes it easier to identify developments, differences and similarities. The seminars focus on social conditions and structural dimensions, and a distinction should be made between state/institutional accountability and individual responsibility in order to avoid overly simplistic comparisons. This differentiating approach can create a learning atmosphere in which the participants are able to take a critical view of human rights violations even by members of their own professional group.

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* This article is a shortened version of the introduction to the final publication of the 'History of Nazi Germany, Institutions, Human Rights' project. The questions and considerations raised here are addressed in several academic articles in that publication, and the seminar modules and educational materials discussed later on are also covered in more detail there. Cf.: *NS-Geschichte, Institutionen, Menschenrechte. Bildungsmaterialien zu Verwaltung, Polizei und Justiz*, edited on behalf of the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial by Ulrike Pastoor and Oliver von Wrochem, Berlin 2013.