

Ethnic Minorities and Holocaust Memory

Veranstalter: Study group „Global Holocaust? Memories of the Destruction of European Jews in Global Context“ (Augsburg University, University of Vermont, University of Haifa, Jena Center)

Datum, Ort: 11.07.2013-13.07.2013, Jena

Bericht von: Lars Breuer, Berlin

How do ethnic minorities relate to manifestations of Holocaust memory throughout the Western world? What is the impact of migration on Holocaust memory in the majority societies? These questions were to be discussed at the symposium „Ethnic Minorities and Holocaust Memory“ which convened in Jena on July 11-13, 2013.

It was the third conference organized by the study group „Global Holocaust? Memories of the Destruction of European Jews in Global Context“, consisting of scholars from Augsburg University, University of Vermont, University of Haifa, and the Jena Center. Departing from the general assumption that Holocaust memory „undoubtedly constitutes a central component of historical consciousness and political culture“ in Western countries, the first gathering examined memories in „non-Western“ countries and regions.¹ The second conference focused on the variety of Holocaust memory within the Israeli society.²

In his opening Lecture, JACOB EDER (Jena) juxtaposed Western mainstream societies, in which Holocaust memory would play a crucial role, with challenges to this notion by particular memory communities, namely ethnic minorities. As a framework for the following presentations, Eder outlined different perspectives of approaching the tensions between „particularities and universal dimensions of Holocaust memory“.

In her observations on Holocaust education and immigration in Germany, ANGELA KÜHNER (Frankfurt am Main) found that the pride taken in successfully having come to terms with the past would remain an exclusive property of German majority society and inhibit immigrants from becoming part of the hegemonic memory culture. Often Holocaust education was all about conveying the right attitude, thus (re-)producing the symbolical

exclusions of immigrants. Many teachers presupposed a general lack of interest among immigrant pupils, neglecting that they often critically compare and reflect upon memory cultures in Germany and their countries of origin.

YASEMIN YILDIZ (Urbana-Champaign) assessed that immigrants in Germany are not supposed to remember the Holocaust the same way as ethnic Germans. Especially Muslims were often perceived as either accusing outsiders or anti-Semites. Although often neglected by majority society, there are actually various examples of public, self-motivated dealing with the Nazi past by non-ethnic Germans (for example Muhsin Omurca, Zafer Şenocak, Serdar Somuncu). Often, these migrant views would provocatively engage with taboo issues and thus challenge the dominant image of the past.

BIRGIT SCHWELLING (Konstanz) described the memories of a lobby organization of former German POWs (Heimkehrerverband), which played an important role in postwar West-Germany, but unlike the German expellees' lobby organization (Bund der Vertriebenen), is rather irrelevant today.

Although Austria's memory culture is very different from Germany's, many assumptions about migrants' Holocaust memory are the same, OLIVER RATHKOLB (Vienna) argued. A study on migrant pupils' „dissonant perceptions of history“ showed that European issues are considered very important by migrants, since they offer an arena of negotiation for various identities and memories. Rathkolb highlighted the necessity of a comprehensive, non-hierarchical historiographical framework without exclusion and attempts to explicitly address a migrant audience, as it is already implemented by institutions as for instance the Mauthausen memorial.

¹ Tagungsbericht Global Holocaust? Memories of the Destruction of European Jews in Global Context. 10.06.2011-11.06.2011, Augsburg, in: H-Soz-u-Kult, 09.07.2011, URL: <<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/tagungsberichte/id=3714>> (08.09.2013).

² Tagungsbericht Global Memory of the Holocaust? Memories of the Destruction of European Jews in Global Context (II). 04.01.2012-05.01.2012, Haifa, in: H-Soz-u-Kult, 20.02.2012, URL: <<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/tagungsberichte/id=4088>> (08.09.2013).

In his comment, PHILIPP GASSERT (Augsburg) claimed that after different historical phases, nowadays Holocaust memory was more open, self-conscious, and multi-ethnic. In the subsequent discussion, it was argued that immigrant narratives of the Holocaust would still hardly get acknowledged. Moreover, by silencing migrants' experiences, such as every day Racism, a key motivation for migrants to engage with the Holocaust would be ignored. Instead, homogenizing views on the majority society and normative expectations of a „good“ Holocaust memory prevailed. When focusing on migrant groups, phenomena like anti-Semitism would frequently be overestimated and externalized to migrants.

ARND BAUERKÄMPER (Berlin) proposed some ideas on the relationship between migration and memory in Europe after 1945. Generally speaking, migration would only add to the competing memories existing anyway. Instead of following ideas of ethnic homogeneity and neglecting the specific memories of migrants, we should hence aim for an integration of divergent memories in the sense of a *histoire croisée*. However, a mere universalization of Holocaust memory would go along with decontextualization and dehistoricization of the Holocaust by equations with other cases of mass violence (for example the Palestinian „Naqba“ or the Ukrainian „Holodomor“).

ANNEMARIKE STREMMELAAR (Amsterdam) analyzed how members of the Dutch Milli Görüş branch refer to the Holocaust. On the one hand, open Holocaust denial is frequent, and Jews are being accused of „emotional blackmail“ with Holocaust memory. On the other hand, the Holocaust is being exploited as a yardstick for the suffering of Muslims, predominantly depicted as innocent victims attacked by the West for example in Iraq.

TONY KUSHNER (Southampton) presented an example of universalized Holocaust memory in Britain. The fate of Stephen Lawrence, a victim of a Racist attack in London in 1993, was by his parents linked to the Holocaust and especially to Anne Frank. On the one hand, their campaign led to a wider understanding and even to a comprehensive investigation of institutionalized Racism in Britain. On the other

hand, the murder of Stephen Lawrence was included in exhibitions on Anne Frank and the program of Holocaust Memorial Day in Britain, exemplifying the need to fight Racial violence still today. According to Kushner, the linking of the two biographies is an example of a productive intersection of different memories, what Michael Rothberg has framed as „multidirectional memory“.³

ALAN E. STEINWEIS' (Burlington) comment and the following discussion focused on the current state of Holocaust memory. While remembrance of the Holocaust is clearly consensual, there would be many feelings of rejection not only among migrants, but among young people in general. With growing distance in time, Holocaust memory would become more abstract, but also more open to comparisons, for example with Racism today. The burning question would be, why groups chose to use the Holocaust paradigm to make their claims and how this could be conceived in a positive way, especially when the Holocaust is being referred to in a competitive way, for example by British Muslims boycotting Holocaust Memorial Day.

CLARENCE TAYLOR (New York) demonstrated three different ways in which African Americans related to the Holocaust. The first discourse highlighted the „similar experience“ of Jews in Germany and African Americans as early as in the 1930s. From the 1960s onwards, a second discourse gained importance, referring to slavery as the „Black Holocaust“, sometimes even depicting Jews as its main perpetrators. In a third discourse, Christian „Pro Life“ activists would use the notion of a „Black Holocaust“ to win over African Americans for their cause against abortion.

DONALD FIXICO (Phoenix) portrayed the links American Indians draw to Holocaust memory. By using Holocaust terminology, they would follow a political agenda in order to gain attention. This would go along with parallels in the experience of American Indians, be it as objects of Racist stereotyping or in experiences of trauma.

SHIRLI GILBERT (Southampton) elaborated on the role of Holocaust memory in post

³Michael Rothberg, From Gaza to Warsaw: Mapping Multidirectional Memory, in: Criticism 53 (2011), S. 523-548.

Apartheid South Africa. During Apartheid, Holocaust memory had been mainly limited to the rather marginal Jewish community. After 1994, a dehistoricized, universalized understanding of the Holocaust came to play a crucial role. In the Truth and Reconciliation Committee and in memorials like on Robben Island, Apartheid was equated with the Holocaust as a crime against humanity. According to Gilbert, this helped to establish a consensual memory culture, but at the cost of silencing problematic parts of the past, such as collaboration.

DANIEL STAHL (Jena) presented adaptations of Holocaust memory in dealing with the crimes of the Argentinian junta. In their demand for an investigation and prosecution of junta crimes, Argentinian Jewish representatives stressed analogies between Jewish victims of the junta and the Holocaust. This led to investigations and trials among other in Spain and Israel. Although the charge of genocide was eventually rejected, commemoration of Jewish junta victims has been integrated into Argentinian Holocaust memory.

From her teaching experience, ATINA GROSSMANN (New York) concluded that for today's students, the Holocaust does not have a privileged position among mass crimes or atrocities of the 19th to 21st century anymore. Mass killings would be rather connected to events in Africa, Asia or elsewhere. In times of shifting demographics, even the shared memory community in the West would be breaking down. However, due to a universalization of Holocaust memory, the Holocaust would be „recruited“ in different ways, be it as benchmark, teaching tool, legitimization for human rights claims, or juridical claims. Most importantly, it could serve as an entry ticket for acknowledgement of other experiences. Thus, the pending question would be how to integrate other, transcultural or localized understandings into Holocaust education.

In the closing comments, ANKE JOHN (Jena) highlighted the difficulties of Holocaust education which is confronted with analogies and comparisons on the one hand, and the mission to transport a clear historical narrative on the other hand. MICHAEL ROTHBERG (Urbana-Champaign) opposed three binary oppositions which he found frequently

used throughout the conference. Instead of a division into „Western“ and „non-Western“ countries, we should refer to a „shared but unequal world“. Instead of juxtaposing victims and perpetrators (which often implies an either-or), we should think of „implicated subjects“. Finally, instead of rather static notions of particular or universal memories, we should apply the concept of a multidirectional, dialogical memory. To this end, Rothberg presented a theoretical model which allows to localize different memories at two levels: One axis reaching from equation on one end to differentiation on the other end and the other axis spreading from the pole of solidarity to the pole of competition.⁴

In the final discussion doubts were expressed, if the notion of „Western“ countries, in which Holocaust memory is hegemonic or at least central, is still applicable. Undoubtedly, the Holocaust serves as a „gold standard“ for memories of mass violence, atrocities and discrimination worldwide. Also, the assertion of a universalized imperative to „learn lessons from the past“ seems legitimate. However, the examples of ethnic minorities and other particular memory groups have shown that this is not necessarily tantamount to a centrality of Holocaust memory in a narrow sense. Several discussants argued for a need to accept and embrace the variety of perspectives and historical references not only on a global level, but also within societies referred to as „Western“.

The inclusion of neglected stories, narratives and perspectives (namely of immigrants) was considered crucial for meeting the challenges of multi-ethnic and multicultural societies. However, conflicts and competitions between different memories, especially within societies should be given greater recognition. Conceptually, alternatives to the term „Holocaust“ were proposed, which was said to had become kind of a buzzword, often rather simplifying than explaining history. Concepts like „mass violence“ or „transitional justice“ were thought to be more appropriate to adopt a global perspective.

Considered positively, the conference

⁴Michael Rothberg, From Gaza to Warsaw: Mapping Multidirectional Memory, in: *Criticism* 53 (2011), S. 523-548.

demonstrated a productive heterogeneity of both empirical and theoretical approaches to Holocaust memory. Seen in a more critical light, it would have been helpful to expatiate the respective points of reference. For example if *Holocaust memory* is understood as different ways of dealing with the historical experiences of Jews during National Socialism (predominantly by historians), and *Holocaust education* is understood rather as attempts to raise civic awareness for various forms of discrimination in current societies (predominantly in education), the relationship between the two needs to be discussed. Instead, both concepts were frequently used synonymously throughout the conference.

Conference Overview:

Opening Lecture

Jacob S. Eder (Friedrich Schiller University Jena): Ethnic Minorities and Holocaust Memory: Perspectives, Dimensions, Questions

Panel 1: Germany and Austria

Chair: Kristina Meyer (Friedrich Schiller University Jena)

Angela Kühner (Goethe University Frankfurt am Main): Immigrants and Immigration in German Holocaust Educational Discourse

Yasemin Yildiz (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign): Turkish Germans and Holocaust

Birgit Schwelling (University of Konstanz): German „Kriegsheimkehrer“ and Holocaust Memory

Oliver Rathkolb (University of Vienna): Holocaust Perceptions of Young Immigrants in Austria

Comment: Philipp Gassert (Augsburg University)

Panel 2: Western Europe

Chair: Annette Weinke (Friedrich Schiller University Jena)

Arnd Bauerkämper (Freie Universität Berlin): Holocaust Memory and the Experiences of Migrants in Europe after 1945

Annemarike Stremmelaar (NIOD Institute for

War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Amsterdam): Turkish-Dutch Memories of the Holocaust

Tony Kushner (University of Southampton): Situating Racism between the Post-Colonial and the Holocaust in Britain

Comment: Alan E. Steinweis (University of Vermont, Burlington)

Panel 3: The Americas and South Africa

Chair: Susanna Schrafstetter (University of Vermont, Burlington)

Clarence Taylor (Baruch College, New York): African American Memories of the Holocaust

Donald Fixico (Arizona State University, Phoenix): American Indians' View the Jewish Holocaust

Shirli Gilbert (University of Southampton): Holocaust Memory in Post-Apartheid South Africa

Daniel Stahl (Friedrich Schiller University Jena): Jewish Discourses about the Crimes of the Argentinian Junta

Comment: Atina Grossmann (The Cooper Union, New York)

Final Comments and Conference Closure:

Anke John (Friedrich Schiller University Jena)

Michael Rothberg (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign)

Tagungsbericht *Ethnic Minorities and Holocaust Memory*. 11.07.2013-13.07.2013, Jena, in: H-Soz-u-Kult 04.10.2013.