

Chapter 7

Remembering the Holocaust and Learning From Its History: An Analysis of Representations of the Holocaust in Europe

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at how the history of World War II and the Holocaust, in particular, has been treated in museums in Europe. It also discusses a trend within which the political and educational treatment of the Holocaust has been shifted in Germany's neighboring countries. Examples are drawn from history-related institutions and museums in Sweden, Czech and France. The trend in addressing past injustices should be seen in relation to heightened commitments to human rights in the context of post-Cold War international relationships.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines how the Holocaust, which refers to the mass murder of European Jews during the World War II, is represented at history museums and other institutions in Europe. More specifically, it examines the ideas and concepts that underlie the representation of history at these educational institutions rather than the exhibitions themselves. For this purpose, the article discusses a series of transitions in which the countries neighboring Germany began to treat Holocaust history as part of their national history. Illuminations are drawn from institutions in

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the Czech Republic, France and Sweden as examples of former communist regimes, Nazi-occupied countries and the wartime neutral states respectively.

For the first five decades following the end of World War II, the Holocaust had been regarded inside and outside of Germany as a brutal undertaking that was almost entirely carried out by the Nazi regime. From the 1950s onwards, the government of West Germany has imposed a self-reflective policy of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (overcoming the past) to all sectors of society, including law, public life and education of the country. As a result, denying the Holocaust was outlawed. The use of Nazi symbolism, such as the Swastika or any form of the SS bolts, became subject to legal punishment. In education, the government placed strong emphasis on the history of World War II, National Socialism and the Holocaust. The policy was not confined to the subject of history. Indeed, considering that Hitler's rise was made possible by public support, this policy was also extended to political science and social studies education. School textbooks also cover these topics extensively. This is particularly true for *Gymnasium*, which are generally attended by potential elites in German society. There are a number of exhibitions and memorials about the Nazi period in Germany and the Holocaust that are visited frequently by the public and school children.

While Germany's neighbors appreciated the policy efforts of West Germany for decades, these countries often turned blind eyes to their own involvement in the crime of the mass murder. However, beginning in the 1990s, a growing number of Germany's neighbors began to perceive the history of the Holocaust as part of their own national histories, while acknowledging the overt and covert involvement of their own countries in these crimes. Some of the governments offered public apologies and monetary compensation to Holocaust victims and their relatives.

In this context, this chapter analyses the changes in public policies related to the Holocaust by examining how this dark side of national histories of European countries has been treated and represented in post-war Europe.

THE CZECH REPUBLIC: THE TEREZÍN MEMORIAL

The case of Czech Republic is a characteristic example of a former communist country that have changed its treatment of the Holocaust. In addition to Poland, where Auschwitz is located, the Czech Republic plays a key role in passing down the history of the Holocaust to younger generations in Europe. The Terezín Memorial was a former prison that held the assassin who killed the Austrian imperial couple, an event that triggered the outbreak of World War I. Terezín is located in a suburb of Prague and it was known as Theresienstadt in German. Nazi Germany used the former prison as one of its concentration camps between 1941 and 1945. Now the

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