Franka Rauch

The Body in Memorial Site Education. Contributions of Politicized Somatics to Memorial Site Education in Germany

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The body in memorial site education:

A theoretical case study on the possible contributions of politicized somatics to memorial site education in Germany

Student: Franka Rauch

M.A. Peace and Conflict Studies at Otto von Guericke University Magdeburg

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List of Abbreviations

IHRA  International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance
IR    International Relations
ISMETA International Somatic Movement Education and Therapy Association
PACS  Peace and Conflict Studies
WWII  Second World War


1 Writing on the land of my ancestry

“My body has an ancestry.” (Frank, 2012, p. 392)


As I am writing this introduction, I am sitting at my desk at home – only 33km away from the memorial site at the former Nazi concentration camp Neuengamme near Hamburg. I was born in Nuremberg, not far from the Documentation Center Nazi Party Rally Grounds. All my life, my feet have walked on the same ground that only two generations before me unimaginable horrors have taken place. I was educated on and have learned about the history of National Socialism in Germany but where the past is present for me is not in my head; it is the sensory experience of realizing how the land I live on and the ancestry I come from is interwoven with this history that makes me wonder: how does this history shape me, and really: anyone?

This thesis takes a look at the body in memorial site education at former Nazi concentration camps¹ in Germany. On the subtle and not so subtle ways in which bodies are shaped by the Holocaust² until today, the ways the body is nevertheless mostly overlooked in memorial site education and the pedagogical implications of recognizing the body in memorial site education. I engage the methodology of politicized somatics in the case study of memorial site education as an example of how Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS) could re-cognize the body and somatic dimensions of peace and conflict in general.

In analysing the role of the body in memorial site education and respective politicized somatic recommendations for its pedagogy, the topic of this research is situated in the wider societal discourse on Holocaust memorial culture in Germany and beyond. As the

¹ A detailed definition of concentration camps will be given in chapter 3.
² I use “Holocaust” as it is the most established term in international discourse. Simultaneously, I recognize that the etymology of the term Holocaust is problematic (derived from the biblical word for burnt offerings). Inner-Jewish discourses therefore mainly use the term Shoah (translating as catastrophe in Hebrew) Kübler (2014, pp. 31–34). I use the term Holocaust in accordance with the Council of Europe, in its wider significance of referring to the genocide perpetrated by Nazi Germany against the Jews and Sinti and Roma as well as other victim groups, such as “people with disabilities – homosexuals – Jehovah’s witnesses – resistance members and political opponents – Slavs – Poles – asocials” (Mayran and Schlagdenhauffen, 2013, p. 3)
generation of the Holocaust is gradually passing away, the generations who have not experienced its historical context themselves are left with the question of how to respectfully deal with its memory – and its spatial presence at memorial sites. Furthermore, memory of the Holocaust has undergone a process of pluralization, cosmopolitanization and universalization since 1945; globalization has contributed to transferring memories of the Holocaust across time and space. Today, many different communities of memory exist all over the world, and also within Germany – where memorial culture constitutes a central element of national identity. German memorial culture has (been) developed over time and has now arrived at a crossroads at what Aleida Assmann calls: „das wachsende Unbehagen an der Erinnerungskultur“ (Assmann, 2016, p. 13). The end of the era of witnesses, the mediatization of Holocaust memory in a digitalized world and the diversification of society shaped by migration are only a few challenges that demand memorial culture to change. This thesis turns the spotlight on memorial site education as one component of German memorial culture, and how “the body” could be one actor in facilitating its evolution. Tapping into the zeitgeist of discussing future collective remembering of the Holocaust in Germany, politicized somatics offers a unique perspective to reimagine the purpose and methods of memorial site education. The topic of German memorial site education is not only relevant to current public debates, but also to the field of Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS). As an international discipline, PACS is predominantly concerned with contemporary issues of war, violence, and peace that “are often dualistic spatial demarcations of a (peaceful) here and a (violent) there, near and far, global north and south” (Namberger, Wischnath, & Chojnacki, 2019, p. 1). This theoretical case study on the body in memorial site education in Germany thus “retain[s] the local from the spatial hegemony of the distant other” (Väyrynen, 2019, p. 25) in peace research: understanding Germany as a country that is also post-conflict, where the memorialization of a violent past is an important part of building, cultivating and educating for peace – here, now.

The question that this exploration of the body in memorial site education sets out to answer is: how can the perspective of politicized somatics contribute to memorial site education at former Nazi concentration camps in Germany? It is based on the hypothesis that recognizing the body could inform more holistic, multidimensional, and transformative iterations of memorial site education, and memorial culture in general. To answer the

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3 “The body” here is not bound to those born in Germany or descending from those who lived through the Holocaust and the Second World War but seeks to be inclusive of the different communities of memory and, as far as possible, any potential visitor at memorial sites in Germany today.