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Jour fixe Kulturwissenschaften

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Willing Executioners? Ambiguities and Insights in Teaching the Social Psychology of Perpetration, Collaboration, Indifference and Rescue During the Holocaust

Kevin Simpson (Portland, USA)

The personal and societal devastations wrought by the genocidal actions of individuals remain confounding to historians and psychologists. As instructors aim to increase students' engagement in global concerns, courses which address the oft-confusing interplay between prejudice, mass persuasion, human aggression, and prosocial behavior seem to be well-placed to reduce these ambiguities. Here, I present considerations, techniques, and ideas for integrating historical and psychological evidence in teaching about the Holocaust at the undergraduate level. I include course aspirations and themes, suggested reading lists, potential course activities and support materials, and exemplary class activities taken from the most recent iteration of the course as it was taught at Concordia University in Portland, OR, USA. Special emphasis is given to the processes of memory and memorialization of the Holocaust along with the ambiguities of recollection. In addition, relationships between perpetrator, collaborator, and bystanders (the psychology of altruism), between persuasion and propaganda are also prioritized here. I also reference a study-abroad module presently being taught this academic term in Vienna, Austria which examines the social psychology of the Holocaust and the related crossover of history and psychology involved in the legacy of National Socialism in Austria (course titled "Explaining Evil: Vienna and Hitler's Genocide"). Finally, a plenary discussion of the benefits and challenges of blending the linear (history) with the thematic (psychology) will conclude the presentation. The diminishing loss of living memory of the genocides of the 20th-century, particularly the Holocaust, stands as a stark reminder that we as educators must carry on the moral imperative of teaching the causes and consequences of genocide.

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