Re-Visions of the Holocaust: Textbook Images and Historical Myth-Making

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The visual representation of "others" or those not identified as part of main-stream European-derived culture is an issue of historiography as well as one of current politics. This paper evaluates the World War II Holocaust of European Jews as it is depicted in a sample of visual images in United States secondary school history textbooks. It finds that the images are not oriented toward historical fact or complexity as much as to enact contemporary goals of societal unity. All the blame for the events is placed on stereotypical "Nazis." Absent are the culpabilities of other groups and nationalities and of persecution of minority groups in Western thought and tradition. The study also raises the question of how images can or should be used to heighten social consciousness and provoke public action.

Keywords   holocaust, photograph, historiography, representation of minorities, textbook, revisionism, stereotype, myth

. . . Who will calculate for us the cost of our decision to forget?

—George Seferis, *South Wind*

Tension in any society is revealed by battles over the definition, description, representation and interpretation of the past. The recrudescence of Holocaust revisionism has forced scholars to examine how the Holocaust is represented in historical and journalistic writing (Lipstadt, 1993; Vidal-Naquet, 1993). Simultaneously, ignorance of the events is on the rise; a 1992 Roper survey reported that 39% of U.S. high school students could not identify what the term *Holocaust* referred to (Jaroff, 1993, p. 83). One of the most direct ways to understand the current social conception of the Holocaust is to look at its portrayal, particularly how it is pictured in visual images. How is the Holocaust seen and how should it be seen? Specifically, what visual images of the Holocaust exist and how are they used, to what ends and with what meaning? The locus in which this display can best be measured as reflecting current social and cultural struggles and norms is the school textbook.

Such an inquiry has wider implications than just the study of the portrayal of

a certain event. The creation, use, and appreciation of pictures are unique to anatomically modern humans. We use images to define ourselves and others. As the paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould (1994, p. 85) noted, "The pictures we draw betray our deepest convictions and display our current conceptual limitations." It follows that how any society orders and displays its past for modern presentation, whether in words or images, is therefore a revelation of the society's estimate of itself. Moreover, the Holocaust is also a case study in the disturbing paradoxes in the act of looking at visual images of human suffering. As is argued below, simplistic notions about images—whether of massacres in Bosnia or starvation in Africa—automatically producing empathy and action are undermined by an examination of the visual display of Holocaust pictures. This article, as a small step toward addressing such objectives, discusses a qualitative evaluation of the World War II Holocaust of European Jews as it is depicted in visual images in United States secondary school history textbooks.

The Industrial Background: Textbooks and Social Power

Historians have traditionally used written documents as the primary sources of historiography (Stern, 1956). Visual history has yet to arrive as a fully integrated and defined subdiscipline of historical or communications research (Perlmutter, 1994). Photographic histories are often "coffee table books" treating the images as simple denotations of events. As the photographer and critic Allan Sekula suggested:

> At their worst, pictorial histories offer an extraordinarily reductive view of historical causality: the First World War "begins" with a glimpse of an assassination in Sarajevo; the entry of the United States into the Second World War "begins" with a view of wrecked battleships. (Sekula, 1986, p. 158)

It is only rarely that mainstream, illustrated, survey histories actually engage the visual image as a problematic and complex form of discourse worthy of inspection and analysis (e.g., Parker, 1995). Significantly, the same is true for the textbooks examined for this study. The images are largely selected by editors who work for the publishers rather than by the authors of the word text. Generally, works on representations of the Holocaust tend to follow this tradition. For example, Glenn S. Pate examined the Holocaust in American textbooks published from 1967 to 1982, but he simply listed the number of pictures without discussing them in any depth (Pate, 1987, pp. 259–260).

To consider why a textbook vision of the Holocaust exists, some background is required on the methods and constraints of textbook production. Textbooks are social and industrial constructs, not autonomous authorial musings (FitzGerald, 1979). They are manufactured by teams of writers and graphic designers headed by an editor working for the publishing company. One of the key selling determinants of a book is its aesthetic attraction, that is, its "eye appeal" (Farr & Tulley, 1985). To meet editors' and marketers' definition of the requirements of eye appeal, textbooks must contain a large number of images, use as much color as possible

(at least one aspect of color per two-page layout), be anthropocentric (i.e., deal with the activities of people, not objects), be action oriented, and, most of all, be "socially redeeming" (Perlmutter, 1992a).

In addition, textbook selection is an intensely political process. Adoption criteria are not the spontaneous generation of scholarly principles but the result of lobbying, complaints, and appeals by special interest groups as well as the imposition of community standards (Currey, 1988; English, 1980; Jorstad, 1988). The editors (who often select textbook images and write captions) must operationalize the dictates of many interest groups. Naturally, the one goal of a textbook editor is to not cause anyone to feel offended by a text's content. In areas where several groups may have competing views of how a topic should be depicted, textbook manufacturers are in a quandary. The result is, as many critics contend, blandness. But struggles over textbook content have another effect. In today's textbook *realpolitik*, allocation of limited space entails a zero-sum game (Perlmutter, 1992a). The surface area set aside is more a matter of cultural politics than any objective historical value.

Method

The sample consisted of one world history and one American history secondary school textbook from each of the major manufacturers that market to the Philadelphia public school system (the sixth largest school district in the United States; see Appendix A for a list of texts). These were the main program textbooks from which teachers draw lessons each school day. They are typically over a thousand pages, with as many images. The books are distributed to most major American school systems. They rarely have a sole *auteur*; they are edited or managed rather than authored.

A previous study of the visual images of war in the texts proved revealing for the present study (Perlmutter, 1992b). Although considerable variation was observed across publishers, represented wars, and artistic media (e.g., photographs, paintings, and so on), several general tendencies emerged: clarity of time, place, and situation; an American orientation; a preponderance of color or colorized images; and a high kinetic content—human figures involved in action, usually combat. The depiction of the Holocaust was originally intended to be only a part of this study, but for reasons that will become obvious, it grew into a separate project. This analysis was conducted by examining all images in the sample (photographs, paintings, etc.) that were related to the Holocaust or the treatment of Jews in the Second World War. Coding was for themes of "who did what to whom and when, in what way, for what reason." Of basic interest and concentration was what the body text and caption told about the events depicted in pictures of the Holocaust.

In addition, part of the task of any visual history is to ask what is missing from the picture (Perlmutter, 1991, 1994, 1997). Absence is significant but rarely conspicuous unless a reader or viewer is aware of other possibilities. A picture, no matter how accurately it represents a strip of reality, is still a selection from a wider horizon at a certain moment, a certain microsecond; one should always ask what is

not shown in an image as much as interpret what is shown. The Holocaust, as suggested by the massive literature that it has engendered, was not a simple event with a limited *dramatis personae*. Nor did it occur for a limited time in a severely restricted spatial setting. Yet the goal of a textbook (and of journalism) is the reduction of complexity into easily comprehensible narratives. Visual images play a role in that reduction by exemplifying points made in the text or acting as metonyms for generalizations about larger events or by allowing the text to focus its lens on what it considers to be the most significant episodes to be included. Part of the method of this study, qualitative and subjective as it is, was to ask *why* some aspects of the events were not shown as much as to appraise what was shown.

Description of the Images

Of 6,553 images[1] examined in the sampled textbooks covering the period from 1492 to 1990, 1,218 or 19% were judged to be related to a particular war or war in general. The number of World War II related images was 273 or 22.4% of the total number of war images. The number of Holocaust images was 23 (almost all of them photographs), about 8.4% of the total World War II images.[2] This number is an inflation, however, because it represents the repetition of only 15 images across texts. For example, the famous image of a small boy, in short pants, hands in the air, coming out of a ruined house in front of a pack of surrendering civilians while a German soldier, rifle ready, looks on, is repeated five times.

Although a full description of each Holocaust image is beyond the scope of this study, six tendencies emerged in the images examined:

1. All the images are either set spatially within the concentration or death camps or showed the roundup of Jews presumably to be sent to camps. Even the one picture that showed only corpses, trees, and a shadowy nondescript figure is captioned as being related to "murder" in "camps." The textbook vision of the Holocaust excludes many aspects of the Holocaust, such as the killings of non-Jews (e.g., Gypsies), and other areas or forms of death, such as in-the-field massacres (by the *Einsatzgruppen* murder squads) and street murders. Absent as well are the infrastructure and bureaucracy of death, such as the utilization of German police, industrialists, and rail workers.
2. When non-Jewish nonvictims are distinguishable, they are either the villains (German or "Nazi" soldiers) or the designated Western libera-tors (British or American soldiers). All the camp photos are accom-panied by text that in some way states that the Allies (i.e., American and British soldiers) liberated the camps.[3]
3. The Holocaust is primarily a photographic event, although some pieces of representational and abstract art and sculpture of it exist.
4. It is exposed in black and white images, with only one exception.
5. There only two images of dead humans: Both portray piles of naked corpses. The corpses are emaciated, but in the dim black and white image, no wounds or dismemberments or entrails are visible. Both

death images are, notably, from the same textbook publisher, Scott Foresman & Co.[4] In textbook guidelines, it is well established that death images are bounded by behavioral, contextual, thematic, and artistic constraints. Among these are that death becomes less frequent as time progresses, so that it is almost absent from imagery set in recent times (Perlmutter, 1992b). Also, death is allowed in color oil paintings but not in color photography. All photography death images were black and white. Finally, death is usually depicted as being caused by combat. The *only* violations of the these rules are the dead of the Holocaust.

6. The complicity of others—Croats, Bosnian Muslims, Ukrainians, Poles, collaborationists of all European countries—is absent.

Interpretation

This population of images offers suggestions about the place of visual images of the Holocaust in historiography, education, and society. It also connotes ways that struggles over the social construction of history are resolved in modern K–12 education.

The visual allocation of the blame solely on the "Nazis" for the Holocaust may be an illustration not of ignorance but of how textbooks, to avoid controversy, make simplistic good and bad distinctions, with the ranks of the bad being as few as possible. The ubiquitous evil Nazis are a safe target. Sourcing them as the propagators of horror is acceptable. Textbook companies will not risk censure by any credible pressure group. Claiming, however, that other groups—whose descendants are strong presences in the United States political and social community—were complicit in genocide is another matter. The culpability of institutions like the Catholic Church or of European cultural tradition are, of course, *verboten*.

Yet, as the historian A.J.P. Taylor (1961) once argued, Hitler did to the Jews what cultured Western Europeans had talked about for centuries. The Holocaust, as all careful writers note, was not a one-man, one-party, or one-state show; it could not have occurred without the active cooperation and passive approval of tens of millions of ordinary Germans, not to mention French, Italians, Austrians, and East Europeans. Although this is discussed in scholarly history books aimed at a literate, adult audience, textbooks aimed at children ignore such unpleasant notions. Not to do so would be to take a risk in provoking the ire of pressure groups. It is far more expedient to create a dream world Holocaust—an alternative history—where evil Nazis (taken as exceptions to the rule that humans are decent creatures) were fought by all the united peoples of Europe (proving that the brotherhood of man is just around the corner) and acted alone (i.e., not directly aided by 2,000 years of Western racist dogma and institutional precedent). In industrial terms, the cleansing of blame for the Holocaust is a risk-reduction formula for the textbook publisher (cf. Cyert & March, 1963, p. 119; Turow, 1992, p. 61).

In addition, the vision of the Holocaust in these textbooks does not recognize that the liberation of the camps did not reveal or uncover some great secret. In reality the liberation simply confirmed what had been generally known for years. The willful ignorance, even culpability, of the American government and especially

many segments of the American press has been well documented (Gilbert, 1981; Lipstadt, 1986; Ross, 1980; Wyman, 1984). Indeed, there is also strong evidence that most moderately literate Americans had some idea of the plight of European Jewry (Zalampas, 1989).

Furthermore, what are we to make of the fact that Holocaust dead are the *only* photographed civilian dead in these textbooks? Dead bodies are considered disturbing and hence controversial— something, as said, anathema to textbook editors. The violation of an obvious proscription may originate in the fact that the photograph of Holocaust dead has become a familiar genre sight, perhaps even a visual cliché in Western imagery. It is an icon with which we are familiar, like today's ubiquitous starving African child. Its repetition has, perhaps, as in all such cases, diminished its impact, and its horror is diluted. This is a paradox of human suffering. It may be linked to what Bob Geldoff called the "compassion fatigue" of the West when presented with repetitive disasters in the Third World.

The genrefication of the Holocaust is most evident in the "little boy" image. It is, according to archive librarians, the most requested image of the Holocaust. Indeed, it has been called "The Holocaust in one photograph" (Fishkoff, 1993). Also, it becomes a symbolic object of reference. For example, Vice President Gore, in a memorial service held on the 50th anniversary of the Warsaw uprising, said that he was "haunted" by this image and that it reminds him—linking it to Bosnia—that such "outrages" cannot be allowed to continue (Jasser, 1993). The question is whether the image is haunting in itself or has been repeated so many times it is coded as being a haunting reminder of the events. As said, it appears five times in the textbooks studied in the survey, more often than any other image. The image is, in a sense, an icon of outrage. Lorraine Monk, in her book *Photographs That Changed the World* (1989), tells us the boy survived the war and that the photograph "was submitted as documentary evidence at the Nuremburg war trials" (Monk, 1989, pp. 27–28). Yet, we ask, did the image actually change anything or in any way lead to the boy's life being spared? Did it stop the slaughter? Or more bluntly, did any photograph save the life of a single Jew?

Such sentiments of "outrage" tap into the commonplace assumption that photographs of horror trigger some universal nerve of empathy and concern. Rarely mentioned (and certainly not in the textbooks) is that the "little boy" image, for example, is the product of a Nazi camera. It was one of the pictures contained in the deluxe, leather-bound album delivered to Heinrich Himmler by Jürgen Stroop, the S.S. general who exterminated the ghetto community. In short, the image was not intended to evoke sympathy; rather it was a metaphorical celebration of rooting out "rats" from their holes. This situation calls into question the dictum that the meaning of the image is always directly related to authorial intention. Here the authors were the murderers. That their meaning may not be our meaning is a sign of the transience of meaning itself.

Other examples abound. The Nazi organization *Strength Through Joy* organized tours by coach through the ghetto of Warsaw in 1942. One participant reported:

> Every day large coaches came through the ghetto; they take soldiers through as if it was a zoo. It is the thing to do to provoke the wild animals. Often soldiers strike out at passers-by with long whips as they drive through. They go to the cemetery

where they take pictures. They compel the families of the dead and the Rabbis to interrupt the funeral and pose in front of their lenses. They set up genre pictures (old Jew above the corpse of a young girl). (Noakes & Pridham, 1988, p. 1069)

Commenting on similar visions, the Nazi philosopher Alfred Rosenberg concluded that

the sights are so appalling and probably so well known to the editorial staffs [of Nazi documentary filmmakers] that description is presumably superfluous. If there are any people left who still somehow have sympathy with the Jews then they ought to be recommended to have a look at such a ghetto. Seeing this race *en masse*, which is decaying, decomposing, and rotten to the core will banish any sentiment of humanitarianism. (Noakes & Pridham, 1988, p. 1069)

In short, our definition of suffering is not so much resident in the photograph as in ourselves. It is quite possible—we must always in such cases keep in mind Elie Weisel's unassailable insight that the Nazis were human, not invaders from Mars—to look at an image of agony and take delight.

Moreover, as noted earlier, editors of textbooks like to draw out a lesson of human brotherhood from history. Conflict should be seen as a dysfunctional event. Diverse peoples working together is the functional norm. Although this view has an obvious pedagogical value in today's America, it obscures certain inconvenient realities. It is a hollow triumph of hope over experience. It is ironic that from a philosophic point of view, the decontextualization and dehistorization of the Holocaust, the removal of linkages to traditional Western antipathy of "others" of all kinds, does a disservice to the goals for which the textbook makers strive.

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Appendix A
List Of Textbooks

The texts below have multiple authors and often include extensive lists of contributors, specialists, and consultants. For the sake of simplicity, only the primary senior authors cited in the title page of the book are listed here, with the addition of the *et al.* designator.

Triumph of the American Nation. (1990). Louis Paul Todd, Merle Curti, et al. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch.

World History: Peoples and Nations. (1990). Anatole G. Mazour, John M. Peoples, et al. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch.

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Our Land, Our Time: A History of the United States. (1991). Joseph R. Conlin, et al. Austin, TX: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

World History. (1990). Jerome R. Reich, Mark M. Krug, Edward L. Biller, et al. Austin, TX: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

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A History of The World (rev. ed.). (1990). Marvin Perry, et al. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

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World History: Traditions and New Direction. (1991). Peter N. Sterns, Donald R. Schwartz, & Barry K. Beyer. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.

Notes

1. This figure refers to the total number of images (i.e., not just images of war) and includes cartoons, lexical documents, maps, paintings, prints, etchings, engravings, photographs, posters, sculptures, reliefs, and statues within the period (1492–1990).

2. The category World War II included the Japanese invasion of China (1936–1945).

3. Yet the liberation of the camps was conducted mostly by Russians, who entered the true death camps in the east. In none of the Holocaust images are the liberators Soviets. This situation could be interpreted in two ways. First, Russian images of concentration camp liberations may be more difficult to obtain (see Lewinski, 1978, pp. 110–116). Second, it is possible that the books are simply attempting to put an American perspective on history, that is, a proactive and pro-Anglo American vision: We were fighting an evil enemy and rescued poor unfortunates; that is, the war was worth it.

4. The texts have different listed authorships. The editorial offices, however, are identical. Considering the industrial circumstances of textbook publication, it is likely that the images were selected by the same editor or group of editors.