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How moving are the victims' stories?

An attempt to question the role of victims in historical education using the example of student essays from Russia

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Abstract

This article is about how dealing with historical experiences of violence and their victims shapes politically relevant attitudes towards violence and how this can be anchored in history didactics. We are interested in the situation in which events that occurred far in the past do not leave pupils indifferent, but rather affect them. Using a nationwide history competition among Russian students, we examine several dozen student works to understand how students engage with narratives about victims and what reactions these narratives evoke. Our findings show that while students show great sympathy for the suffering of victims, this sympathy does not necessarily translate into an attitude that can prevent future violence and promote attitudes critical of power. We argue that historical consciousness arising from the emotional confrontation with historical experiences of suffering is strongly dependent on the prevailing political culture.

Keywords

historical consciousness, emotional engagement, pedagogy of emotional upheaval, Betroffenheitspädagogik, history didactics and political culture

1. Introduction

Modern history didactics revolves around imparting historical knowledge - knowledge of concrete facts from the past. However, something else is meant by historical consciousness, which serves as a bridge in historical didactics: The knowledge of historical events is linked to the need for orientation of adolescents, which is a need to imagine how to act meaningfully and sensiblely in the future. The systematic distinction between historical knowledge and historical consciousness is of central importance for the following explanations. Historical consciousness emphazises the importance of historical didactics: The past is converted into meaningful attitudes, decisions and actions in the future (Seixas, 1998). We want to take a closer look at how past events can have a meaningful function in the present.

The fates of victims of past experiences of violence play a significant role in this context: In this case a meaningful orientation gained from the past means above all a specific attitude towards violence, namely the hope that one will not be exposed to it oneself in the future. In the

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following, we would like to focus on certain aspects of the significance of historical events of violence for history that imparts knowledge and gives meaning. Specifically, we are interested in the connection between awareness of or even in-depth engagement of past experiences of violence (e.g. within one's own family) as well as attitudes towards violence that affect future thinking and action. More specifically, we ask about the importance of the emotional impact (we follow the German term "Betroffenheit" here) of the victims of violence and their suffering for attitudes towards violence, which should provide meaningful orientation for the future. To put it bluntly, the question is: To what extent can we expect clear future attitudes (e.g. rejection of violence) from knowledge about victims and their experiences of violence as well as being affected by them? Or is it perhaps the other way around, according to our thesis, namely that such knowledge of the fates of victims of violence and their suffering, as well as the emotional consternation triggered by this, can certainly give rise to different attitudes and profiles of historical consciousness (including those that do not necessarily have a preventive effect against violence). In our contribution, we will not only discuss these questions but also try to make explicit some of the conditions that influence the kind of historical consciousness that develops through consternation and "Betroffenheit" with the victims.

We will proceed as follows: After a brief critical view on the term historical consciousness and the current state of pedagogy of emotional upheaval (Betroffenheitspädagogik), its premises and expectations, we will turn to a specific empirical case: a nationwide history competition among schoolchildren in Russia. In the next step, we will summarize the evaluation of several dozen works submitted by pupils in this competition, paying particular attention to the way in which pupils deal with historical victimhood narratives. In the last step, we will discuss the specifics of the attitudes that are indirectly reflected in the student works submitted to the history competition and relate them to political culture in Russia. To begin with, we can say at this point that all of the students' historical research papers that we analyzed showed visible concern for the suffering of the victims, without revealing any politically relevant attitudes that we could consider conducive to preventing the violence that happened to the victims of the historical narratives in question in the past. We will attempt to provide some explanations for this finding.

2. History and emotional concern: a critical examination of the "pedagogy of emotional upheaval"

To clarify the terminology of the concepts mentioned here, it is essential to point out that we are using for "concern" or "upheaval" the German term "Betroffenheit", which is not the same as the term empathy. While empathy is about an actual capacity for empathy, "Betroffenheit" initially only describes the fact that something is perceived as relevant and disturbing at the same time and has a cognitive and an affective component. We believe it is essential not to underestimate the role of the cognitive component in "Betroffenheit". Below we briefly discuss the aims and problems of what is known as affectedness or upheaval pedagogy, which is often understood as predominantly "emotional".

The concept of historical consciousness must also be linked to a scientific concept at the outset. Our understanding of it is based on the view of Jörn Rüsen. According to him, historical consciousness is a necessary prerequisite for orientation in actual life situations since it aids us in comprehending the past to grasp present actuality. Rüsen characterizes historical consciousness as a key orientation element that provides a temporal frame and matrix to daily life. For Rüsen, as well as for the project described here, narratives play a special role in the constitution of historical consciousness and the associated formation of moral values (Rüsen, 2004). Jason Endacott's understanding of historical empathy should also serve as a theoretical guide for this text. Like Rüsen, Endacott and Brooks also emphasizes the importance of historical consciousness for current life situations. According to them, "historical empathy is the process of students' cognitive and affective engagement with historical figures to better understand and contextualize their lived experiences, decisions, or actions" (Endacott & Brooks, 2013, p. 41). The pedagogy of emotional upheaval discussed here aims to strengthen both competences.

2.1 The pedagogy of emotional upheaval

The term pedagogy of emotional upheaval or „Betroffenheitspädagogik“ refers to a non-specific pedagogical method that aims to lead people to deeper reflection and consequently intensive learning experiences through emotional affect. Affect should be used to raise awareness of certain social challenges. For example, in civic education, history education and memorial education, affect is used as an educational tool, although Münch (2019) explicitly points out that education on memorials should not work with it and rejects the idea of deliberately provoking strong emotional and cognitive involvement. Brauer and Lücke (2013) nevertheless mention visits to historically meaningful places, historical documentation and comparable material to illustrate that emotions are a central aspect of historical culture. According to Brauer and Lücke (2013), this is common sense in history didactics. With reference to Bodo von Borries, they describe that there is a reluctance to teach history in Germany in terms of emotion-led history teaching and point to the manipulation potential of this approach, which was used in a targeted manner in the Wilhelmine Empire and under National Socialism, as an explanation for this reluctance. Furthermore, according to Brauer and Lücke, there is a fear of the incalculable effect of emotional historical learning processes, and therefore cognitive learning principles are preferred.

The focus in teaching lies on the cognitive communication and processing of historical facts and the emotions they evoke (Brauer & Lücke, 2013). However, Münch (2019) demonstrates that emotionalizing approaches are indeed employed and, based on interviews, suggests that teaching staff explicitly describe visits to memorial sites explicitly as an emotional event. Overwhelming and emotionally charged experiences are therefore part of the practice of teaching history and are also expected by pupils when visiting memorial sites, for example, after appropriate preparation. According to Münch, this can lead to disappointment, alienation and even avoidance if the memorial pedagogy offered does not consciously support this approach. In qualitative interviews conducted by Münch with teaching staff, it quickly becomes clear that emotion plays an important role in conveying historical facts. The classification of emotion as a teaching tool varies from person to person. One teacher describes emotion and, in particular, dismay as the aim of the memorial site visit, in which he addresses staging problems such as fair weather, which is detrimental to the desired mood. Münch describes the approach of emotion as an indicator of knowledge as possibly hindering the independent classification and reflection of the content conveyed. Psychological findings on emotion indicate that strong emotion stands in the way of cognitive processes, meaning that too much emotion can actually interfere with the processing of information.

As in the theoretical approach, there is also disagreement in the practical implementation with regard to the use of emotion in teaching history. In the interview, one teacher explicitly points to emotional overwhelming as a danger of some teaching strategies and describes a problem that illustrates the need to interweave history teaching and psychology: the need to deal responsibly with the emotions evoked in pupils. Münch points to uncertainties in dealing with emotion, the appropriateness of emotionalization and the actual objective of confronting historical content and the consternation it evokes. In the practice of teaching history, emotion is used to deepen the learning effect, but at the same time the classification of the emotion evoked in this way is a challenge and its actual effect is diffuse. The integration of digital media into different teaching concepts also reveals that history is often communicated through the use of emotions. For example, the diary of Anne Frank is offered as a video series on YouTube. According to the director of the Anne Frank House in an interview in 2020, the material, which includes additional information such as an explanation of “discrimination”, is intended to invite people to “enter into a direct relationship with the girl Anne”.

The videos are offered with accompanying teaching material and were published on YouTube with the idea that a particularly large number of young people can be reached there. The Anne Frank House website states that the video diary is intended to inform young people about Anne Frank’s story and its historical context in a way that is appealing and accessible to them. Possibilities such as this show that emotion is part of teaching for many teachers, that history didactics uses it and all the more that it is necessary to systematically deal with emotional history teaching, define goals, examine methods and uncover gaps. Hasberg points out the great variance in the use of emotional content in the teaching of history, ranging from the complete refusal of emotional touch to complete identification with the victims. Hasberg (2013) points out that emotion and empathy are equated, whereby the distance between the historical actor and the recognizer is not taken into account. According to Hasberg, there is a lack of empirically reliable basic research on the role of emotionality in historical learning (Hasberg, 2013).

First of all, it should be noted that there are good arguments for wanting to use emotionality for educational purposes: Proponents hope that it will promote empathy, strengthen moral awareness and foster social connectedness and a collective narrative of right and wrong in terms of an orientation framework. In the following, we will take a critical look from a psychological and sociological perspective at the challenges that can arise from the required concern.

2.2 Some challenges of the pedagogy of emotional upheaval from a psychological perspective

As early as 1966, Brehm was able to show that overly strong emotional appeals can lead to resistance and rejection. People who perceive their room for maneuver as being restricted or at least threatened show aversive reactions. Numerous studies such as those by Pennebaker and Sanders (1976) support this finding and illustrate how important it is not to exert emotional pressure while teaching.

Apart from direct rejection there is also a more subtle level on which one can respond to emotionally charged content.

The term "slacktivism" refers to a form of activism where people show support through simple, low-effort actions such as sharing information on social media. Often, the focus is less on the actual social or political message and more on self-presentation and displaying a socially desirable stance. However, this can also have positive effects: important topics reach a broader audience, minimal engagement can lead to deeper involvement, and self-presentation may influence actual behavior to avoid cognitive dissonance. Nevertheless, there is a risk that symbolic actions create a sense of moral superiority or fulfillment, leading individuals to believe their involvement is complete without taking further action. If a person performs a good deed or feels morally superior, for example through the feeling of socially desirable involvement, this can lead to another curious effect:

"Moral licensing" describes the fact that a person, after performing an action that they consider moral or ethical, tends to behave immorally afterwards. The background to this appears to be the idea of "moral credit". Since symbols or symbolic actions also have an effect on self-image (Gollwitzer et al, 2002), it is conceivable that the concern that is apparently demanded by some teachers during school trips has a comparable effect. Monin and Miller (2001) were able to show that people are more inclined to behave in a discriminatory manner after a moral act, as they already see themselves as moral people and therefore find a deviation forgivable. Recent findings by Blanken et al (2021) support this finding.

Wen and Hu (2023) were able to add an interesting perspective on the display of moral actions on social media channels. In their study, they were able to show that the public sharing of moral actions leads to a decrease in moral self-esteem and the performers are more likely to carry out further moral actions instead of relying on their "moral credit". The display of political convictions or moral ideas in order to gain recognition without actual actions following is referred to as "virtue signaling" (Barclay, 2013). This behavior seems to be particularly prevalent in social media, where certain symbolically transmitted attitudes are used to signal affiliation with specific groups and ideologies (Jordan & Rand, 2020). Van der Linden points to the effect of virtue signaling on political discourse, as it is used by public figures to appeal to specific (voter) groups (Van der Linden, 2018). Tosi and Warmke describe this practice as not just annoying but morally bad. It is superficial and serves to distract from problems and one's own inaction (Tosi & Warmke, 2020). In relation to the use of consternation as an educational tool, this means that measures such as whipped-up memorial site visits could promote the mere appearance of moral integrity rather than actual ethical behavior. The demand for emotional reactions and the forced display of consternation may be an obstacle to finding solutions to the issues raised, as the emotionalized pupils then believe they are already on the side of moral integrity and no longer see any need for action.

In daily life and popular approaches emotion is often seen as a suitable vehicle for information. With reference to psychological findings, however, this reveals potential problems. The overly targeted appeal to emotion or empathy can lead to something called "empathy fatigue" or "compassion fatigue". This is when people are repeatedly exposed to stressful information and as a result are emotionally exhausted and less receptive to the seriousness of the problems mentioned (Moeller, 2002). Empathy fatigue is common in professions that require constant emotional engagement, such as healthcare (Chen et al., 2022). However, it is also relevant for the general public when people are exposed to a constant stream of emotionally charged media or news. This can result in the issues presented being perceived as less urgent or serious, not be-

cause they are less critical, but because the audience's emotional response is dulled (Moeller, 2002). This finding is relevant in the field of teaching historical knowledge in that the phenomenon can undermine educational goals related to empathy and moral engagement. If students are repeatedly confronted with upsetting or emotionally intense content, the initial impact of this material may diminish. This could result in them no longer being able to properly appreciate the gravity of the topics covered, whether they are historical events, social justice or moral education. From a cognitive psychology and neuropsychological perspective, there are also criticisms of overloading lessons with emotions. Excessive emotional arousal can significantly impair cognitive processes, as has been empirically demonstrated for decades. Figueira et al. (2017) were able to show that emotional distractions have an unfavorable effect on certain cognitive processes, such as memory tasks. They point out that emotional states can control actions and decisions in our everyday lives through their influence on cognitive processes.

A further challenge that can arise from the use of emotional pedagogy is that the degree of complexity of the events described may not be portrayed due to the depictions aimed at emotions. The simplification of complex social problems could lead to an uncritical adoption of stereotypes. This happens because oversimplification leads to overgeneralizations that ignore individual differences and perpetuate rigid, biased views of social groups. (Annenkova & Domysheva (2020). Simplified and generalized beliefs about social groups tend to persist because they provide an easy way to process information, but they overlook individual differences and therefore contribute to social prejudice and discrimination (Zhang et al, 2023). Social categorization is a necessary cognitive process that requires active engagement with one's own perceptual habits. It would make sense to provide students with historical information that is as complex as possible and described from many perspectives in order to support them in actively and critically engaging with the content. To counteract these stereotypes, critical thinking skills are crucial by fostering the ability to analyze and question these oversimplified narratives (Annenkova & Domysheva, 2020). From a didactic perspective, the oversimplification of complex historical events can lead to the reinforcement of stereotypes and perpetuate one-dimensional views of certain groups.

In order to illustrate how pedagogy that focuses on consternation is applied and what further discussion points arise from this for history didactics, we will now present a specific empirical case. It not only reveals the psychological challenges of didactics aimed at emotion but also raises specific politically relevant questions.

3. Russia-wide history competition for students in the final years of secondary school (1999 – 2021)

We consider the history competition "People and History, 20th Century Russia", which was initiated and carried out by the Russian well known human rights organization Memorial from 1999 to 2021 (The competion's site is https://www.memo.ru/en-us/projects/men-in-history.). However, the original name in Russian ("Chelovek v istorii") is in the singular, literally translated as "person in history", which, as will be shown later, is highly relevant; in English translations, however, the plural form has prevailed. This competition of high-school students (in Russia 9., 10. and 11. classes) from all the regions of Russia continued until Memorial was finally banned and dissolved by the Russian state in 2021, shortly before the war against Ukraine began, in the course of a long-standing campaign of persecution; many Memorial employees had to leave Russia as a result of this persecution. For many observers, the destruction of one of the world's best-known NGOs in Russia was part of the immediate preparations for the large-scale attack on Ukraine. However, it should be noted that since 2017 at the latest, and to some extent already since 2014, Memorial and specifically the relevant historical student competition have been subject to various disinformation campaigns initiated by the Russian state. According to the findings of the FIDH 2021 rapporteurs, this involves several forms of persecution:

> "[...] education officials harassed and intimidated students who participated in International Memorial's Russia-wide annual historical school essay competition. In 2017, school officials across Russia pressured competition laureates so that they would not travel to Moscow for the awards ceremony. The list of the laureates was not public at the time, making Memorial suspect unauthorized access to its email account. In 2019, competition laureates and/or their teachers were interrogated by school principals, local officials, and/or FSB operatives who demanded that they stop participating in Memorial's programs. The same year, a letter was circulated among the participating schools calling on history teachers not to take part in the competition, or otherwise engage with International Memorial. [...] In 2016, an independent ethics board associated with Russia's Union of Journalists concluded that the Ren-TV reports covering International Memorial's school competition did not comply with media ethics standards, and were 'pure propaganda purposely discrediting Memorial'" (FIDH Report, 2021).

A decisive factor in the work of Memorial, which was founded during the perestroika years, was the conviction that commemorating the victims of various Soviet repressions was the highest social duty. When Memorial was founded, Soviet citizens knew little about the history of their own country, not even the approximate number of victims of state terror - let alone all their names and exact details of their fate in the Gulag (at least the date and place of death) - were often unknown even to their relatives. With the aim of commemorating the victims, Memorial decided to carry out comprehensive and meticulous historical research. The overriding goal of erecting a memorial or becoming a place of remembrance (hence the name of this NGO) initially prompted Memorial to bring all the victims who deserved to be remembered out of oblivion. And so the organization pursued the ambitious goal of knowing every victim by name, of being able to assign every date and every fact biographically, of reconstructing the history of the gulag and its victims in as much detail as possible - by name. Over the years, a spontaneous movement of committed activists has developed into a solid and unique expert institution, which has gladly made its knowledge available to anyone interested (Schor-Tschudnowskaja, 2014).

Several thousand young people took part in the history competition, which was launched in 1999, in the years up to 2021. The competition archive comprises around 38 thousand written works, which were written according to certain predefined criteria that met the high standards of both history education and history sciences. The pupils were invited to take a closer look at regional and/or family history, reconstruct biographies, investigate unknown historical events and facts and, above all, recreate the historical experience of specific people. As this was a competition in which winners were nominated each year, we deliberately did not only include prize-winning works in our study. The competition jury was made up of well-known Russian journalists, writers and academics. The best and prize-winning essays by the students were published in several anthologies of the competition.

According the competition site the intended outcome was to "encourage students to engage in research of the Russian history of the last century, to stir up an interest in the fate and fortunes of ordinary people, their everyday life – what makes up the 'great history' of the country" (People and History, 20th Century Russia).

In addition to this main goal of the competition, Memorial has also repeatedly formulated other goals: Arsenij Roginskij, long-time chairman of Memorial, emphasized the importance of finding oneself in history and only then feeling connected to one's own family, one's own city, one's own country, in other words, to build connections between the past and the children's lives today. A temporal, historical connection, being embedded in a long chain of events, links between present and past are also addressed by some of the jury members. For example, the writer Lyudmila Ulitskaya (2008), alluding to Shakespeare, emphasized that the students' essays can resist the familiar state in which "the time is out of joint" and reconnect or reconcile the times. But other goals were also addressed, such as the moral duty of adolescents or the fact that the students give contemporary witnesses the beneficial opportunity to finally speak out about what happened to many families during the long period of Soviet history (according to Irina Scherbakowa, chairwoman of the competition's organizing committee). Last but not least, one of the aims of the competition has always been to promote historical research into the Soviet past and to create archives. After 20 years, the historical knowledge gained through student essays has indeed formed a solid historical foundation. This is where the mission of the Memorial meets that of the history competition: it is to preserve the memory of a difficult past that is exposed to silence and silencing.

Before we take a look at the student essays themselves, the following heuristic difficulty should be noted at this point: The student essays are now being viewed retrospectively from the year 2024, after Russia launched a major attack on Ukraine in February 2022, many (estimated at up to one million people) have left Russia, the repressiveness of Vladimir Putin's regime has

been drastically tightened and the number of political prisoners or banned NGOs and media has risen dramatically. In the course of this tightening, not only has Memorial and its projects disappeared, but such history competitions have become completely impossible. It can be argued that this outcome of developments in post-Soviet Russia was rather difficult to predict for many people there, as well as for Memorial staff. In 2009, the organizers of the competition published an anniversary booklet to mark its 10th anniversary, in which they very optimistically expressed their conviction that "today's young people no longer have any forbidden topics, are free, are not afraid of anything or anyone" and that the development of such civic awareness is one of Memorial's most important goals (Chelovek v istorii, 2009).

Fifteen years later, most of the rather small number of sociological studies on young people in Russia indicate that they represent the social group that is largely politically passive and conformist and largely loyal to the current regime in Russia, which has become highly authoritarian, according to Russia's leading sociologist Lev Gudkov, for example. When asked about conformism, Gudkov made it clear that this can be observed above all in those population groups "from whom I had actually expected a different reaction [than indifference, author's note]: among younger, better-off, educated people. They quickly buckled and began to show the greatest indifference and tolerance towards the war (Medvedev, 2022). However, it is difficult to research the current mood in Russia under increasingly repressive conditions, which is why there is a lively debate among Russian sociologists (quite a few of whom had to leave Russia) about how to interpret the attitude of the population, especially young people (Schor-Tschudnowskaja, 2024). We will return to this debate briefly later.

At this point, we would like to note that our privileged perspective from the year 2024 certainly leads to certain distortions and biases when interpreting the data from the decades before: It is the knowledge of the shocking outcome of the school competition, which lasted over 20 years, and also the disappointment about unfulfilled lines and hopes that were associated with it, and therefore probably also our own emotional dismay, which could have distorting effects when reading and analysing school essays, which we would like to point out here. But we would like to use this very perspective to better understand the role of young people's historical consciousness and its political relevance in retrospect. In order to better assess our findings, we have placed them in a wider context and related them to other studies and data on political culture in Russia.

3.1 The voices of victims from the past and the voices of pupils in the present

In the course of the dismantling of Memorial, its entire archive had to be evacuated from the organization's premises and taken to safety. This also affected the approximately 38,000 works submitted as part of the school competition, several thousand of which were not digitized and were stored in paper form in various boxes. As part of a research project initiated in 2022, we were able to provide some support for this digitalization, which gave us access to a total of around 250 student essays. However, the aforementioned research project is dedicated to the dynamics of students' historical awareness in the period between 1999 and 2021. We will not look at this question in detail here. For this article, we present a small excerpt from the findings (more or less systematically distributed over the 20 years with regard to only 89 essays), namely those central patterns of interpretation that we were able to identify as more or less unchanged in the students' representations over the 20 years of the analysis period. The evaluation of the essays, which has not yet been completed, is carried out by means of content analysis (inductive categories) and the analysis of political-cultural patterns of interpretation; only the results of the analysis of patterns of interpretation are used for the following explanations.

The social patterns of interpretation (see Meuser & Sackmann, 1992; Oevermann, 1973) are an essential part of social self-awareness and are therefore particularly suitable for research into political culture and historical consciousness. They have a dual function: they are (1) meaningful components of the lifeworld that enable orientation and guide action, but at the same time (2) they are also the results of internal social negotiation processes. They have both cognitive and affective components. Specifically, it is about a systematic representation of which topics are brought up and what the categories are that subjects use to describe and interpret something. Lexical units, key words, frequency of terms and key metaphors, for example, define the subjective horizon of interpretation, which is always also a reflection of the social horizon of interpretation. Since we are primarily interested in the consternation in connection with historical experiences of misfortune and the consternation is more than just affects, but always also interpretations, we want to focus especially on those feelings that are consciously or uncon-

sciously expressed in the works, as well as a few patterns of interpretations that we classify as politically relevant and that can be inferred from the students' formulations.

The papers evaluated were on average between 10 and 20 pages long, the proportion of male and female pupils was roughly the same, all pupils from the last three school years, but from very different regions of Russia. Many of the papers included photographic material. They were all dedicated primarily, but not exclusively, to the fates of relatives in their own families, but acquaintances, neighbors or people discovered by chance could also be the subject of historical research. The majority of the student essays were based on eyewitness accounts and oral and written memories of relevant adults, but documents from family and local government archives were also included in the research. The fates of the people to whom the students turned their attention were largely determined by significant political events of the XXth century, such as the Bolshevik October Revolution of 1917 and its consequences, forced collectivization, exile and forced resettlement of various social and ethnic groups, state terror under Josef Stalin (especially in the 1930s and 1940s), the occupation of parts of the Soviet Union and the Leningrad Blockade during the Second World War, the reconstruction of the country after the war and, last but not least, hunger and hardship in the years before, during and after the war.

What emotional relationship to the researched historical events do the pupils express? The reactions expressed were dominated by respect, pride and amazement. Pupils repeatedly wrote that they were moved by pride because the people whose lives they were researching were able to survive so many trials and proved to be resilient. The fact that victims of violence survived these experiences and were perhaps not even broken inside gave the students a great deal of respect for them. They also expressed their admiration for the "human greatness" of their relatives, as they tried to preserve their human dignity even in very dangerous situations or under the wildest, even inhuman circumstances. Let us illustrate this with a few examples (without mentioning the names and places of residence of the students). For example, one pupil stated in his work that it was only through his historical research on six generations of his family that he understood that if there had been "no revolution (October Revolution 1917 - author's note) and its consequences as they were", his ancestors could have "achieved much more".

He claims to be proud of his ancestors, knowing how much potential they had and what was prevented in their lives by political circumstances. Another work, written jointly by two pupils from the 10th grade, ended with the following confession: "On these pages, we wanted to give the floor to those people who were never asked by anyone how they lived, and whose unrecognizable heroism and resilience were neither appreciated by those in power nor sometimes even by their own children" (Chelovek v istorii, 2009). This basic motif, according to which a victim's biography per se resembles a heroic deed and deserves pride and admiration, runs through the vast majority of student essays.

One girl who dedicated her research to the forced relocation of several generations of her family wrote: "This almost century-long forced relocation of my mother's side of the family has made us resilient, has not hardened our hearts and has not triggered anger towards our homeland" (Chelovek v istorii, 2009). This basic motif also runs through most of the works: Hard fates and experiences of violence do not mean that people love their country any less; on the contrary, (surviving) experiences of violence and patriotism are mutually dependent. This motif can be found again in the wording of some of the history teachers who supervised the pupils' research on site: "The mission of this competition is to encourage young people to study the history of their homeland, to awaken love for this country and respect for the history of the fatherland, no matter how tragic this history may be," said one history teacher on the 10th anniversary of the competition (Chelovek v istorii, 2009).

The astonishment expressed several times indicates that the adolescents obviously could not imagine what it meant to be at the mercy of the whims or arbitrariness of a totalitarian state. It is noteworthy that many witnesses also reported their experiences of violence as completely senseless. This senselessness of violence continued in the pupils' view of the past: Most of the experiences of violence reported to them are described by the pupils as incomprehensible or senseless: Why and for what purpose this happened is beyond comprehension in several generations. This is obviously related to the fact that the victims' experiences are systematically described as life tragedies, historical tragedies or tragic pages of history. And because they are tragedies, the students almost completely avoid asking in their texts who or what their relatives were victims of, i.e. which specific actors or decision-makers were responsible for the harsh fates, which specific political decisions caused the suffering of people in previous generations. The state terror under Stalin is referred to as "tragedy", "blows of fate" or "trials of fate", the war as "sorrow", political reprisals as "difficulties", camp and prison experiences as "tragic pages of

history". Various metaphors, literary and even poetic devices, especially comparisons with natural events, can be found in almost every work; state terror and political injustice are depicted as a kind of force of nature. Students therefore very often describe events in an impersonal way, such as "he was arrested", "he was taken away at night", "everything was taken away from him", "the family was sent into exile" etc. Persons as well as authorities, political institutions and rulers who arrested, interrogated, shot, expropriated, harassed or committed other injustices very rarely appear in the pupils' work; if at all, then they are mentioned in an allusive (e.g. "Soviet power") or even euphemistic way. One of the pupils compared the entire history of the 20th century to a "tornado of fire" that swept through his district. Another pupil also wrote in an impersonal manner: "Perhaps it will never be known again how many people have their graves in the nameless cemeteries of Vorkuta" (Vorkuta was the infamous camp region in the north of the Soviet Union - author's note) (Chelovek v istorii, 2009). Whether this is an allusion to the systematic concealment of Soviet state reprisals in contemporary Russia as well as the lack of efforts by the Russian authorities to ensure that all victims are identified by name and commemorated remains an open question.

In this context, we noticed a work entitled "So that this does not happen again" by its author, in which she describes persecutions and murders of clergy and the destruction of churches and church inventory in the 1930s using the example of a local story from the Russian north. During her research, the student succeeds in gaining access to the files from the state archives, she studies and quotes interrogation protocols of the NKVD in her work, and obviously she also gains insight into which specific persons and local authorities were involved in the various reprisals and state crimes described in the work. However, this student also only mentions the names of the victims and otherwise chooses exclusively impersonal formulations; she only gets specific about the date on which the main character of her research is executed. She concludes her work by quoting an inscription on a local memorial plaque: "Dedicated to those who experienced sorrow and humiliation, buried in unknown graves, remaining in our thoughts, so that this may not happen again" - "as a sign of mourning for guiltlessly condemned victims of the gulag" she adds to this inscription (Chelovek v istorii, 2009). In view of the gentle, impersonal treatment of perpetrators, this faint hope does not look very promising.

Let us briefly note what this first insight into the students' work has revealed: Moved by pride, admiration and deep respect for the biographies researched, the students tend very strongly to see much that is heroic as well as tragic in these biographies. Heroism and tragedy are the two leading patterns of interpretation with which the attempt is made to restore the subjectivity of the victims and which shape the students' historical consciousness. What is completely absent from the small sample of analyzed essays is, on the one hand, the subjectivity of the perpetrators and, on the other, the possibility of self-critical reflection.

3.2 Russia's political culture: precarious historical sense-making?

Here we want to avoid entering the debate as to whether historical consciousness is a part of political culture or, conversely, whether political consciousness is one of the dimensions of historical consciousness (Pandel, 1987). We argue that historical consciousness is closely intertwined with political culture, so that it is not possible to consider historical didactics, for example, or historical narrative or the representation of victims of past experiences of violence outside of the political-cultural context. Patterns of interpretation, which go hand in hand with contemporary thinking and are indispensable when considering historical narratives, are also closely linked to the structure of power relations and the degree of autonomy of subjective action. By and large, we follow the observation of the two well-known German cultural psychologists Carlos Kölbl and Jürgen Straub (2001):

Historical consciousness and historical self-awareness emerge and form empirically, more precisely: In the course of adolescents' participation in the socio-cultural practice of temporalizing, dynamizing and "historicizing" the world and the self. In this respect, individuals and groups are exposed to varying degrees of socio-cultural incentives and incentives that promote or inhibit historical meaning.

We also follow the thesis of the American psychologist Kenneth J. Gergen, according to which historical representations only appear to be about the past, but instead primarily depict the range of interpretative patterns and values (Gergen says "the sense of what is right") taken from contemporary socio-cultural (we add: political-cultural) life. (Gergen, 1998). In the following, we want to critically scrutinize the "sense of what is right" depicted in the student essays, without losing sight of the fact that requirements or expectations of historical narratives and historical didactics are formulated from the perspective of political culture.

Let us first return to Memorial, which was not only the umbrella organization for the school competition, but also the leading high-profile research institution dealing with Soviet history for decades. Originating as a civic movement dedicated to remembering victims (!), it later repeatedly addressed the question of the relationship between victims and perpetrators in social remembrance. Memorial staff repeatedly pointed out that victims and perpetrators were "mixed up" in Soviet history (i.e. perpetrators often later became victims themselves). From this, Memorial derived an explanation for the lack of social remembrance work: The conditions, especially during the Great Terror under Stalin, when people denounced each other and took part in the official smear campaigns - directed against whomever ("spies", "counter-revolutionaries", "cosmopolitans", etc.) - traumatized the population to such an extent that neither horror at what had happened nor sympathy for the victims could be felt. Furthermore, a clear distinction between "us" (good) and "them" (bad) was not possible in relation to the Gulag, which is why ultimately there was no coming to terms with this history.

It is precisely this conflation of victims and perpetrators that is responsible for the fact that the Gulag is usually referred to as a tragedy. For many years and in many portrayals, Memorial, for example, was also seen as a historically enlightened organization that interprets the tragedies of the past primarily as a violation of human rights. Indeed, tragedy is by definition a genre in which no clear separation between bad and good is possible, as higher powers are at work, so to speak. Under such circumstances, the question of the possibility of coming to terms with such a story is cast in a completely different light: How are people supposed to come to terms with crimes that have happened by virtue of their reason if they can be traced back to the actions of higher powers? How are they supposed to address the question of guilt with rational legal and political instruments if there are no true culprits among the people? The chairman of Memorial Roginskij, who died in 2017, explained the situation as follows:

> „The blurred line between ‚victims' and ‚perpetrators', which is characteristic of many episodes of Soviet terror, now has fatal consequences. People could not find a point of reference for themselves and could not establish a moral frame of reference with which they could judge the past." (Roginskij, 2011, p. 60).

We are not convinced by the psychological mechanism that Roginskij holds responsible for the lack of interest in injustice and crimes during the Soviet era, but we agree with Roginskij that it is hardly possible to make a clear distinction between victim and perpetrator groups. All the more reason why we want to know why the victim narrative is so strongly emphasized in the students' work. Who is the "person in history" (the literal translation of the title of the student competition)? In this context, rare sociological studies that deal with historical consciousness in modern Russian culture are very valuable. According to them, it exhibits a strongly sacralized, metaphysical perception of history: According to them, as also assumed by Memorial, history is not the result of human action, but the work of higher powers; and "a repetition of the tragedies of the past" is thus predetermined (Gorin, 2009). In a history imagined in this way, there can therefore only be heroes and victims and no perpetrators or losers; the "man in history" is therefore above all a heroic victim - and the political decision-makers as well as the imaginative figure of the "state", which is identified with "Russia itself" and also takes on mystical traits, hardly appear in the story, are concealed and thus relieved of political responsibility. But isn't the perpetrator also a "person in history"?

Some Russian historians, such as Tatyana Voronina (who has since left Russia), also speak of the official pattern of interpretation of history (using the history of the Second World War as an example), which is to be perceived as "flawless in its heroism and greatness" (Voronina, 2011). This socio-cultural pattern of interpretation (repeated for years by propaganda in the media and in school textbooks) is confirmed not only by sociological data, but also by current Russian legislative practice. For example, the FIDH reporters quoted above speak of the obsession of Russia's ruling elite with control over historical memory, they

> „seek to create a heroic national narrative and legislate away any doubt about the state's historical righteousness as well as ‚high moral service to the State'; Russian Federation ‚honors the memory of defenders of the Homeland' and ‚protects historical truth' (Article 67.1 § 3); warns that ‚diminishing the significance of the people's heroism in defending the Homeland is not permitted' (Article 67.1 § 3)." (FIDH, 2021).

Indeed, the general mood among the population of post-Soviet Russia is characterized by a remarkable indifference to the issue of "state terror" or "state crimes" Neither the now known figures - which are still inaccurate, but at least testify to the extent of Soviet (and now post-So-

viet!) repression - nor the many film adaptations of the works of well-known writers and Gulag inmates such as Varlam Shalamov or Alexander Solzhenitsyn, nor documentary films about the Gulag on television or the Internet, nor the performances of relevant plays in theaters have led to a change in the mood regarding the millions of victims of state arbitrariness in the Soviet Union. This social background played an important role in Memorial's position with regard to the question of perpetrators, and accordingly the latter receded into the background. Memorial had its activists work primarily on collective compassion for the victims and their memory and understood its educational (!) work as efforts directed against social (political, historical and moral) indifference, indeed as political resistance! Since collective compassion for the victims was seen as much more important than the question of who all were (co-)perpetrators, the "Soviet state" was declared guilty of terror and repression across the board and the citizens of this state were generally regarded as victims (and heroes) of the totalitarian regime.

One of the paradoxes of post-Soviet history is that the central importance that the memory of the victims had for Memorial contributed to the very widespread political exoneration of the figure of the "state" in Russia. Looking back from the year 2024, it can be said with a heavy heart that Memorial's historical work has always been situated on the painful border between accepting the leitmotifs of Russian political culture and attempts to modify them. The more attempts were made to rationalize the patterns of interpretation of tragedy and victimhood, the more undesirable Memorial itself became. The lack of an openly declared break by the country's official leadership with the repressive methods of state policy and the perpetuation of the repressive political culture were therefore the most difficult obstacles to Memorial's work, obstacles that ultimately caused it to fail.

Looking back from the year 2024, the social dynamics in attitudes towards repression and state terror in the Soviet Union can also be recognized. The dominant feelings towards the Soviet history of terror are still indifference and disinterest. As much as this history could have had a traumatic effect, it does not seem plausible that this indifference is due to the conflation of perpetrators and victims. For even if this conflation is a historical fact, it should still trigger reactions of horror or at least curiosity in the face of the sheer possibility of unimaginable mass atrocities. It is not only the figure of Stalin and the crimes of the state leadership that deserve to be shocked, but the everyday social situation of a totalitarian regime itself. Alexander Daniel, former board member of Memorial, rightly remarked in 2009: "True patriotism is the feeling of responsibility for the present and the future of one's own country, and it begins with pain and deep sorrow for its past." (Daniel, 2009). Only in the next step could a critical and political reflection begin, as well as a distancing from the arbitrariness of state power towards its own population.

Here we want to raise the critical question of whether admiration for victims and pride in their survivors is in line with a true critical engagement with the narratives of victims or rather contributes to the obscuring of historical circumstances and actors? Could it not be that this kind of consternation about the fates of victims evades critical and multifaceted engagement with history and instead only supports political manipulation with it, possibly completely unintentionally?

According to the results of a Russia-wide survey conducted in 2017 (VZIOM, 2017), just under half of respondents condemned the Stalinist purges, while 43% considered them "justified" (for whatever reason). And even among the descendants of those who were imprisoned or murdered at the time, this figure is surprisingly high: 33% stated that the purges at the time were a "necessary measure" to "ensure order in the country". This means that one in three people considered the fate of the victims in their own family to be politically justified, even necessary.

Overall, approval of Stalin has continued to rise steadily in recent years. In March 2019, it reached its (temporary?) peak: every second respondent stated that they had positive feelings towards Stalin (approx. 51%, with respect for him mentioned above all, followed by sympathy and enthusiasm) (Pipija, 2019). (By comparison, in 2008, 31% reported a positive attitude towards Stalin). When asked "What role did Stalin play in the life of our country?" in March 2019, 70% of respondents stated that he played a positive (18%) or somewhat positive (52%) role. Just under 20% rated Stalin's role negatively (37% in 2008). The Russian journalist Anna Narinskaya (who has since had to leave Russia) summarized this finding very emotionally but also pointedly: "Not only are we [the Russian population] not so far gone that we consider the reprisals [state terror] to be something evil, we are not even so far gone that we agree that they existed at all!" (Medvedev, 2018).

In the few years following the dismantling of Memorial and the discontinuation of the history competition, the glorification of the state and the manipulative significance of the heroic victim narrative continued to rise sharply in Russia. Meanwhile, for over two years now, Russian intel-

lectuals and public figures (most of them at a safe distance because they had to leave Russia) have been bitterly debating public opinion in Russia in connection with the current war against Ukraine. It was not only shocking for people in Ukraine that people in Russia neither wanted to nor could prevent or stop this war. For many cultural workers and intellectuals from Russia itself, the passive or passively supportive behavior of the absolute majority with regard to the attack on the neighboring country, which has since resulted in several hundred thousand dead and wounded as well as millions of refugees, also proved to be an incomprehensible and painful realization. However, it can now at least be argued that the lack of resistance among the Russian population to the large-scale attack on Ukraine, which destabilized the entire European and transatlantic security order, was only made possible by specific victim narratives, to put it bluntly, by a specific manipulatively generated consternation and empathy with supposed victims.

Together with Katharina Hametner and Markus Wrbouschek, Anna Schor-Tschudnowskaja (Hametner et al, under review) describes in a recent study that, on closer inspection, the reactions to the war against Ukraine or, as it is often called in Russia, against the "Russophobic West", can certainly be described as dismay or "Betroffenheit": The majority of people surveyed so far appear to be emotionally moved by the war and convinced that something at least necessary and possibly even good, heroic, is happening! The paradoxical thesis is that the war against Ukraine is not legitimized out of strong aggression, but precisely out of compassion and empathic concern.[1] This concern results from a victim consciousness and the (propagandistically supported) idea of one's own suffering and moral rightness. The authors therefore suggest distinguishing between two types of "Betroffenheit": a critical and a resigned one. The first type of consternation or "Betroffenheit" implies a moral questioning of oneself and doubts about the correctness of one's own position, while the second implies a moral revaluation of oneself and one's own community. Critical consternation is therefore not only self-critical, but also oriented towards (power-critical) change, while resignation is conformist and conservative in nature. Only critical consternation takes into account not only experiences of suffering and powerlessness in the sense of a historical perspective, but also the experiences of perpetrators, especially when we are talking about permanently existing unfree social orders with decades of perpetrator history, in which experiences of violence and perpetrators have hardly been dealt with. Resigned consternation, on the other hand, tends to heroise the victims and ignore the question of perpetrators and responsibility.

The well-known American historian Timothy Snyder pointed out in a debate on the role of Holocaust museums that the moral lesson of the Holocaust is not that one could become a victim of the purges oneself. The most important lesson from such historical events is that such purges happen right next door to others and are easily overlooked, perhaps even with one's own active or passive support. It is therefore not so much the emotional identification with the victims that is decisive for critical historical consciousness, but at least no less important is the emotional reference to the perpetrators and perhaps even the imaginary identification with them.

"There is little reason" - according to Snyder (2015) - "to think that we are ethically superior to the Europeans of the 1930s and 1940s, or for that matter less vulnerable to the kind of ideas that Hitler so successfully promulgated and realized". In this sense, critical concern is much more than empathy or an emotional reaction to the perception of other people's suffering or misfortune; rather, it means a (power-) critical vigilance towards the reassuring normality of everyday life, which can always conceal violence, and thus a cautionary moral questioning of oneself as well as of the social groups with which one identifies.

4. Conclusions for history didactics

When it comes to developing a new orientation of history education, our thesis is that a fundamental assessment of the political culture within which this education will take place is necessary. The guiding questions here could be, how rational and critical of power do we want to be? How much subject autonomy do we strive for? How much reflection is part of autonomous subjectivity?

We do not want to fundamentally deny the value of the "Betroffenheitspädagogik". Rather, our aim is to show that the historical didactic value of students being affected by the victims' experiences of violence and empathizing with them in history lessons can only be assessed in a political-cultural context. In a situation in which any doubt about the correctness of those in power and the political community identified with them is sanctioned, the consternation conveyed in

history lessons due to historical experiences of violence can lead to an additional anchoring of the impunity of the perpetrators. Our aim was to show that, under certain circumstances, victim narratives encourage one-sided historical thinking that rejects the rationalization of past events and critical reflection. Moreover, this one-sidedness of historical thinking obviously promotes a certain susceptibility to political fictions and ideological manipulation.

At the beginning of our paper, we stated that historical didactics is geared towards meaningful insights, a meaning that can guide current and, above all, future decisions and actions. We would now like to conclude by pointing out that any kind of one-sidedness in thinking diminishes subjective autonomy. Hannah Arendt once expressed it very aptly: "The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist." (Arendt, 1973, p. 474). We hope that it was clear from our argument that, under certain circumstances, being affected by historical experiences of violence is very well able to prevent the distinction between fact and fiction. If we are concerned with a way of history consciousness that includes personal responsibility for history that is only emerging today and tomorrow, it is essential not only to re-establish the subjectivity of the victims, but no less the subjectivity of the perpetrators who committed the injustice, i.e. their responsibility. For Arendt, who was also much concerned with the meaning-giving function of history, it was this distinction that is particularly relevant. According to Arendt, we learn from history through examples, which, divided into good and bad, help us to develop a meaningful orientation for our own actions (Beiner, 2012). From a historical didactic point of view, people should reflect on deeds in history, those that can be a good example in the future and those that are unsuitable for this.

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