

## Reflection on teaching controversial issues in Germany and South Africa

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My name is Sello Cassius Mojela, and I am a student at the University of Pretoria, pursuing a Postgraduate Certificate in Education, majoring in History. I was one of the students who participated in the University of Pretoria and the University of Leipzig collaboration discussions focusing on teaching controversial issues in the classroom. This reflection aims to abridge my experience as a postgraduate team member in an international collaboration. I am very interested in how history is taught and how its very nature is contested and controversial.

My motivation to join the international collaboration session emanates, first and foremost, from my love and appreciation of history as a subject riddled with controversies that modern societies still grapple with. To me, Germany is a very interesting country in my study of modern history. I have always been interested in how the German curriculum is structured and, more importantly, how controversial issues in German history are taught. With the benefit of hindsight, my participation in the session was worth it.

Based on the collaboration, I understood that in Germany, the history curriculum is not characterized by super patriotism but rather extreme caution in avoiding controversial issues that mark German history. The curriculum seems to be characterized by an almost pacifist and deliberately unpatriotic undertone. It reflects principles formulated by international organizations such as UNESCO or the Council of Europe, thus oriented towards human rights, democracy, and peace. Therefore, German textbooks usually downplay national pride and ambitions and aim to develop an understanding of citizenship centred on democracy, progress, human rights, peace and Europeanness.<sup>1</sup>

In my view, this over-emphasis on Europeanness and a lack of national pride shuns, to an extent, a miscellaneous collection of controversial issues and, therefore, contributes to

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1 S Lassig & K H Pohl, *History Textbooks and Historical Scholarship in Germany*, History Workshop Journal, 67, 2009, p. 128-129.

an erasure of topics and issues that affect Germany's national history and colonial history.

During our discussions, a consensus emerged that, especially in Germany, there is a feeling of guilt and fear of dealing with controversial issues in history education. It emerged that in Germany, the education system shuns controversy in teaching history in a context marked by Eurocentricity, lack of patriotism, guilt and shame, and the apparent dangers of ultra-patriotism. To me, this means that German society has yet to liberate itself from its dark history in Germany and its former colonies. It enforces liberal values and norms to such an extent that it becomes difficult to question and interrogate history dispassionately, and showing excessive patriotism may be misconstrued. To this end, the question of how Germany was able to recover from the Great Depression under the notorious leadership of Adolf Hitler and the massive industrialization that followed is a question that is outrightly dismissed. The rationale is that the Nazi regime cannot be accorded any positive affirmation in German society.

While collaborating with the German students, I posed three fundamental questions that cut deep within the fabric of German society and history. The first question had to do with the possibility of considering multi perspectivity when looking at the administration of Hitler, and the answer was a definite no; that is, Nazi Germany never contributed anything positive in all spheres of German society. The second question had to do with Germany's colonial history in Namibia. I asked about to what extent to which Germany's colonial history, in particular the Herero-Nama Genocide, features in the classroom. The answer was that it is minimal to non-existent because of the topic's controversial nature.

The third question was about the fact that Adolf Hitler is historically considered the most brutal dictator and despot for his abhorrible deeds against Jews. I noted the case of King Leopold of Belgium and his misdeeds in the Congo. My question was, who is the most brutal, and why is it not Leopold? The answer to me squarely centred around a Eurocentric education that often disregards 'other' people's lived experiences, particularly Africans. This highlights a disproportionate differentiation of victims and the hierarchy thereof. This means, in my view, that in the hierarchy of mass killings involving people of the world, Africans are ranked last and such that their lived experiences that deserve the same attention as others are often overlooked.

International collaborations focusing on controversial issues in history education are crucial, especially for young and upcoming history teachers and aspiring historians. There is a scholarly consensus that History is a field riddled with controversy, and controversial figures are the core focus of history. Therefore, teachers and students must learn to reflect upon the epistemological status of sources as well as the concepts of authenticity,

originality, and truth, as well as with those used in memory debates like victim and sacrifice, the differentiation between different types of memorials (hero-, victim- and so on), the political concepts which draw on historical interpretations (like hierarchy of victims vs. equalization of victims) and so on.<sup>2</sup> All considered this was a worthwhile experience, and we, as pre-service history teachers, grappled with the plurality and multiplicity of handlings of the past and orientations drawn from history.

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2 A Korber, *German History Didactics*, German History Didactics, 2007, p. 162.