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THE WEB APPLICATION *LEARNING WITH INTERVIEWS. FORCED LABOR 1939–1945 FOR GERMAN, CZECH AND RUSSIAN SCHOOLS. COMMON GROUND AND COUNTRY-SPECIFIC DIFFERENCES*

It has often been observed that the life-story narratives of witnesses of National Socialism – even in the form of videotaped interviews – enable pupils to develop a personal approach to history. But how must history teaching using such highly subjective sources be designed if it is to do justice to their special character as well as the needs of the educators and young people’s active sense of history? In the last few years work has been done at the *Freie Universität* Berlin, in close cooperation with partners in the Czech Republic and the Russian Federation |1, to develop digital educational platforms using the videotaped testimonies of former forced labourers taking due account of the specific educational context in the three countries.

In the following we first consider the common foundations of this platform, which is funded by the “*Foundation Remembrance, Responsibility and Future*” (EVZ). The second part is devoted to the specific approaches adopted in Germany, the Czech Republic and the Russian Federation. Finally, by way of a conclusion, a summary is provided of a number of those principles which seem worthy of emulation.

Point of Departure

During the Second World War, more than 25 million people were forced to perform slave labour for Nazi Germany |2. In those countries which are burdened with the heritage of that crime, the enormous number of victims has

met with decades of indifference – for reasons that differ from country to country. Stimulated by the symbolic compensation payments made to former – and now very old – forced and slave labourers ¹³ and the opening of archives in eastern Europe, several researchers have addressed the subject in the last 20 years. ¹⁴ In the schools, on the other hand, forced labour under the National Socialists and its victims have rarely been worth more than a marginal note in the history textbooks in almost all European countries. Oral history interviews with people who were subjected to various forms of forced labour in various locations therefore have a special role to play in education in those countries. The multi-perspective life-story narratives in the *Forced Labor 1939–1945* archive of interviews recorded in 26 countries and 27 languages in 2005–2006 by Alexander von Plato and his team ¹⁵ accordingly offer a highly suitable basis for developing educational materials that facilitate involvement with these diverse experiences and forms of remembrance. Digital history education with online support is still in knee-pants in the schools of all three countries. In this context, a well designed learning platform can become a useful resource as it provides simple access to the video interviews as sources and also provides relevant assignments and supplementary materials with an eye to contextualisation. In addition, it helps pupils to produce autonomous results and to do so in a form that is fit for presentation. For that purpose it is important that users should be able to access the platform and their results of the work not only at school, but from everywhere, when using their tablets or smart phones.

Shared Strategies in Spite of Different Cultures of Remembrance

The development of and agreement on a common basis and the commitment of the main actors to the above interview project on forced labour under the National Socialists were of great importance. Since 2008, the Freie Universität Berlin has prepared the collection of just under 600 interviews for convenient and scientific use ¹⁶ and also developed the first DVD with educational materials ¹⁷, while the Czech and Russian partners were directly involved in the interviews in their respective countries. At the preparatory

international meetings, all parties agreed to common standards for the format of the interviews and technical aspects. The interviews are based on the narrative technique, which leads to as open a narrative as possible, with the interviewer relegated to a supporting role, and include subsequent questions designed to go into greater depth on certain aspects. The fact that the interviews last an average of 3 hours 30 minutes indicates that the agreed method was successfully applied.

While the interview project can be considered a common European scientific exercise, European cultures of remembrance “remain very diverse” (Interview von Plato: Question 5, TC: 04:55–05:25) and forced labour is still a national issue (von Plato 2013: 36). To cope with this situation, it was decided to develop educational materials based on a common strategy which offer scope for diverse life stories and approaches and in some cases conflictive questions in the countries involved. With the online app, it was possible – in the spirit of international exchange – to develop a common format to do justice to the



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convictions shared by the partners on educational basics and didactic principles. In addition – and equally fundamental at least – it offers adequate scope for developing country-specific content, materials and questions.

Learning with Interviews. Didactic Principles

From a didactic point of view, what is important with regard to the **biographical approach** is to understand that the various periods of the 20th century are not simply a string of isolated phases but that people literally lived through them. Moreover, it involves a “configuration of the narrator as a historically competent subject”, which means “recognition as an individual” (Barricelli/Lücke 2013: 56). Consequently, the format of the **interview film** was developed, which follows the life-story course of the narrative and is normally chronological. The project is not therefore based on thematic clips but on films that are between 25 and 30 minutes long and remain as close to the original source as possible. No use is made of any additional items, of photos or documents, nor of any music, and the cuts made are always recognisable as such. These interview films constitute the central element of the learning apps.

Another basic principle is **multi-perspectivity**: It was decided to select six or seven quite different narratives which complement and contrast with one another and above all constitute self-contained chapters of equal importance. Almost all the interviews are from the archive *Forced Labor 1939–1945* and were chosen on the basis of country-specific criteria. For the German learning platform there is only one German-language interview, while the Czech platform offers six Czech-language interview films. In all cases, however, people with very different backgrounds and experiences are included, and they are all strong narrators at the subjective level. By way of embedding the films, **contextualisation** is provided at several levels. The interviews are accompanied by a short biography with an interactive map showing the stations in the lives of the interviewees. The “background” section is also extremely important as it includes an introductory country-specific film explaining the extent of forced labour under the National Socialists as well as its subsequent history and reception.

The tools provided for use with all the chapters include a lexicon and a time line in support of autonomous learning and enquiry. For the various **assignments**, key documents related to forced labour under the National Socialists and its subsequent history are also integrated. The **critical approach to the sources** of the learning platform is reflected in the links provided to the *Forced Labor* archive, which means that users can always call up the unedited versions of the interviews. In the “further assignments”, for example, pupils are encouraged to compare the interview films with the original sources and assess the editing of the film, or do their own research into other people’s experiences of a certain place or topic, including the relationships between different groups of forced labourers. The **users** of the platform are not just an attentive audience in the survivors’ digitalised living rooms; they are encouraged to contribute their thoughts, feelings and questions and produce their own results through interaction with the interview film. For that purpose they are provided with a user-friendly environment in which they can work on modularised assignments on the pattern of “discover – develop (choice of assignments) – discuss”. There is a workspace in which they can create their own texts and combine them with images, documents and excerpts from the interview. At the end, pupils can summarise the combined results for the various chapters in the form of a portfolio, which can be presented in digital form, sent as a pdf document or printed. That enables pupils to offer their own analyses, thoughts and interpretations for discussion and also to save them. With regard to the **educators**, importance was attached to providing an effective introduction to the subject of forced labour under the National Socialists, with which many were not previously familiar. Didactic comments on all the assignments and specific educator functions are designed to facilitate preparation of the teaching. In addition, educators can formulate additional assignments for their pupils or adapt those provided to the needs of their groups. Given the breadth of the topics that the narratives touch upon, the online app can be used in various subjects in addition to history, like civics, literature, art, ethics and languages. The three-step process “discover – develop – discuss” is designed for a ninety-minute class,

a time line that permits viewing, interaction and subsequent discussion of an interview film and also represents a time frame that can most often be integrated within a standard school timetable in an international comparison. For project work, term papers and also university/teaching training seminars, the platform is suitable for in-depth and comparative working. The assignments for all variants of the learning app address the specific narrative formats and patterns of an interview and establish links with the present. On all platforms, questions of identity, external ascriptions and self definition are raised as are questions of the continued existence of antisemitism, racism and ethnic thinking. In summary, the interviews have been selected and the assignments designed to promote narrativity, media competence, source criticism, judgemental competence, reflection and action-oriented transfer. The shape this takes in the various countries is the subject of the following sections.

The German Learning Platform

In Germany, the ideology of National Socialism was not only conceived but also implemented – with the merciless persecution of political opponents, the annihilation of the Jews, the war of extermination in the East and the deportation of millions of people for forced labour. These unparalleled crimes were committed with massive support at all levels of German society. Such facts create very specific conditions for learning about the history of National Socialism in German schools. For many years the schools' efforts were dominated by the documents and narratives of the perpetrators. Forced labour currently tends to play a minor role, although – in Germany especially – there are reasons enough not to neglect this criminal system and its social realities.

Choice of interviews

A main criterion in the choice of interviews was to include a representative of what in numerical terms were the largest groups of forced labourers, but also groups which had received particularly little attention. One interviewee is accordingly one of the 600,000 former members of the Italian military

internees who were classified as being ineligible under the compensation scheme for forced labour under the National Socialists. The other selection criteria included country of origin, type of work, gender, age, social background, post-war life, the question whether such aspects as freedom of action and profiteers were touched upon, and also the narrative style of the interview. The web application also includes the interview with Marie Jeník-ová 18, who had to perform forced labour for BMW, which establishes links with the “total deployment” of Czechs under the Nazis as well as with the Czech learning platform. The English-language interview with Anita Lasker-Wallfisch adds the situation of the persecuted Jews to the subjects covered by the learning app. As a result of the various countries of origin of the forced labourers in Germany, the German variant of the application features Polish (Helena Bohle-Szacki), Russian (Sinaida Baschlai), Italian (Claudio Sommaruga), French (Victor Laville), English and Czech interviews and just one in German – with the German Sinto Reinhard Florian. For that reason, every film comes with a voice-over, which pupils can switch off and on. That in turn opens up innovative opportunities for bilingual working, which are further supported with a running transcript plus German translation. During the editing, a prologue was added to each interview film, in which the interviewees reflect on the main aspects of their narratives. They touch on such topics as the motives and objectives of their narratives, the significance of the remoteness in time of the events described and the limits of narrative for the intended purpose. That delivers a strong signal with regard to the points to be considered when analysing the sources.

Main topics discussed

a) Guilt and debt

Over and above the general purpose of all the interviews, there are some topics which are specific to the German learning app, starting with the whole complex of the response to guilt and the financial obligations incurred through forced labour under the National Socialists. These subjects are raised frequently in the interviews, either in the form of interviewees’ experiences

of treatment by various Germans or their assessment of the German response after the war. The conclusion drawn by Sinaida Baschlai: “It is courageous to admit one’s guilt, even if it is not one’s own but that of one’s fathers and grandfathers.” (Interview film with Baschlai: TC 21:10–21:25) In view of the fact that today’s school classes consist only partly of descendants of the perpetrator society, such a quotation is well suited to add a new perspective to the debate and encourage pupils to form their own opinion. For many years, German society had little awareness of either guilt or the financial obligations arising out of forced labour under the National Socialists. It was not until the 1980s that survivors and various associations – with great commitment – placed their claims deriving from wages withheld and compromised health and company profits on the international agenda. As the post-war history of (non-)compensation for forced labour under the National Socialists is central to an understanding and assessment of the current situation, it is dealt with in the background film. Assignments are suggested in which pupils can formulate their opinions of “symbolic compensation” or the response of world-famous German companies. The filmed interviews also include key sentences on the subject, such as when Claudio Sommaruga says:

“What we want is recognition for the way we behaved. We are not interested in money. There can be no compensation for deportation; no amount of money in the world could compensate for deportation.” (Background film compensation: TC 16:47–17:02)

b) Links to local research and family histories

Forced labour was widespread and its traces are still to be found in the public space today – in the form of buildings constructed by forced and slave labourers, sometimes complete with their accommodation and workplaces. The Forced Labour online archive includes a map-based search of the locations of forced labour discussed in the interviews. The family histories of some pupils include narratives relating to forced labour from diverse perspectives, which can be included in the teaching and additionally investigated.

c) Current topics for transfer

Some of the key assignments relate to the narratives of individual experiences of persecution and raise questions of universal relevance like the questions of one's own identity, which interviewees address. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, for example, says:

"To be Jewish is to belong to a club from which you can't resign. 'Can't resign, I'm Jewish'. And there's nothing wrong with being Jewish. That is the whole thing. There's nothing wrong with you being German. In fact, that is the only thing in our lives that we have no input. Once you are born, then you have responsibility." (Interview film with Lasker-Wallfisch: TC: 26:36–26:58)

Other themes are also present, such as the experience of foreignness, of freedom/work/forced migration, and what resistance can really mean today. Finally, users are offered a discussion that relates to the dialogue character

German learning platform: <https://lernen-mit-interviews.de/>

of the source and provides for the questions the pupils would have liked to ask. The pupils position their own historical narrative as a communicative act for constructing meaning through the experience of time. A key element of historical consciousness is involved when our questions derive from encounter with the narratives of the survivors and we realise that we are the ones who must provide the answers for today.

The Czech Learning Platform

Forced labour for the German war economy was also a mass phenomenon in what was then the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. It is estimated that a total of 450–600,000 young men and women were deported to the German Reich for that purpose. To that can be added another ten thousand individuals to take account of concentration camp inmates and forced labourers working on the territory of the Protectorate. 19 Czechs were deployed mainly in armaments and other industrial plants, on construction sites, on the



Czech learning platform: <https://nucenaprace.cz/>

railway, in the trades and, in a few cases, in agriculture and forestry. The forced labourers were long among the “forgotten victims” of National Socialism in the Czech Republic (and former Czechoslovakia), too. They were not accused of collaboration with the enemy and were rarely stigmatised but they had hardly any place in the official post-war culture of remembrance. The main role in the “master narrative” was played by the communist resistance fighters and partisans. The first published research on the subject of forced labour written by František Mainuš (1970; 1974) long remained the only such research in the country. In the schoolbooks the forced labourers attract no more than a marginal note, and their status as victims has always been questioned. With the passing of the last generation of eyewitnesses, the experiences of the former forced labourers can no longer be communicated directly, but records of their narratives in the form of video- and audiotaped interviews with the next generation offer opportunities for indirect encounter with the eyewitnesses via the digital platform.

Choice of interviews

The point of departure for the choice of interviews was the level of public awareness in the country as the product of the culture of remembrance described above. We did not wish to neglect the groups of victims that had received preference after 1945 but we also wanted to draw attention to other groups of forced labourers. Our goal is to expand the overall picture with regard to today’s Czech Republic especially but also in the European context. The results of our teaching training work confirm the assumption that educators are interested in a broad spectrum of experiences, as some of them choose to work on the Shoah while others select the Roma Genocide or forced civilian labour. That focus was influenced by the decision to discuss the European context in the background film. We chose seven eyewitnesses, including both former inmates of concentration camps and corrective labour camps and “civilians”, i.e. forced labourers deported to the German Reich. The eyewitnesses were persecuted as Jews, Roma, resistance fighters, political prisoners and members of the Bohemian and Moravian majority population,

who were classified as inferior under the racist Nazi ideology and used as a reservoir for forced labour. The life story of the German-Czech-Jewish family of Peter Demetz reflects the multi-ethnic character of pre-war Czechoslovakia. Six of the seven interviews are taken from the online archive *Forced Labor 1939–1945*, while the interview with the member of the resistance, Miloš Volf, was added from the archive of *Živá paměť*. A thirty-minute background film is designed to expand users' horizons with regard to the phenomenon and also the extent of forced labour in the European context. The fates of forced labourers from other countries are also presented and the question of compensation discussed. For further study of the problems, users are provided with three ten-minute thematic excerpts from interviews with forced labourers from the Soviet Union, Poland and France and also a 1943 propaganda newsreel from the Protectorate.

Main topics discussed

Between five and eight assignments are offered for each short film. The Czech web app is structured with three assignment levels: a) "History big and small" encourages pupils to connect the "big" political picture with the "small" personal histories. b) The "Life story" assignment promotes basic competencies like comprehension, retelling the story and reproduction. c) The assignments at the third level, "Food for thought", relate thematically to each interview film and promote advanced competencies. Like the interview films, the assignments are also devoted to the years before and after the Second World War. They include memories of pre-war Czechoslovakia, emigration following the 1948 communist putsch as well as the *Prague Spring* and its suppression in 1968. Apart from imparting historical knowledge, the assignments help pupils develop general analytical skills and competencies needed today. The focus is on the ability to distinguish between reality and propaganda, general questions of human rights and freedoms, decision-making processes and consequences, human behaviour under extreme conditions, solidarity, help and ethical behaviour.

The Russian Learning Platform

During the Second World War, millions of Soviet citizens – both civilians and prisoners of war – were deported to the German Reich for forced labour. On their return to the Soviet Union after the war, they were denied recognition as victims of war and their fate was veiled in silence in Soviet society. In Russia today, there are several publications on the subject and numerous initiatives have been launched in this field (Земсков, В. 2016 ; Полян, П. 2002). These are purely regional initiatives, however, with limited public resonance, and there is hardly any information on the subject in schoolbooks at the high school level. The Russian-language version of the interview archive Forced Labor 1939–1945. Memory and History has been online since the end of 2014.¹⁰ It is hoped that, as a result, the personal experiences of the former forced labourers will become established in public awareness and enter into collective memory in Russia. That is the reason why the Russian-language version of the learning platform was created as an educational tool for schools with the objective of strengthening the fragile chain of intergenerational communication of historical experience.

Choice of interviews

The Russian learning platform includes six biographical films produced from interviews taken from the Forced Labor online archive. Three of the films are about the fates of Soviet citizens: the Jew I.I. Abkovich, a former prisoner at the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp who survived the Holocaust, the former “Eastern worker” (“Ostarbeiter”) O.I. Smirnova, who worked in industry and was an inmate of the Ravensbrück concentration camp, and the former Soviet prisoner of war M.P. Bochkarev, who was held in several concentration camps including Buchenwald. One of the films is about the fate of a German, Elisabeth Kunesch, who was first imprisoned for political reasons and subsequently held at Ravensbrück concentration camp and was excluded from the “Volksgemeinschaft” (the “Aryan” people’s community). The Polish political prisoner Anna Palarczyk was a barracks clerk (“Blockschreiberin”) at Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp who was called as a witness at

the Auschwitz trial in the 1960s. The fate of the French forced labourer Victor Laville illustrates the illegality of National Socialist policies on occupied soil in France. All these people, belonging to various groups of victims of war, were long ignored in Russian society and research. The choice of interviews was made on the basis of the need to show Russian pupils the sufferings of people of various nationalities. On the first page, the interviewees are presented in the chronological order of Nazi expansion. That makes it possible to focus not only on the character of the war on the Eastern front and the position of the Jews and Soviet people as “Untermenschen” (subhumans) in the National Socialists’ racial ideology but also on the anguish of those Germans, Poles and French who rejected National Socialism. To that extent, the learning platform helps overcome the national perspective by including the perspectives of persecuted individuals from other countries. At the same time, attention is drawn to the diversity of the forms of forced labour employed by the National Socialists in Germany and the occupied areas of Europe during the Second World War, which offered very different chances of survival for the victims – from the “extermination through labour” to which the Jew I.I. Abkovich was exposed and the slavery to which concentration camp prisoners were subjected to the systematic murder through deliberate starvation of a large proportion of the Soviet prisoners of war. The platform also makes it possible to compare the working and living conditions of forced labourers from East and West Europe. All these aspects can be studied at high school level with the help of the tasks provided with every film.

Main topics discussed

The assignments are divided into three sections. The first section is devoted to familiarisation with the biographical films. The questions in the second section help users understand the character of forced labour and the living and working conditions in captivity. There is a strong focus on the aspects of resistance and solidarity between the prisoners independent of nationality or citizenship. All six films also describe life after liberation and the end of the war. The questions on this period enable pupils to see the difficulties

encountered by the former forced labourers on their return to the USSR. In this context, great importance is attached to the question of the position of this group of victims of war in the collective memory of Russia or their home country. The last section serves to underscore the specificities of a biographical narrative interview. The pupils can compare the biographical short film with the complete interview so as to observe the principles of designing different narratives. The learning platform also includes a context film as a source of basic information on the problem of forced labour under the National Socialists and its position in the culture of remembrance in Russia and Europe. For the teaching materials, numerous sources have been made available to Russia's research and educational communities for the first time. Documents from the Nazi concentration camps and documents kept by former victims or the Soviet administration, for example, provide opportunities for multi-perspective involvement with history.

The screenshot shows a web page titled "Обучение на основе интервью" (Learning based on interviews). At the top right, it says "ОБЪЕДИНЕННЫЙ ФУМ 1939 - 1945 ВОСПОМИНАНИЯ И ИСТОРИЯ". Below this are navigation tabs for "Биографии" (Biographies) and "Исторический контекст" (Historical context). A row of six small portrait photos of elderly people is displayed. Below the photos, the name "Ольга Ипполитовна Смирнова" (Olga Ippolitovna Smirnova) is shown, with the subtitle "Вспоминательница района Ржевского...". The main heading "Обучение на основе интервью" is followed by a paragraph: "Среди 20 миллионов человек вынуждены были трудиться на жиданно-социалистическую Германию в годы Второй мировой войны, на данной учебной платформе представлены рассказы шести человек, переживавших опыт принудительного труда и пребывания в нацистских лагерях. Этот опыт разделен на жизнь на дол и после." Below this is another line: "В тему принудительного труда входит также контекстный фильм." To the right of the text is a search form with fields for "Имя или электронный адрес:", "Почта", and "Показать результаты". At the bottom right of the form are two buttons: "Авторизоваться (в личный кабинет)" and "Регистрация".

Russian learning platform: <https://obuchenie-na-osnove-intervyu.org/>

Conclusion

Remarkably enough, it has proved comparatively easy – following the interview collection phase – to achieve a consensus between the three countries on common didactic and digital formats for the conceptual framework of the videotaped life story interviews. As a result, a transnational accepted answer was found to a whole series of educational and didactic requirements for work with this special type of source. Thanks to this common basis, the video interview plays a central role for work with the sources. This role is determined by the specific format of the life story interview films and their presentation on the user interface or touchscreen. In addition, a multi-perspective approach was selected with the choice of six or seven interviews with forced labourers, whose experiences of persecution were very diverse and whose interviews reflect the different ways in which they sought to come to terms with those experiences. Another thing the learning platforms have in common is the emphasis placed on careful contextualisation at the biographical and historical levels. In the interest of the educators, importance was attached to intuitive working, a good introduction, didactic comments and aids to preparation as well as scope for adding their own questions for their respective learning groups. The learning platforms include assignments that promote narrativity, media competence, source criticism, judgemental competence, reflection and action-oriented transfer and offer ample opportunities for users to produce and present their own results. For this common structure, it was important to develop an application that provides full scope for the development of independent, country-specific contents, which remain changeable and in transformation – just like our own views of each and every single video interview.

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- 1 For the Czech platform: the non-profit association Živá paměť in Prague (Šárka Jarská); for the Russian platform: the Regional Center of Oral History in Voronezh at the Voronezh Institute of High Technologies (Natalia Timofeeva); for the German platform: the Center for Digital Systems (CeDiS) at the Freie Universität Berlin directed by Nicolas Apostolopoulos.
- 2 Only rough estimates of the figures are possible, especially with regard to forced labour in the occupied territories. The Nazi Forced Labour Documentation Centre in Berlin-Schöneeweide with Mark Spoerer assumes there were at least 26 million forced labourers (see Fröhlich et al. 2013: 28).
- 3 Following years of international negotiations, the EVZ Foundation was established in 2000 with contributions from the German federal authority and German companies. On application, the fund paid € 2,000–7,000 in symbolic compensation to former forced labourers.
- 4 In spite of numerous individual studies, Herbert 1991 and Spoerer 2001 are still standard reading.
- 5 See the interview archive Forced Labor 1939–1945. Memory and History: www.zwangsarbeit-archiv.de (see Plato/Leh/Thonfeld 2008).
- 6 Almost all the interviews have been transcribed, translated into German and made user-friendly with the help of lists of contents, indices and short biographies. Registered users can access them in the online archive Forced Labor 1939–1945. The archive is in English, German and Russian.
- 7 The educational DVD *Forced Labor 1939–1945. Eyewitness Interviews for Teaching* has been available in German from the German Federal Agency for Civic Education since 2011.
- 8 The full length versions of all the interviews mentioned in the following are accessible for registered users at www.zwangsarbeit-archiv.de
- 9 Chmela, L. 1946; Mainuš, F. 1970; Kárný, M. 1991. M. Spoerer/2001/put the number of Czech forced labourers at 355,000.
- 10 <http://prinuditelnyj-trud-archiv.org/ru/> accessed 2 August 2017.