
A Textbook Study in Villainification: The Need to Renovate Our Depictions of Villains

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Introduction

All historical accounts used in social studies classrooms, by their very nature, will be simplifications of the past. Curriculum developers, textbook authors and teachers are forced to make difficult choices about how and what to include. Discussions about historical significance (Seixas 1994; Seixas and Peck 2004; Wineburg 2001) as well as ethical judgments (Gibson 2014) and historical responsibility (Löfström 2013) are helpful in the task of deciding what topics to include and how students might understand those topics, but in this article we are arguing for criteria regarding how certain historical figures—villains—are portrayed. The portrayal of villains can influence student judgments about those implicated in historical and contemporary atrocities. We focused on the portrayal of Hitler in Alberta social studies textbooks, in part because of his status as a quintessential villain from his extensive representations in media.

This textbook analysis was inspired by data (literally from the Latin, the “things having been given”) from a larger phenomenographical study on youth conceptualizations of evil (van Kessel 2016). During some of the interviews and task-based focus groups with Grade 11 students (aged 16 to 18), participants voiced their concerns about the portrayals of the villains of history. This textbook study, inspired by those comments, seeks to illuminate the extent to

which Alberta’s high school textbooks can represent Hitler as an almost otherworldly villain. Hitler can become, as one participant, Nikolai, stated, “a representation of the situation.” A single person (in this case, Hitler) becomes a hyperindividualized, evil entity instead of an interconnected human who, although an integral part of a horrific process, was only one of countless people in Germany and beyond who participated.

It is not a new criticism to demonstrate that social studies textbooks can inadequately discuss particular events, people or processes, and that these inadequacies have unintended, negative consequences (eg, Anyon 1979; Apple 1993; Brown and Brown 2010; Loewen 2007; VanSledright 2002). Our analysis, however, is unique in its focus on villainification, and is intended to help teachers and teacher educators navigate the stormy waters of discussing historical atrocities with a view toward a less violent future. It needs to be noted, however, that this study is not an attack on textbook writers or the process of composing a textbook; rather, this project seeks to illuminate a broader process that informs not only textbook writing but also other educational situations—villainification (van Kessel and Crowley 2017). The task of anti-villainification is to remove this false sense of comfort that evil is other and not “us,” and calls upon us to engage with a more complete analysis of historical actors and contingencies, with an emphasis on the personal implications.

Villains as Historical Actors

Curriculum and support materials (for example, textbooks) often portray historical actors without nuance, where “not only victims, but also victimizers, collaborators, resisters, bystanders, and rescuers were all individualized or collectively represented, normalized or exoticized, personalized or abstracted—that is, if their roles were included in the first place” (Schweber 2004, 157). Villains are often hyperindividualized, or blame is placed on a faceless mob (that is, a vague nod to society), but neither of these depictions explicitly asks students to weigh their own complicity in parallel contemporary processes (van Kessel and Crowley 2017). Yet, students are intrigued by the moral and ethical issues of history:

[Students] immediately perceive the historical contexts and relate to personal experiences or general moral values. Their reasoning gathers both the historical context and the present context. Even lessons we must learn for the future are emphasized, which indicates the students’ historical consciousness. (Ammert 2017, 32)

We argue in this article that a commitment to antivillainification can maintain this interest while fostering a sense that social change can and should occur. Such a situation is difficult with simplistic villains, as one Grade 11 student, Serena, noted: “Regularly, when we portray an evil person I feel like it’s really one-dimensional. It’s just that’s it, that’s all you are going to be told. There are no layers.” A focus that rests too much on the villain (for example, Saddam Hussein, Osama Bin Laden, Josef Stalin) and not also on the ordinary processes and everyday people involved allows us to shut down our thinking about the part that we all play, or could have played, in the atrocities we are quick to condemn and blame on a select few others. Undoubtedly, these villains of history committed atrocious acts; however, we need to provide nuanced layers to these portrayals.

The study of history is often considered to be a way to illuminate issues of right and wrong (Hakkari 2005), but the students’ perception of a rupture between the past and present might obscure such a lofty goal, especially in tandem with an individualistic sense of responsibility (Löfström 2013). If we take curriculum in Grumet’s (1981) sense, as “the collective story we tell our children about our past, our present, and our future” (p 115), then that story ought to be one that unveils how we all can contribute to systemic harm, thus providing an impetus to correct those (in)actions. We cannot expect ourselves or our students (or society

at large) to avoid repeating past atrocities if we fail to critically examine them and feel the discomfort of our own potential complicity in comparable horrors. To this end, the insights gained from this study are intended to guide future textbook and other resource publishing, as well as more modular and/or personal resource development by teachers.

Villainification

Villainification is the process of creating single actors as the faces of systemic harm, with those hyperindividualized villains losing their ordinary characteristics (van Kessel and Crowley 2017). There is a tendency to simplify historical figures, such as the process of heroification, whereby “flesh-and-blood individuals [are turned] into pious, perfect creatures without conflicts, pain, credibility, or human interest” (Loewen 2007, 11). Heroification and villainification morph ordinary humans of the past into the extraordinary heroes and villains of history. Both obscure how everyday folk are forces of change within larger structures, risking removing a sense of civic agency—for good or for evil (Epstein 1994; Kohl 1991; van Kessel and Crowley 2017), and such simplifications can have unintended, adverse effects, such as the idealization of victims, which forecloses the opportunity to work through the trauma (Britzman 2000). Heroification can rob students of their sense of civic agency and self-efficacy (Epstein 1994), and villainification can obscure how students (or anyone else) can perpetuate evil through our daily (in)actions (van Kessel and Crowley 2017).

In Western society, we tend to understand successes and failures as the result of individual traits and drives isolated from broader processes (Audi 1993; Britzman 1986; Brown and Brown 2010; Löfström 2013; van den Berg 2010; van Kessel and Crowley 2017). Such a simplification can lead to a conception of a hyperindividualized villain who is aberrant and divorced from context and relationality. While the atrocities of the Second World War (for example) are beyond normal experience, those who perpetrated those atrocities were human beings like those we encounter in our daily lives, even ourselves. It is all too easy to condemn Hitler, the Nazis or even all of Germany for horrors like the Holocaust as entities unlike our normal experience, and thus neglect our own complicity in the contemporary horrors of 2017, such as the fate of thousands of Syrian refugees and missing and murdered Indigenous women (MMIW) in Canada, to name

(sadly) only a few situations of many. How we study the processes of history affects our sense of agency here and now, because the process of students reflecting upon ethical concerns in the past “sensitize[s] the students to the predicament of ethical-political choices that they, as citizens, must face today” (Löfström 2013, 517; Selman and Barr 2009).

Ordinary, Extensive Evil

It is important to challenge the idea of pure evil in human beings. A belief in pure evil due to a process of demonization has a clear (and troubling) effect on how we relate to the ideas of retribution and punishment (Webster and Saucier 2015), which by extension affects how we live together in our societies. The task of antivillainification calls for a recognition of what Elizabeth Minnick (2014) calls *extensive evil*:

the massive and monstrous harms carried out by many, many people for significant periods of time—months, years, decades, and more (slavery and sexualized violence: when has humanity been without these and others?). They are the evils of which we would not speak, of which we so often say, “unthinkable.” (p 170)

Minnick, a former student of Hannah Arendt and influenced by the idea of the banality of evil (Arendt 2006), sees ordinary people at the root of extensive evil. Although Arendt’s analysis of the (in)famous Adolf Eichmann was somewhat flawed due to his duplicitous self-representation (Stangneth 2015), such a ruse was possible only because there were indeed “so many perpetrators of the kind he was pretending to be” (Browning 2003, 3–4). Otherwise normal people can and do commit horrific acts such as mass killing. As Arendt herself phrases it, “The sad truth of the matter is that most evil is done by people who never made up their minds to be or to do either evil or good” (Arendt 1978, 180). Social psychologists have wrestled with the topic, such as the research of Stanley Milgram (1974) and Philip Zimbardo (2007) regarding obedience and role adaptation in social contexts. Such phenomena are also revealed in the historical record with analyses like those of Christopher Browning (2017), regarding the Reserve Police Battalion 101 in Nazi Germany, and of Jean Hatzfeld (2006), in the context of the Rwandan genocide—analyses that reveal that some participants were eager, others needed to be coaxed or coerced, and some did not think about their actions at all. Such complexity is explicit in the work of James Waller (2002), who identified a nexus of factors ranging from

ethnocentrism and desires for social dominance to moral disengagement and self-interest to socialization and to victim blaming, us–them dichotomies, and dehumanization.

High school students in social studies classrooms seem to appreciate complexity in the portrayal of Hitler and other villains. Serena noted that she learned in her advanced placement (AP) psychology class that Hitler was a human being with a degree of complexity (van Kessel 2017, 582), and that such a framing, paired with antivillainification discussions from a research project about evil

has made me think of Hitler as, not less evil, but him as a person as less evil because his act was evil and not him. This has changed my thinking 360. So I feel that it would have a place in painting evil as not just a person, but the act as well so that history doesn’t repeat itself cause I could easily go and do the same thing as well. (van Kessel 2016, 168–69)

In this article, we claim that Alberta’s government-mandated textbooks for high school social studies can promote villainification to varying degrees. We want teachers to add nuance to exceptional individuals in historical narratives so that the complexities of the past are highlighted and thus teachers can increase the likelihood that students might see themselves as similarly capable. When these exceptional individuals are the villains of the story, the stakes are high because students might then be tacitly encouraged to remain thoughtless and complicit in everyday actions that facilitate atrocities like those of the Second World War and systemic harm like racism (van Kessel and Crowley 2017).

Villainification Textbook Analysis

The aim of this study is to examine the extent to which the content of social studies textbooks can contribute to villainification. For the textbook study, we engaged with the textbooks for Grade 11 (junior) and 12 (senior) students in mandatory social studies classes; namely, Social Studies 20-1, 20-2, 30-1 and 30-2. Social Studies 20 is aimed at Grade 11 students, and 30 for Grade 12s, although students technically can take the courses in any year as long as they have the prerequisite. This discipline (among others) is streamed (although the government resists such a framing). The *-1* indicates the most rigorous class, and thus *-2* has a subtly different curriculum.

The guiding question from the program of studies for both Social Studies 20-1 and 20-2 is “To what extent should we embrace nationalism?” but the related issue subquestions vary slightly, with the 20-2 questions asking, for example, “Should national interest be pursued” instead of 20-1’s more nuanced question, “To what extent should national interest be pursued?” (Alberta Education 2007a, emphasis added).

We chose to focus on the example of Adolf Hitler in textbooks from the province of Alberta. Because education is a responsibility of each province, social studies and history curricula vary by location, but the Second World War is a widely taught topic in Canada and elsewhere. The historical figure of Hitler is ubiquitous in and out of the classroom, likely in part from his extensive representations in film and other media. This phenomenon is not unique to Alberta, or even Canada. Liu et al (2009) asked university students from a vast array of countries to name the most important figure in world history from the last thousand years. Students from 11 countries ranked Hitler as first or second in influence, which led Liu et al (2009) to brand him as a “universal villain” (p 685). Do the textbooks in Alberta echo this internationally pervasive stance? We feel that starting with a supervillain like Hitler is a helpful place to begin the task of antivillainification because he is such an extreme example, one that many (if not all) of us have traditionally considered in a very simplistic light. Although working toward antivillainification now, the authors of this paper have previously reified simplistic villains in their teaching and beyond (and still struggle with the task). Thus, the provocations in this article are not meant to be overly critical of the textbook content or the authors themselves—rather, we strive to create conversations that might be helpful for teachers and their students. After engaging with the more obvious example of Hitler in government-approved textbooks, we hope that educators will consider Hitler’s portrayal in their other resources, as well as other examples of possible villains in their curriculum, such as Duncan Campbell Scott in the context of Indian Residential Schools in Canada and Bull Connor in relation to the US civil rights movement (van Kessel and Crowley 2017).

In Alberta, officials from government, not school districts, select approved resources for classroom use. With the current program of studies, Alberta Education has approved one or two textbooks for each social studies course in this province. The textbooks for Grade 11 examined in depth for this study include the two choices for Social Studies 20-1, *Exploring*

Nationalism (Gardner et al 2008) and *Perspectives on Nationalism* (Harding et al 2009); the only option for Social Studies 20-2, *Understanding Nationalism* (Hoogeveen 2008); the only option for Social Studies 30-1, *Perspectives on Ideology* (Fielding et al 2009); and the only option for Social Studies 30-2, *Understandings of Ideologies* (Noesgaard et al 2010). To be approved by the provincial government, these textbooks must adhere closely to the Alberta program of studies for social studies.

The programs of studies for 20-1, 20-2, 30-1 and 30-2 identify a few contexts for studying Nazism during the interwar period and the Second World War. In 20-1 and 20-2, students study this period in some depth; they must “analyze” (20-1) or “explore” (20-2) the “relationship between nationalism and ultranationalism,” as well as “analyze” (20-1) or “examine” (20-2)

- nationalism and ultranationalism during times of conflict (causes of the First and Second World Wars, examples of nationalism and ultranationalism from the First and Second World Wars, ultranationalism in Japan, internments in Canada, conscription crises) and
- ultranationalism as a cause of genocide (the Holocaust, 1932–1933 famine in Ukraine, contemporary examples). (Alberta Education 2007a, 22, 34)

In their subsequent social studies class, students will “evaluate” (30-1) or “analyze” (30-2) ideological systems that rejected principles of liberalism (Communism in the Soviet Union, fascism in Nazi Germany) (Alberta Education 2007b, 20, 33), which is placed in the context of the role of government in relation to the people economically and politically.

It is important to note that these courses are in social studies and not history. Social studies is necessarily (and, in our opinion, beautifully) “unwieldy” because it draws from a variety of disciplines beyond history, including anthropology, economics, philosophy, psychology and sociology (Smith 2017). Thus, we are not seeking to criticize textbook authors for a lack of historical detail; rather, we see our task as encouraging an engagement with sensibilities from other fields—most notably insights from Hannah Arendt’s philosophy and political theory—as a supplement to the accounts about the villains of history. Such an approach jibes well with the intent of the social studies program of studies, in which the themes of nationalism and ideology are explored in a variety of places and periods, thus providing fertile ground for conversations about agency and responsibility in both historical and contemporary times.

Method

The specific methodology for this study is informed by other education scholars who have conducted textbooks studies, most notably Brown and Brown (2010), who conducted a textbook analysis on how racial violence is portrayed in Texan textbooks. First, it is important to find the relevant sections of the textbook (in our case, sections on the Second World War) and read these sections carefully, noting language, phrasing and accompanying images, as well as notable absences. For a content analysis, the physical layout, such as font and placement, can also be considered (Leavy 2017, 145); thus we also noted, for example, what content was marginal (literally and figuratively), such as what is included in optional questions for students. Next, patterns and themes are identified. Then, it is key to reread the sections with the initial analysis in mind, morphing and/or refining the analysis as needed and selecting representative examples. Such a constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin 1990) is important for credibility. Questions to frame the analysis included the following:

- Who is considered responsible for the harm (eg, discrimination, murder or other cruelty) inflicted? Is the sentence in the active or passive voice? Is the agency clear?
- Is Hitler himself named, or Nazis, Germans and so on? How and when is the term *Nazi* used versus *German*? Is there a sense of nuance within any of the groups discussed?
- Was there a similar process in another country that has gone unnamed?
- Is there a sense that the harm is committed at the whim of Hitler or due to broader policy? Is that harm indicated as having the support of some of the ordinary citizens of Germany? Of elsewhere?
- What images accompany these descriptions? What might these images convey to the reader?
- What questions are the textbooks asking students? Do they require students only to answer with facts or do they ask students to engage with self-reflection? How are Hitler and the Nazis framed in these questions?
- What definitions do the textbooks use for words or concepts related to the subject matter?

Responding to these questions required initial coding and repeatedly returning to the excerpt's initial context to check for inconsistencies and sweeping generalizations.

Coding Strategies

We chose to code the data manually, without a software program, so that we would not miss nuances or “latent meanings” (Leavy 2017, 147). The first author began with a pilot study of two textbooks, and then her research assistant, the second author, coded those textbooks independently before proceeding to the remaining textbooks. The first author then returned to all the data to continue the recursive process (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011). We used mainly descriptive and values coding, so as to summarize data and make assumptions about the cultural constructs guiding the content as well as what impressions the readers might form from engaging with the text (Saldaña 2014).

We began by analyzing the textbooks from highest grade level to lowest grade level, and within grade levels coding the -1 textbooks before the -2. This process ensured that the content within grade levels could first be compared and contrasted, and then cross-examined, with the other grade level. The first step in the coding process was to examine the index of the textbook in order to get a sense of where the textbook discussed the subject matter and related issues outside of the chapters that were exclusive to the subject matter. We then went on to examine the definitions pertaining to the subject matter to better understand the way each textbook wanted students to understand the terminology in the chapters. Finally, we examined the chapters that were pertinent to the subject matter, as well as the pages in the index that were not a part of these chapters, and noted observations on how the textbook discussed Hitler, the Nazis and Germans, as well as assumptions that readers may have made from the noted passages.

The second stage of coding involved comparing and contrasting definitions as well as the content of the textbooks, first within each grade level and then across grade levels. The content included chapter titles, key terms, key issues, chapter structures, how Hitler and the Nazis were discussed and, finally, how each textbook framed questions about Hitler and the Nazis. We made observations on each of these categories on how readers might interpret the differences in these categories, specifically with word choice as well as the content presented.

Findings

We found a range of results—some intense villainification, some mild villainification, and a few attempts to address a nexus of personal and societal

implications. Textbook authors diverged on the extent to which they attributed Nazi policy and actions to Hitler alone, revealed societal factors that contributed to the Second World War, identified the contributions of ordinary folk and implicated the student readers with a sense of shared responsibility. These interconnected categories highlight the difficulty in conveying narratives that do not contribute to villainification.

Hitler as the Sole Director of Nazi Policy

Textbooks vary in terms of whether Nazis other than Hitler are named. Some of the Alberta textbooks we analyzed did not discuss other Nazis, even when they were directly related to the content. There are logical reasons for this omission (for example, the programs of studies focus more on themes than historical detail), and yet there can be unintended consequences. Hitler could be hyper-individualized to the point where even other prominent Nazis are not implicated. Fielding et al (2009), Harding et al (2009) and Noesgaard et al (2010) referred only to Hitler specifically or the Nazi Party in general. No other important historical figures in the Nazi Party are named or held responsible for the actions taken during that time; for example, “the Nazis attempted to control what German citizens believed by controlling the ideas to which they were exposed” (Noesgaard et al 2010, 172). This statement does not name others intimately involved, such as Joseph Goebbels, the minister of propaganda for the Nazi Party. Similarly, Noesgaard et al (2010) presented the techniques that Hitler used in order to maintain the support of the German people—propaganda, youth movements, the use of the SA (*Sturmabteilung*) and the SS (*Schutzstaffel*), and scapegoating (p 178)—without naming Goebbels, Himmler or other key players. These absences, although understandable, can simplify the processes and people involved by boiling down responsibility to merely Hitler, thus unintentionally absolving any individuals (other than Hitler) of blame. Noesgaard et al (2010) presented Nazism as something that Hitler himself was solely responsible for, writing that “Hitler created his own form of fascism, Nazism” (Noesgaard et al 2010, 178). This statement is somewhat misleading because the Nazi Party existed before Hitler joined it (although, arguably, Hitler and other Nazi elites shifted the party’s direction), but more importantly,

this statement absolves other members of blame for involvement in the rise of the Nazi Party and their dedication to the hateful views espoused by Party members.

Harding et al (2009) asked the question, “Why Hitler? Why the Holocaust?” (p 192), which could perhaps lead students to the conclusion that the Holocaust could not have happened without Hitler (although it could equally provoke the question of how broader society allowed someone like Hitler to achieve power). The authors noted that anti-Semitism was previously present in Germany, and yet Hitler is still the driving force:

Anti-Semitism was not new to Nazi Germany—it was present long before Hitler resolved to act on it. He perceived that anti-Semitism had a long tradition in parts of Europe, but that he alone was going to be the one to act. (Harding et al 2009, 196)

By framing anti-Semitism and the Holocaust/Shoah in this manner, students might overlook the anti-Semitism of other prominent Nazi Party members and society at large, thus somewhat absolving them of responsibility for the horrors endured by many peoples during the Holocaust/Shoah. Even though “parts of Europe” are mentioned with respect to historical anti-Semitism, they are not named (and the anti-Semitism in North America goes completely unnamed), which is troubling because students might not then be able to properly understand how widespread and entrenched anti-Semitism was before the Second World War.

Some textbooks included details about individuals other than Hitler. *Exploring Nationalism* (Gardner et al 2008) and *Understanding Nationalism* (Hoogeveen 2008) named Goebbels as an important figure who had a major influence on how the German people reacted to Hitler and the Nazi Party and their policies. Gardner et al (2008) detailed how “in Germany, the Nazis used newspapers, radio, and film to promote extreme nationalism” (p 140), explaining the hatred Joseph Goebbels harboured for those he did not count as part of the nation, such as calling Jewish people “the incarnation of evil” (Gardner et al 2008, 140). Hoogeveen (2008) also named Goebbels as “Adolf Hitler’s propaganda minister ... [who] used this propaganda machine to feed Germans’ fears and insecurities to deceive the German people into believing that they were superior and Jews were evil” (p 135). By naming Goebbels and describing the way in which he used propaganda in order to influence the German people, we avoid blaming only Hitler. Instead, we

have an opportunity to identify not only other Nazis, but also the general population who ought to be implicated (albeit passively), which can allow the reader to understand the implications of extensive evil in the context of Nazi Germany.

Societal Factors

Effectively naming and describing broad-level, societal structures that contributed to the horrors of the Nazis proved difficult for the textbooks examined. The authors of *Perspectives on Ideology* (Fielding et al 2009) tended to refer either specifically to Hitler alone or generally to the Nazi Party, or both (“Hitler’s Nazi Party”), and rarely to the general population who contributed to Nazi ideology and deeds. Although there were some statements that reflected processes in play, there was no prepositional phrase of “by _____,” and so broader society has been implicated but not named. An example of such a statement would be “such claims took advantage of widespread pre-existing anti-Semitism” (Fielding et al 2009, 177). This statement stands in contrast with Gardner et al’s (2008) statement that “anti-Semitism was common in many countries, including Canada” (p 166). Although perhaps also somewhat vague, the specific mention of the home country of the textbook’s readers has the potential to draw the students’ attention to the extensive evil of anti-Semitism. When societal factors are included, but nebulous, the reader can be left with the general impression that Hitler manipulated anti-Semitism (which needed no help to be destructive) to his own personal ends: “The ideology of fascism in Nazi Germany was in part an expression of Adolf Hitler’s deep-seated hatred of liberalism, Jews, and communists” (Fielding et al 2009, 186). Although Fielding et al (2009) aptly indicated that Hitler was not the only one responsible, nonetheless readers might not explore that idea because other factors are not specifically named and thus remain vague: “[Hitler] pledged to restore the economic strength and national pride that he *and others* [emphasis added] believed had been lost” (Fielding et al 2009, 186).

Noesgaard et al (2010) attempted to engage with the economic and political uncertainty as well as the fear of communism that led to the Nazi rise to power. Major contributing factors for the rise of Hitler and fascism in Germany are explored, such as how the Treaty of Versailles affected domestic sentiments in Germany and how there was a loss of confidence in the Weimar Republic because “many blamed the

democratic German government for not effectively addressing [the] economic problems” (p 175) caused by the terms of reparation in the treaty.

Harding et al (2009) showed a clear commitment to providing a variety of quotations to explain the factors leading up to the rise in popularity of the Nazi Party, such as the German reaction to the terms of the Treaty of Versailles as well as the impact of the Great Depression on Germany’s resolve for self-sufficiency. There are quotations ranging from Nazi Party statements on the Treaty of Versailles, Hitler’s perspective on appeasement, and sections on Pastor Niemöller, White Rose, Ervin Staub and Elie Wiesel. Harding et al (2009) also explained the reasoning for the expansionist policies under Hitler’s rule, including the failure of the League of Nations and the need for more physical space for production; however, as mentioned above, these discussions centre on Hitler as an individual.

Exploring Nationalism (Gardner et al 2008) and *Understanding Nationalism* (Hoogveen 2008) explore the how broader society was also to blame for Nazism because of their focus on the role propaganda played in fostering hatred for the Jews. This task was aided through the images presented, such as images of young children reading *The Poisonous Mushroom*, a children’s anti-Semitic propaganda book (Hoogveen 2008, 135), as well as descriptions such as “using powerful public addressing systems, careful staging, and skillful architectural design, Hitler whipped up support for his ultranationalist policies at mass rallies” (Gardner et al 2008, 145).

Inclusion of Ordinary Folks

Fielding et al (2009) admirably attempted to specifically name ordinary Germans who were affected by Nazi policies, for example, Liselotte Katcher, the Bishop of Limberg, Sophie Scholl and Luise Essig. Gardner et al (2008) include now famous, but at the time ordinary, people such as Oskar Schindler (p 176). Furthermore, Harding et al (2009) made general nods to ordinary German folks, such as “In Germany, Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party received wide support for the changes they brought to the people and the nation” (p 180). Noesgaard et al (2010) took this idea further by pointing out that it was not just Nazi gangs responsible for the violence and destruction during *Kristallnacht*. This inclusion is important because it shows students that people who were not affiliated with the Nazi Party also took part in the violence, which allows students to reflect on how ordinary citizens can also take part in violence even though they

are not ideologically driven. Furthermore, Noesgaard et al (2010) mentioned that German citizens who openly opposed the government and its policies were persecuted and/or killed—an important point because it shows that there was resistance and that not all the German people were complacent in accepting the government’s policies and actions.

Images can powerfully reveal the place of ordinary people in the extraordinary events of Nazi Germany. Hoogeveen (2008) included an image of members of the Nazi party demonstrating in Berlin in 1938 on the anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Versailles (p 119). These folks were not in uniforms—they would look like ordinary people to the readers of the textbook, and thus might serve as a tool for antivillainification, especially if teachers draw their students’ attention to this image.

Personal Implication

By highlighting the role of ordinary people, textbook authors have an opportunity to foster a sense of personal implication in their students. Hoogeveen (2008) makes a statement that might resonate with students, explaining how “from elementary school through university, students were taught Nazi values” (p 139). Students could be led by such a statement to consider the role they might have played if they had been born in Germany at that time. Both Gardner et al (2008) and Hoogeveen (2008) contain a section on the Holocaust/Shoah that outlines genocide and the international response, explaining how Canada would not accept the MS *St Louis*, a ship with Jewish refugees from Europe. This case study is an excellent example of ethical judgments in history (Milligan, Gibson and Peck 2018), and allows students to engage with an uncomfortable history that they may not have been aware of, allowing them to connect more with the past in order to understand related issues, such as how Canada responds to refugee crises today.

Personal implication is furthered by critical questions in the sections on the Holocaust/Shoah, such as how “Elie Wiesel believes that forgetting about human suffering makes people accomplices—partners in the crimes. Do you agree with his opinion? Explain your reasoning” (Hoogeveen 2008, 161), and if crimes against humanity could be committed in Canada considering that “people involved in Adolf Hitler’s extermination program were all ordinary citizens with spouses, children, mothers, fathers, boyfriends, girlfriends, and neighbours” (Gardner et al 2008, 167). Asking questions like these allows students to engage with uncomfortable truths such

as the ordinariness of the German people involved in various jobs that led to extermination of many peoples during the Holocaust, as well as revealing the discomfort of how banality could allow something similar to happen here.

Limitations

This textbook study engaged with only five textbooks, and these were specific to the Alberta curriculum. We feel that these are at least somewhat reflective of how teachers might approach the topic of the Second World War in this province because these textbooks were written by highly experienced Alberta teachers. It should be noted, however, that teachers will take up the content of these textbooks in a variety of ways and that the textbooks themselves are not designed or intended to be the only resource for the course. Teachers will supplement textbooks with other materials and insights that may support, extend or challenge the textbook content. We hope that this study draws attention to how we teach about the Nazis and the Holocaust/Shoah in our schools, and can provide some guidance for teachers as they select additional resources for this topic and others.

We feel that antivillainification work in classrooms calls for an emotional element that requires care for each student and the classroom community. There are many ways to attend to such “difficult knowledge” (Britzman 1998; 2013) that are beyond the scope of this textbook study. To this end, we would like to note the helpfulness of particular works in the context of social studies: Lisa Farley’s article “Radical Hope: Or, the Problem of Uncertainty in History Education” (2009) and H J Garrett’s book *Learning to Be in the World with Others* (2017), among other works that attend to the affectual or emotional aspects of teaching social studies teaching (for example, Helmsing 2014; Sheppard, Katz and Grosland 2015).

Discussion and Implications

Some textbooks provided a framework for Nazism that emphasized blame on Hitler (and, to a lesser extent, the Nazi Party more vaguely) without exploration of other figures or factors important in that time period. Although economic and political factors are recognized, it is easy to fall into a narrative that does not explore how ordinary German citizens were affected by Nazi Party policies or how they reacted to them, a discussion that

is vital if we want to encourage students to thwart comparable processes of hate in the contemporary world. Hyperindividualized portrayal of the Nazis (for example, citing only Hitler as the agent of evil) discourages thoughtfulness regarding the capacities we all have for similarly evil deeds.

Our Eurocentric curriculum in Canada and the United States creates a whole host of problems, but one salient to this study is the simplistic take on history in which there are good sides and bad sides, which shuts down thinking about complexities and limits understandings of history and historiography (Van Nieuwenhuysse 2017); for example, “we” won the Second World War, and so “we” are good and “they” (that is, the Germans) are bad.

Because students tend to see textbooks as neutral reporters on the past (Wineburg 1991), it is important to interrogate written and visual representations within textbooks. Through the creation of individual villains, complex situations involving many interconnected factors (human and otherwise) are unintentionally oversimplified. Villainification makes it more difficult to recognize and evaluate systemic factors, particularly vis-à-vis how we all might contribute to systemic harm at times. Thus, antivillainification analyses are needed to ascertain the extent to which textbooks contain an unintentional curriculum that teaches students that they cannot be present during, or participate in, processes of systemic harm. This textbook study provides a starting point to (re)think how educators might portray the “villains” of history with a view to subverting harmful processes in play here and now. Students find ethical issues in history interesting (Ammert 2017); consequently, there is an opportunity to engage students in ways that provide an opportunity to pay careful thought to the atrocities of the past, with a view to working toward positive social change in our own times.

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