

World War II and Holocaust Comics, Perpetrators, and Education

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This roundtable was convened by Laurike in 't Veld, a comic scholar with a research interest in the depiction of war, genocide, and perpetration in graphic narratives, and the guest editor of this special issue, as a series of written exchanges via the online collaborative platform Etherpad between January-July 2021. The aim of the forum was to supplement the articles in the special issue that focus on the representation of perpetrator figures in comics. In 't Veld posed questions focused on the depiction of the Holocaust in comics, probing into their potential to represent perpetrators and their position in an educational setting and a broader memorial landscape.

All three participating scholars, Christine Gundermann, Ewa Stańczyk, and Kees Ribbens, work on the intersection of popular culture, history, and national identity, with a shared interest in the memory politics around World War II and the Holocaust. Gundermann's expertise in public history includes a focus on the depiction of the Holocaust in popular culture and in comics, with publications on, among other topics, Holocaust comics in Europe and the use of comics as historical sources. Stańczyk's research focuses on collective memory in East/Central Europe and includes work on the representation of the Holocaust in Polish comic books and a monograph on comics and national identity in Poland. Ribbens' interest in depictions of World War II in popular culture and (inter)national processes of meaning-making can be traced in his work on the cultural memories of Anne Frank and early representations of the Holocaust in popular culture.

Through their responses, the scholars analyse the opportunities and constraints that World War II and Holocaust comics offer in engaging with victim narratives as well as perpetrator figures. Here, the participants discuss the almost-exclusive focus on the victim and a subsequent dearth of perpetrator representations in WWII and Holocaust comics in their respective national contexts. Furthermore, the participants explore how national frames and memory politics affect the content and reception of World War II and Holocaust comics,

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and they discuss the ways in which comics can, and have been, used within educational and memorial frameworks. The participants note the growing importance of comics as vehicles for memory making and their perceived qualities as an attractive medium for children and young adults. In addressing these topics, Gundermann, Stańczyk, and Ribbens offer a rich historical overview of World War II and Holocaust comics and their (inter)national contexts.

What is the potential of comics to represent Holocaust perpetrators? Is there, in your opinion, a comic that has been particularly successful in engaging with perpetrator characters?

Christine Gundermann: To begin with, placing a perpetrator at the centre of a comic or a graphic novel is quite unusual. (Historical) comics or graphic novels that claim a historiographical status (like Pierre Dupuis's series *La seconde guerre mondiale* (1974-1985)), invite the reader to identify with the main characters, to build a relationship with them. This requires a character or characters that somehow appear likeable or at least offer a possibility of identification. Thus, beyond a very large group of comics focusing on war as military battle that presents a distinction between enemies (and less of a distinction between perpetrators and victims), comics and graphic novels about the atrocities of the National Socialists focus on the stories of individuals, most often clearly allocatable to people or groups that suffered under the National Socialist crimes.

In Germany, one of the first comics about World War II made especially for pupils was *Hitler* by Friedemann Bedürftig and Dieter Kahlenbach (1993), a graphic novel based on the biography of Adolf Hitler by Joachim Fest from 1973. Since this was a very first attempt to work with comics in the classroom (in a country that hadn't embraced comics as Ninth Art), the artists were encouraged not to use the comic speech balloons or panels; the slightly modified text modules of the Fest-biography were mostly put in text blocks under or next to the illustrations. They also used crayon pencils for drawings and created a very comic-unlike design for comic readers of the early 1990s. It was obvious that the comic book of two hundred pages was supposed to represent a serious approach that avoided the impression of presenting World War II in a funny and therefore ridiculous style; a fear that amounted to a very strong prejudice against comics in pedagogical discourses of that time. The result was (from today's view) as expected.

Although the comic focused on the (primarily) responsible perpetrator(s), it was extremely difficult to read; the reader could not really engage with the drawing style and the character of the picture book. Using comics in the classroom or in an educational programme at a memorial site was not common practice in Germany. This changed with the new millennium. As comic studies experienced a boost in Germany, pedagogy and didactics¹ (especially literary didactics and didactics of history) increasingly engaged with comics and graphic novels as part of everyday (historical) culture, and comics slowly became part of educational services in museums and at memorial sites as well.

Comics that were explicitly used at memorial sites most often tried to give a forum to those who suffered at those sites. They emphasized the 'lost voices' to educate the visitors of the site. This was important because in many cases, it took a very long time to recognize the history of the victims publicly. Thus, the rise of Holocaust comics is reflective of changes within the German memorial culture. Although in principle comics are capable of telling any story, they most often did not focus on the story of perpetrators—especially not the convicted ones like Albert Speer, who can be seen as a prime example of influencing and rewriting one's own past and perception through an autobiography (*Spandauer Tagebücher*, 1975), in which he presented himself as an innocent man, seduced by Hitler. Creating a comic about identifiable perpetrators also requires very precise research into original sources to decrease the risk of being sued for defamation by relatives. It is, therefore, no wonder that the few graphic novels on the German market which deal with perpetrators are, for example, second-generation comics like Cordt Schnibbens' webcomic 'Mein Vater, ein Werwolf' (My Father, a Werewolf) from 2014, in which the son comes to terms with the past of his parents.

Besides those autobiographical approaches, two predominant narrative frameworks can be found: on the one hand *personalization*, where the story and therefore history is told by focusing on a leading figure of history—mostly men. Most of the biographies of Hitler seem to fit this first framework. And on the other hand, through *personification*, where history is told through the perspective of a person that is not a leading figure, and therefore offers an interpretation of the past through a micro-historical approach (bottom-up). In those micro-histories (which can depict a much more diverse approach than most school-books), it is likely that the perspective of the perpetrators can contribute

1 Within the German academic context, pedagogy and didactics are two separate disciplines with their own concepts, methods, and didactic goals.

to showing complex situations beyond a simple black and white scheme. This approach seems valuable not only when working with comics in history classes in schools but also at memorial sites, because it enables the readers to develop empathy towards the victims while also dealing with the manifold motives and performances of (clearly markable) perpetrators, therefore developing a fuller understanding of the history of National Socialist crimes. This is especially important for the descendants of Germans engaged in National Socialist crimes, who are offered an impulse to engage with family history beyond a national master narrative. One of the first comics that emphasized this approach as a didactical tool was *De Zoektocht* (The Search, 2007) by Eric Heuvel, a commissioned work made in the Netherlands in cooperation with the Anne Frank House. Here, different motives and thoughts of German soldiers taking part in mass-executions were—if only in a few panels—explicitly shown and therefore demonstrated the scope of action the historical subjects had.

Beyond the narrative structure of a graphic novel, the key to engage with the history of perpetrators through comics is connected to the learning setting itself: What do the readers know about the depicted history and about the ways in which comics can depict history before they start reading the graphic novel? What do the readers know about the way the past is dealt with in the realms of historical culture—what kinds of master narratives are fostered or contested? Thus, can the readers interpret the comic as part of a historical culture; a culture which in itself has a history of dealing with the past that is drawn in the comic? How does the comic reflect the place, time, and culture in which it was produced? What is set as a goal for reading and in what ways are the readers aided in reflecting on the story the graphic novel provides? These questions lay the foundation for interacting with graphic novels that engage with history.

Ewa Stańczyk: In my opinion, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1991) took the representations of perpetrators to a completely new level. The various debates that erupted after its publication show that the animal allegory can be very powerful—aesthetically, politically, historically, and culturally. I can certainly say that the representation of Poles as pigs struck a sensitive nerve with the audiences in Poland. Of course, Poles are not the primary perpetrators in *Maus* but, when the book was first published in Polish in 2001, it was this aspect that attracted the most attention. This is also why the publication came so late, even though the

translation rights had been acquired already in 1994. Ethno-nationalist commentators saw this kind of portrayal as undermining Polish war-time victimhood and as being slanderous altogether. A group of activists even took the case to court, accusing Spiegelman of vilifying the Polish nation. The court found that the animal allegory had been used in literature long before *Maus* and rendered the case moot. But the whole debate was also representative of certain unresolved historical issues that are still very much present in Polish cultural memory today. This includes the common misconception among the right-wing national-conservative elites that the roles of the victim and perpetrator are mutually exclusive, and that scoring high on the Righteous Among the Nations index invalidates wrongdoings. Those are difficult questions which, I think, Spiegelman understands really well. By no means does he deny the Polish suffering in the war; this is not even the focus of his story. Rather, his interest is in the distinct Jewish experience. After all, the pig allegory was meant to reflect his father's experience with Christian Poles as the 'victimizers of Jews'.²

There is also an important cultural reason why the pig allegory struck a chord with Polish audiences. Since the end of World War II, liberal intellectuals in Poland have been mulling over questions of accountability and complicity. Some of them, like Czesław Miłosz in his poem 'Campo di Fiori', did that much earlier, already in 1943, at the time of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Others, like the literary historian Jan Błoński in his essay 'The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto', returned to those issues on the wave of *glasnost* in 1987. But even those liberal intellectuals, who emphasized the importance of acknowledging one's guilt and asking for forgiveness (to cite Błoński's reasoning), characterized gentile Poles merely as bystanders, even if hateful or indifferent ones.³ When in the 1990s documentary filmmakers Paweł Łoziński and Agnieszka Arnold exposed the wartime killings committed by Christian villagers on their Jewish neighbours and acquaintances, there was no longer any doubt that a wider debate around Polish perpetratorship was needed.⁴ In 2000, the historical work *Sąsiedzi* (Neighbours) by Jan Tomasz Gross was published, which

2 Art Spiegelman, *MetaMAUS: A Look Inside a Modern Classic, Maus* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011), p. 121.

3 See Jan Błoński, 'The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto', in *My Brother's Keeper: Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust*, ed. by Antony Polonsky (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 45.

4 See documentary films *Miejsce urodzenia*, dir. by Paweł Łoziński (Studio Filmowe Kronika, 1992) and *Gdzie mój starszy syn Kain*, dir. by Agnieszka Arnold (Telewizja Polska, 1999).

covered similar themes. In that sense, what Spiegelman was saying about the antisemitic violence and unwillingness to help the Jews was nothing new to readers in Poland. It was part of an ongoing public debate, as polarizing as it was. What was new, however, was the unapologetic pig allegory. It echoed—albeit in a clear pictorial way—what Błoński talked about nearly fifteen years earlier: the state of being unclean and contaminated by the legacy of ethnic hatred. These questions persist even now, twenty years after *Maus* was published in Poland, as demonstrated by the recent libel case against two scholars, Jan Grabowski and Barbara Engelking, whose work discusses antisemitic murders committed by ethnic Poles during the war.⁵ Precisely because these questions remain so fundamental to the Polish politics of memory (both to its liberal and national-conservative strands), the portrayal of Poles as pigs will continue to be relevant, and in that sense also ‘successful’, yet for some time.

Kees Ribbens: Placing a perpetrator at the centre of a story is unusual in comic strips, but not impossible. Nazis have appeared regularly in comic strips around the world since the founding of Nazi Germany. These include leading figures such as Hitler and Goebbels, as well as fictitious characters illustrating how bad and devious, but also how immature and clumsy they were. What motivated their attitudes and actions usually remained undiscussed. The appeal of the National Socialist ideology, or relevant pragmatic aspirations, were barely mentioned. During World War II, Hitler, among others, was frequently portrayed, usually in a rather caricatural manner. Especially in American and British comics, the Führer was often presented as ridiculous—in an attempt to downplay the threat he posed to democratic societies, and in order to keep up the belief in the superiority and eventual victory of the Allies. Such imagery was present in comics that had a readership of children, but similar patriotic-propagandist stories could also be found in comic books read by soldiers.

In post-war decades, especially between the late 1950s to the mid-1980s, large numbers of cheap black-and-white comics in pocket format were published in Western Europe that referred to wartime situations and events. The focus was on heroic military confrontations in which numerous German, but also Japanese and Italian army, navy, and air force characters representing the enemy, were depicted fighting against British,

5 *Dalej jest noc: Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski*, ed. by Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski (Warszawa: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2018).

American, and sometimes Soviet soldiers. The Axis soldiers were usually portrayed as ordinary men, not explicitly influenced by totalitarian ideology, while the officers were often portrayed as villainous characters. Involvement in war crimes against civilians in occupied territory, however, was rarely a theme, which may be explained by the fact that civilians—including persecuted groups such as Jews—were generally invisible in these military narratives. The rather anonymous character of the vicious officer often remained superficial and unexamined, not teaching the reader anything about being or becoming a perpetrator. The appearance of such villains helped to contrast the heroism of the Allied soldiers more starkly, but the willingness of comic strip makers to give perpetrators a substantial role in the story was severely restricted by the enemy stereotypes they cherished. Nevertheless, some comic strip makers tried to bring perpetrators into the limelight. In the early 1940s, German graphic designer in exile Clément Moreau (pseudonym of Carl Meffert) published a comic strip adaptation of *Mein Kampf* in two Argentine newspapers, *Argentina Libre* and *Argentinisches Tageblatt*. Not a biography in the strict sense of the word, Moreau expressively uses passages from *Mein Kampf* to ironically illustrate the absurd power-hungry rage of this dictator as marked by his family history and by his experiences in World War I. Although Hitler had not yet come to power when the source of this comic was published, Moreau's work sheds light on the motives and backgrounds of his later crimes as a perpetrator.

During the war, half-hearted attempts were also made to gain a little more insight into perpetrators. The American comic book magazine *Zip Comics* launched the series 'Zip's Hall of Shame' in January 1943. Reinhard Heydrich, a high-ranking German SS and Police officer who ruled the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and was one of the principal architects of the Holocaust, was the first historical figure to take center stage in this series of 'life histories of the world's most vicious monsters' that had the ambition of showing the reader 'what makes them tick'.⁶ In six pages, Heydrich is portrayed as an immorally violent person whose joining the Nazis is presented as natural and opportunistic. His performance as an emotionless Nazi, deemed responsible for both the death of his father and for 'the wholesale murders of innocent Jews', was above all linked to 'his blood-thirsty

6 'Zip's Hall of Shame: "The Nazi Cobra" Reinhard Heydrich', *Zip Comics* #33 (Pelham: MLJ Publications, 1943), p. 46.



FIGURES 1 and 2: Zip Comics #33, 1943, 'Zip's Hall of Shame: "The Nazi Cobra" Reinhard Heydrich'.

nature'.⁷ Further attempts to explain his development, behaviour and motives were not made by the (anonymous) author.

That other representations are indeed possible is shown in the work of Japanese manga artist Shigeru Mizuki who published a manga biography of Hitler (*Gekiga Hittorā*) in 1971. In this detailed biography Hitler is presented as a person with strong determination who, with the help of his intimidating ideology, succeeds in obtaining an ultimate position of power. Mizuki empathically brings the Führer back to the proportions of a human being—an approach that is rare but not impossible in sequential art—but this is in part made possible by the rather limited attention paid to the Holocaust. To the extent that readers will have identified with a perpetrator as the main character of these comics, this is probably most strongly the case with this Japanese representation. Yet even there, identification will not have been self-evident to all readers. In principle, a protagonist in a comic narrative has to be intriguing, but the reader does not necessarily have to identify with him/her. The question remains whether it is possible to engage with a specific historical situation in a comic narrative without identifying with the perpetrator as the

7 Ibid., p. 50.

main character. Having some empathy as a reader for the character portrayed in a certain comic may help to develop a somewhat further reaching historical understanding of who he was, what he did and why he did so – which is of course not the same as showing sympathy or even approving of what this perpetrator was responsible for. If we look at the genre of fiction, which is more strongly present in comics than the fact-based historical genre, there is clearly no lack of villains as main characters. Comic readers do not necessarily identify with such characters but they certainly engage with the narratives. Why wouldn't that also be possible in historical non-fiction comics?

How can comics that deal with perpetration in the context of war and genocide be used in an educational setting? What are the benefits and pitfalls of using comics in the classroom?

Kees Ribbens: As a means of expression generally based on combining text and image, the medium of comics is in principle capable of representing very different ways of looking at various historical experiences. The educational value of comics that focus on the context of war and genocide is therefore based, on the one hand, on visualizing historical experiences—often on an individual level—which can facilitate the understanding of the portrayed events. On the other hand, zooming in on specific representations in comics in a comparative way offers the possibility of strengthening the awareness of the evolving memory culture of mass violence.

A large number of comics produced in the twentieth and twenty-first century are devoted to wars in this period, in particular to both World Wars. However, like most media, comics don't represent all aspects of and perspectives on war and genocide, as they reflect the dominant interpretive frameworks of their era and the associated bias and selectivity. Military aspects, mostly reduced to the violent struggle between soldiers at the front, were very prominent for a long time. Only a relatively small but growing proportion of comics during the last two to three decades, pays serious attention to genocide.

Comics that appeared at the time of the world wars were characterized by an indisputable patriotism. The often fictitious narratives glorify the military strength and achievements of one's own side, legitimizing the societal efforts required for this, while portraying the enemy as the embodiment of evil. Because the portrayal of genocidal and other crimes mainly served to illustrate

the perceived evilness of the perpetrator as a collective character trait, the educational use of comics from this period is largely limited to obtaining an understanding of the mindset of their creators (and, more indirectly, of their readers). However, structural factors such as political motives and practical considerations as well as the various stages of genocidal behaviour are usually inadequately addressed in such comics (where the main roles are often performed by a limited number of individuals, not by larger entities that might illustrate the widespread nature of the phenomenon), obscuring the backgrounds and motivations of perpetrators and their acts.

A comparative examination of comics from different post-war decades, reflecting the increasing temporal distance to the drastic events, can clarify how slowly the struggle for a more open, balanced view of war and genocide is developing and how comics creators and their readers relate to that more or less recent past. Widening the scope of representation (by placing not only heroic soldiers but also civilians in the spotlight) can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of history with greater attention to issues of collaboration and complicity. However, the overall lack of more nuanced comics with a clearly identifiable perpetrator perspective, illustrating the dynamics and complexity of the phenomenon, remains a practical limitation from an educational point of view.

Ewa Stańczyk: European schools and universities are becoming increasingly diverse so discussing perpetrator characters can be problematic. It is inevitable that sooner or later there will be pupils or students who might find certain portrayals incomplete, biased, or distressing. At times, particular historical events that are dubbed 'universal' might not even be viewed as relevant by some sections of the pupil/student population. I am sure that every teacher who uses war and genocide comics in the multicultural classroom knows how to handle those issues sensitively. One way out of this dilemma might be combining graphic narratives that deal with several different conflicts and represent intersectional viewpoints. Many secondary school teachers who work with reading-shy pupils say that including comics in history and literature classes encourages participation and helps learners engage with complex historical questions. I can definitely see how this is the case. At the same time, some teachers warn that 'comics

must not be overly serious or didactic in their approach to national history' or they risk becoming textbooks.⁸

Personally, I am a huge believer in using victim sources in both teaching and research. I find there is a greater sense of urgency and authority to testimonial material. Importantly, such material is not as tinged with contemporary political agendas—mentioned above by Kees Ribbens—and this can be useful in history teaching. Art from the period can also tell us a lot about the social history of war and genocide. After all, as some scholars have shown, drawings and other self-made artefacts were often used as items of barter, securing additional food rations and privilege.⁹ If discovered, testimonial art could equal a death sentence too. When I look at visual sources from Nazi camps and ghettos, which is one of the areas of my research, I am often struck by how deeply they penetrate into the victim experience and how peripheral the perpetrator is in those representations (to mention the surviving works of Terezín artists such as Bedřich Fritta, Leo Haas, Karel Fleischmann, and Helga Hošková-Weissová). Artists who zoom in on the perpetrator are few and far between, precisely because of the risks involved. The work of David Olère, an Auschwitz survivor and member of *Sonderkommando* unit, is one such rare example. Still, even Olère admitted to producing most of his work close to liberation, rather than in the midst of the events.

Sequential art from the Holocaust is even more rare. There are different practical reasons for this, including the scarcity of drawing materials and the difficulty of hiding a large corpus of works in the camps and ghettos. One narrative which I would like to examine briefly in the context of our discussion on the perpetrator is representative of these difficulties, since it was created immediately after the war. It is a series of drawings by Kalman Landau, a Polish Jew who survived Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and the evacuation marches to Gross Rosen in January 1945. Landau was only sixteen when the war ended. He drew his recollections of the camps from memory while recovering in a Swiss children's home in the summer of 1945. Even though these are not victim sources per se, I would argue that his drawings have a similar gravity as many visual sources from the Holocaust. Although this is

8 Jennifer Howell, *The Algerian War in French-Language Comics: Postcolonial Memory, History, and Subjectivity* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), p. 30.

9 See, e.g., Janet Blatter, 'Art from the Whirlwind', *Art of the Holocaust*, ed. by Janet Blatter and Sibyl Milton, (London: Orbis, 1982), p. 27; Marjorie Lamberti, 'Making Art in the Terezín Concentration Camp', *New England Review*, 17.4 (1995), 110; Anna Hájková, *The Last Ghetto: An Everyday History of Theresienstadt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 180–181.

not a traditional comic strip, Landau's pictorial story has important characteristics of the medium. It has a narrative logic (it unfolds over the course of twelve drawings) and contains captions and speech balloons. In 1946, Landau's drawings were published in the Swiss art periodical, the *Du* magazine, and since then have been included in studies on children in Nazi-occupied and liberated Europe.¹⁰

The perpetrator looms large in Landau's graphic narrative, both literally and metaphorically. He is distinguished by his green-coloured uniform, as opposed to the striped pyjamas of the inmates and the dark brown clothing of the *Kapos*. He is often presented in active roles: taking a roll call, escorting prisoners, and performing executions. At times, Landau distorts the perspective by drawing the perpetrator larger (as in the arrival scene) and exaggerating the size of the weapons he wields (as on a page portraying the death march and the concomitant shooting of prisoners). Meanwhile, the victims are depicted as a motionless and homogenous group. As Buchenwald is liberated, it is the prisoners who now carry arms, while the Nazi commanders stand motionless with their arms raised in surrender.

Landau's narrative line is simple, stretching from the arrival to liberation. His drawing style is understated, which also makes it accessible—a potentially invaluable feature of an educational resource. As in the case of many victim sources, also here, the context in which the work was produced and disseminated could be subject to didactic activity. Landau's stay in Switzerland, where the drawings were produced, was an example of state-sponsored relief aid which encompassed several thousand young people from Buchenwald, among other groups. Although sometimes seen as a deeply politicized programme aimed at broadcasting Swiss humanitarian values and compensating for its neutrality,¹¹ the retreat was also meant to restore the health and mental stability of the survivors. According to Nicholas Stargardt, who interviewed other young survivors from the same retreat, drawing was considered a form of therapy and was widely encouraged by local care workers.¹² This shows in Landau's graphic narrative. He does not shy away from difficult experiences. He confronts his memories of the

¹⁰ See, e.g., Dorothy Macardle, *Children of Europe. A Study of the Children of Liberated Countries, their War-time Experiences, their Reactions, and their Needs, with a Note on Germany* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1949); Nicholas Stargardt, *Witnesses of War: Children's Lives Under the Nazis* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005).

¹¹ See, e.g., Madeleine Lurf, *"Buchenwaldkinder" – eine Schweizer Hilfsaktion* (Zurich: Chronos, 2010).

¹² Nicholas Stargardt, 'Drawing the Holocaust in 1945', *Holocaust Studies. A Journal of Culture and History*, 11.2 (2005), 35.

perpetrator too. As such, his story lends itself to a variety of themes that can be discussed in education, including the transition from victim to survivor and the associated processing of traumatic memories through creative activity. The themes of post-war relief aid and European reconstruction could be also touched upon in this context.

Christine Gundermann: When engaging with war comics and genocide comics, students need to understand that they are confronted with different genres. War comics most often leave out genocide on purpose (in this they are similar to computer games). They focus on battle heroes and therefore 'normalize' the war as a battle and a contest of combatants. Holocaust comics, on the other hand, focus on the largest group of victims of National Socialist crimes, and they tend to leave out military history and focus on the radicalisation of antisemitism until its deadly outcome. Holocaust comics and genocide comics in general can help us to amplify the stories of the victims and unmask conflicts and (civil) wars as a neither heroic nor honourable business.

Besides that, we have to ask what a comic focusing on perpetrators can do to further a better understanding of history: Does it help understand phenomena like political radicalization, growing antisemitism, or racializing a certain group and its historical consequences? Or could it enforce understanding and later sympathy with a perpetrator figure? While there are conflicts where it is of crucial importance to dissolve oversimplified black-and-white-narratives and emphasize the complex scope of actions and situations where a person could be victim and perpetrator at the same time (like in civil wars), there are parts of our past where such an approach has to be reviewed very carefully as a potential historical misrepresentation in terms of an externalization of perpetration and universalization or equalization of victimhood through the comic. Those comics can then serve as examples for a denialist historiography, and not as pathways to identification.

Thus, every comic can be used, but in a didactical setting, it is most helpful to see them all as a primary source of engaging with historical culture. Important questions are then: How does the story fit into the main narratives of a society, which interpretations of the past are fostered and which are not? Who is playing a part in the narrative and who is left out? Recognizing and understanding the comic as part of an ongoing interpretation of the past within a society always helps to foster comic literacy as part of a reflective historical consciousness.

How have comics made by memorial centres and museums engaged with the issue of perpetrator representation? And how does this relate to perpetrator depictions in comics that have less of a didactic approach?

Kees Ribbens: Comic strips explicitly presented as educational media already existed during World War II. American publishers, trying to profit from the booming comics market by convincing parents that their products were less thrill-seeking than those of commercial competitors, published biographies of political and military leaders in comic book form.¹³ Since these emphasized a hagiographic portrayal of representatives of the Allied side, the coverage of human rights violations in that context was limited, as was also the case in early post-war comic book overviews of the war years. A special issue on World War II from the *Classics Illustrated* series, a US publication from 1962 perceived as educational, was translated into several Western European languages. It included coverage of the Axis powers, their political and military efforts, and to some extent, their motives. The mass murder of 'the entire Jewish and Gypsy populations'¹⁴ was explicitly included with distinct empathy for the victims. But with the exception of leading figures such as Hitler and Goebbels, the perpetrators remained anonymous.

After Spiegelman's groundbreaking *Maus* was published and schools had become accustomed to using comics, it became increasingly acceptable to depict genocide in comic books as well. From the 1990s onward, war museums and memory centers in the Netherlands, Belgium, France and Germany, Japan, and the US took the opportunity to enthusiastically initiate various comic books about World War I and World War II in particular. The fact that the generation of heritage professionals who were now in charge was actually more familiar with comics than younger generations who consumed visual media messages mainly from a screen was easily forgotten.

In such educational comics about World War II, the focus was above all on victims of the German occupation, not least of the persecution of the Jews. A well-known example was *De Ontdekking* (A Family Secret, 2003), a Dutch comic book published by the Anne Frank House

13 Kees Ribbens, 'The Invisible Jews' in August Froehlich's 'Nazi Death Parade' (1944). An Early American Sequential Narrative Attempt to Visualize the Final Stages of the Holocaust', in *Beyond Maus. The Legacy of Holocaust Comics*, ed. by Ole Frahm, Hans-Joachim Hahn, and Markus Streb (Vienna: Böhlau 2021), pp. 140-141.

14 'World War II', *Classics Illustrated*, Special Issue 166a (New York: Gilberton Company, 1962), p. 53.



FIGURE 3: *A Family Secret*. © Eric Heuvel/Anne Frank Stichting.

in which the occupation was reduced to understandable proportions. The youthful reader could easily identify with the fictional male protagonist who found artifacts from his grandmother's wartime childhood in the attic. The story of Helena, her father, and her older brothers illustrates the diverse positions in which individuals ended up, by choice or otherwise. While one of Helena's brothers, Wim, joined the underground resistance movement, her other brother, Theo, served in the German army while witnessing—though not committing—the murder of Jews in newly occupied Eastern Europe. In this way, the final stage of the Holocaust is represented, but the makers chose to portray the Dutch involvement as somehow limited.

Particularly interesting, however, is Helena's father, a Dutch policeman who is obliged by the German occupying forces to participate in the persecution of the Jews. His loyalty to the authorities makes him an accomplice to genocide, and therefore a fellow perpetrator partly responsible for the deportation of Jews from the Netherlands. The fact that he allows Esther, his daughter's Jewish friend, to escape during a deportation illustrates, nevertheless, how unequivocal perpetrator labels that supposedly offer clarity should be handled with the necessary caution.

While moral messages are not too explicitly included in various contemporary comic books initiated by war and genocide museums, there nevertheless seems to be a desire that the mostly young readers can identify with one or more characters in the story. Partly by making a certain appeal to readers' emotions, reading historical comics in general reinforces the idea of proximity to the past, which may contribute to a better historical understanding. At the same time, it is unlikely that museums and memory centers—in both their exhibitions and their comics—will opt exclusively for a perpetrator perspective. On the one hand, empathy for victims has priority for understandable reasons; on the other hand, it is obvious that a certain identification with the role of perpetrators is not considered desirable by authors and educators. A better historical understanding of the perpetrator will therefore be limited.

Ewa Stańczyk: One series that comes to mind in this context is *Episodes from Auschwitz*, published by the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum towards the end of the 2000s. The series presents several stories of predominantly Polish Christian characters who had been imprisoned in Auschwitz, most notably the Jesuit priest Maksymilian Kolbe and the Home Army soldier Witold Pilecki. Each of the four albums is aimed at emphasizing the traditional pillars of national-conservative memory culture—namely Polish victimhood and heroism. Other protagonists (including Jewish victims) play a marginal role in those narratives and, even though the series has been translated into several languages (such as English, German and French), it is clearly aimed at supplementing the Polish national curriculum. The story of Witold Pilecki is particularly telling in this respect. Pilecki was said to go to Auschwitz voluntarily as part of an underground operation aimed at infiltrating the camp. He survived the war, including the anti-Nazi Warsaw Uprising of 1944, to be later arrested and charged with foreign espionage by the Communist authorities. He was executed in 1948 following a show trial.

The comic about Pilecki is a typical educational resource—it is flanked by a historical introduction, a preface, and an afterword. These are meant to prompt the teacher and the pupil to read the story 'the right way'. The introduction frames Pilecki's story as a narrative of 'two totalitarianisms' wherein the Soviet crimes are equated with the crimes of Nazi Germany. The introduction contains four panels of drawings which portray Stalin in the company of Roosevelt and Churchill, as well

as a scene from the Katyn massacre perpetrated by the NKVD on Polish officers in the spring of 1940. The comic itself intersperses scenes of brutality during Pilecki's interrogation by the Communist state security with killings committed by SS guards in Auschwitz. The images of Stalin and of the Polish Communist leader, Bolesław Bierut, who refused to pardon Pilecki, loom large in the final pages of the comic, too, even though they appear solely as portraits on the wall of state security offices. Their henchmen, state security officials and interrogators, are portrayed perpetrating violent beatings and torture. These representations are meant to complement the depictions of Auschwitz SS guards who are described as 'animals' who torture inmates 'out of boredom' as well as disrespecting the bodies of dead prisoners.¹⁵

The story is both shocking and poignant, precisely for the scenes described above. In that, it fits in with the wider tradition of narratives attempting to appeal to the readers' emotions and provide positive models to emulate, as discussed by Kees Ribbens above. Although the story contains negative characters, too, who could have been explored further and with deeper insight into their motivations (e.g. the Polish Communist interrogators), this is largely a missed opportunity. All in all, the story is somewhat problematic as an educational resource. It conflates two very different types of perpetratorship and two very different historical contexts. It also seems to encourage the use of the Nazi genocide as a convenient trope with which to discuss other acts of mass violence. Even though the story depicts an 'episode' of history which is certainly worth remembering, one has to wonder inevitably if this is the right outlet for a narrative such as this.

Christine Gundermann: The focus on victims and survivors in comics made by or commissioned by a memorial site might also have something to do with available sources. Most often those comics present the history of, for example, an inmate of a concentration camp or stories of people who are marked as enemies and hunted down. Those stories are connected to the *lieu de mémoire*, the narrative of the museum; many of them only exist because the victims survived and were able to tell their stories. Detailed references to biographies of perpetrators do not really help to understand the history of the victims. It also may be the case that records of guards were (purposefully) destroyed and thus the comic artist is forced to describe more the

¹⁵ Michał Gałek and Arkadiusz Klimek, *Epizody z Auschwitz. Raport Witolda* (Oświęcim-Babice: K&L Press, 2009), p. 19.

function of the perpetrator and exemplify his or her deeds than his or her motivations and goals. And of course, there are graphic novels that dive deep into stereotypes of evil Nazis to depict the Holocaust, to enable a clear setting of good and evil, to fulfil readers' expectations or for other reasons. An example of such a presentation is the camp commander in Pascal Croci's *Auschwitz* (2000), who is not only vicious, sadistic, and driven by cruelty, but even morphs in a dream sequence into Nosferatu, a vampire-figure famously staged by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau in 1922. Demonizing perpetrators brings them closer to Nazisploitation and does not help to understand history itself.

How do comics on national histories engage with perpetrator characters, and to what extent do we see a mitigation of the violent events and its participants? How could reading a comic about collective, national history influence the ways in which the perpetrator figures are interpreted?

Ewa Stańczyk: In the Polish context, there is a long tradition of pictorial stories about friendly rascals who get into all sorts of mischief. This dates back to the interbellum wherein many stories feature national enemies, such as Germans, Bolsheviks, and others. There are also some post-World War II comics which build on that interwar tradition and which feature Nazi characters. One such work is *Wicek i Wacek: Ucieszne przygody dwóch wisusów w czasie okupacji na ich cześć wierszem opisane* (Wicek and Wacek: The Enjoyable Adventures of two Rascals during the Occupation Written in Verse in their Honour), which was written and drawn as an adventure story and portrayed the exploits of two male protagonists during World War II. Wicek and Wacek were not complete strangers to post-war audiences. The strip was launched in the interwar period in a Łódź tabloid called *Express Ilustrowany* (Express Illustrated). It was suspended during the war and reactivated in 1945. *Wicek i Wacek* is a typical story that is written from a national perspective in that it depicts the resilience of the nation in the face of the 'fascist' offensive. The introduction to the 1948 book edition makes that very clear by stating that '[a]fter the villainous attack of the Nazi hordes, the gloomy days of captivity began in the country. However, the people did not lose their spirit, putting up resistance to the invaders in myriad ways'.¹⁶ Wicek and Wacek, too, are said to have participated in that struggle. According

¹⁶ Adam Ochocki and Wacław Drozdowski, *Wicek i Wacek: Ucieszne przygody dwóch wisusów w czasie okupacji na ich cześć wierszem opisane* (Łódź: Express Ilustrowany, 1948), n.p.

to the introductory note, they 'are no heroes' but they know how to use 'mockery and humour as [...] weapons against the cruel enemy'.¹⁷ Indeed, from the very first pages of the book we see them poke fun at the Nazis—as they build a giant snowman that resembles Hitler, disrobe a Wehrmacht soldier, forcing him to walk around naked, and send an angry bull to frighten a party of the Hitler Youth. Even when they are deported to the camps, they rely on their ingenuity to stay out of harm's way. Here the perpetrator is someone to be outsmarted and ridiculed with a vengeance. In contrast, the two characters are portrayed as highly intelligent, resilient, fearless, and mischief-loving. It is those attributes that eventually enable them to survive the occupation.

The story is devoid of explicit martyrological and heroic undertones which will underpin World War II comics later on, particularly from the 1960s onwards, notably *Podziemny Front* (The Underground Front, 1969-1972) and *Kapitan Kloss* (Captain Kloss, 1971-1973). It contains no references to the extermination of Polish Jews either, a trend which will emerge in Polish comics only in the mid-2000s.¹⁸ Instead, aside from adhering to the Allied anti-fascist narrative, the comic's overarching idea fits in with the wider pan-European trope of resistance through laughter. This was, no doubt, a legacy of the interwar press rather than a new representational strategy. We see similar pictorial stories surface in the Polish press already in the 1920s. Towards the end of the 1930s, Nazi characters also begin to appear in those stories. For example, Froncek, a Silesian protagonist of Poland's longest running newspaper strip, *Przygody Bezrobotnego Froncka* (The Adventures of Unemployed Froncek) encounters German Nazi protagonists on a regular basis. In one pre-war episode from 1939 he even travels to Dachau. There he overpowers the camp commander called Müller (who is the spitting image of Hitler), steals his uniform and slips into the camp, pretending to be a Nazi inspector. In other stories, he makes fun of the Nazi movement more generally, including its sympathizers' attachment to the swastika. Froncek's encounters with Germans were meant to channel the romanticized vision of Polishness as characterized by resourcefulness, wit, and courage. This was particularly important for a comic published in Silesia where identities were rarely clear-cut and where rallying support for the Polish nation was an ongoing effort.

¹⁷ Ochocki and Drozdowski, n.p.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Krzysztof Gawronkiewicz and Krystian Rosenberg, *Achtung Zelig! Druga Wojna* (Warszawa and Poznań: Kultura Gniewu and Zin Zin Press, 2004).

In the stories above the focus is rarely on the enemy and his crimes, although the enemy is crucial to maintaining the good-evil binary. *Wicek i Wacek*, in particular, does that without resorting to explicit representations of violence and mass murder, even though the images of gas chambers and chimneys do appear in the comic. This kind of representation is dictated by the specificity of the popular newspaper medium in which those stories had been originally published. In this particular case, then, it was the wider commercial purpose (i.e., the aim of attracting mass audiences and providing them with light entertainment) that governed some of those representations.

Christine Gundermann: Over the last two decades we have witnessed an emancipation from national frames when telling the history of the world wars, the Cold War, or the impact of colonialism, to name only a few. Transnational approaches focussing rather on entangled histories and pointing out ‘glocal’ impacts of history have provided new insights into the history of the twentieth century. It also became clear that the history of the Holocaust cannot be told as national history, because it was in itself a trans-border organized crime. We find these approaches in many memorial sites regarding National Socialist crimes: people from so many nationalities were forced into camps and perished there. It is thus obvious that it is quite challenging to tell a history on and about these places within a national frame. Nevertheless, most school curricula still emphasize the nation as guiding frame for historical orientation. As most comics today can be understood as transnational cultural objects (not only regarding translations, but also appropriations and developments of artistic comic styles, referencing cosmopolitan icons of atrocities distributed via mass media like movies), a comic should be very carefully surveyed regarding questions such as: Can the comic be ascribed to one specific national master narrative? If so, what would it mean to work with this comic? How can literacy regarding historical culture be fostered when working with the comic? These were, for instance, crucial questions when introducing the comics *De Ontdekking (A Family Secret, 2003)* and *De Zoektocht (The Search, 2007)* by Eric Heuvel in German classrooms. Both comics clearly depicted a Dutch perspective on the Holocaust, in which German perpetrators only played a smaller part and the annihilation crusade of the Wehrmacht in the east was underrepresented. Introducing *The Search* to German pupils as a way of understanding the German past also requires a reflection on that particular national perspective because it determines the way in

which German soldiers and Nazis are dealt with. Thus, the stories told in the comics offer a transnational perspective on interpreting history, but only a multi-perspectival approach that explores different roles in wartime leading to different interpretations of history allows the comics to be understood in a national memory discourse.

Kees Ribbens: In many Dutch comics about World War II, Germans mainly play a supporting role. They are present because they materialize the German occupation but in general, comic book creators hardly zoom in on specific characters. Leading figures such as Reichskommissar Arthur Seyss-Inquart and his top officials like the notorious Generalkommissar für das Sicherheitswesen Hanns Albin Rauter rarely appear in a recognizable way in the dozens of comics about the war that have been published since 1945. Insofar as German soldiers or authorities appear here, they can seldom be traced back to concrete persons—and thus not to specific acts by which their position as perpetrator was actually shaped.

This doesn't mean that Dutch comic readers don't encounter representations of German perpetrators. The well-known two-volume comic by the French authors Calvo and Dancette, *La bête est morte! La guerre mondiale chez les animaux*, (*The Beast is Dead. The World War of the Animals*, 1945-1946) also appeared in a Dutch-language edition (*Het beest is dood. De Wereldoorlog bij de dieren*, 1946) soon after the liberation—and showed various atrocities committed by Germans especially in France, including the persecution of the Jews. Early comics, such as 1945 *Ons land uit lijden ontzet* (*Our Country Liberated from Suffering*, 1945) by Ton van Tast (pseudonym of Anton van der Valk), expressed pride in the resistance and joy at the liberation within a nationalist framework while focusing on the recent everyday experiences of the civilian population: lack of food, problems with transport, and the confiscation of radios. Physical violence against people came into focus only to a limited extent in this work. In so far as perpetrators did appear, they were more often Dutch National Socialists than German; they are the ones at whom the rage and frustration of the cartoonist and his fellow countrymen was primarily directed. They are explicitly referred to as 'NSB scum' and 'NSB vermin' who enriched themselves by profiting from other people's misery, who undeservedly ruled the roost, spied on fellow countrymen and betrayed them to the Germans; in short, they were depicted as cowardly traitors in all regards. The motives of the Nazis were not explicitly indicated; the suggestion was

of the behaviour of the perpetrators. There were no attempts to focus on individual perpetrators or to make more sense of their actions (although, at a collective level, the previous rise of the Nazis was linked to unemployment and inflation, and to resentment over the Versailles Treaty and failing democracy).

Because of the national framework of such overarching historical narratives, the characters drawn in them tend to consist, on the one hand, of well-known leader figures who only need to be briefly portrayed in order to be recognized and, on the other hand, of anonymous citizens who are considered exemplary of a certain situation at a particular point in time. A better understanding of perpetrators, in particular of their dynamic development and motives, requires that a comic strip zooms in on one or more individual stories and allows space for them. This seems almost fundamentally at odds with the format of a compact national history comic. At the same time, there is a tension between the fact that Dutch National Socialists do receive attention but are considered too trivial to be taken seriously as perpetrators, and Germans, in turn, who do qualify for the label 'perpetrator' but an in-depth exploration of that phenomenon doesn't seem to fit within the Dutch framework of the historical narrative.

In her article on teaching German history with the graphic novel, Elizabeth Nijdam posits that there is a paucity of German comics that deal directly with the history of Nazi genocide, while German comics 'have successfully begun to deal with another aspect of Germany's tumultuous history, the rise and fall of Soviet East Germany'.²⁰ Can you reflect on this observation and its implications for teaching environments?

Christine Gundermann: In the last two decades, many comics were published that deal with everyday life, suppression in, and escape from the GDR. Especially the theme of the escape is used and encouraged by memorial sites and museums dealing with the 'Mauer', the inner German border. Examples like *Tunnel 57 - Eine Fluchtgeschichte als Comic* (Tunnel 57 - An Escape Story as Comic, 2013) or *Berlin - geteilte Stadt* (Berlin - a Divided City, 2012), both by Thomas Henseler and Susanne Buddenberg, show a clear narrative of the GDR

²⁰ Elizabeth Nijdam, 'Coming to Terms with the Past: Teaching German History with the Graphic Novel', in *Class, Please Open Your Comics: Essays on Teaching with Graphic Narratives*, ed. by Matthew L. Miller (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2015), p. 148.

as an oppressive state that brave citizens have tried to overcome. Here also, perpetrators are to appear more likely as anonymous repressive structures, exemplarily shown through opportunistic figures that execute a specific suppression in the everyday life of the main characters. These comics also often engage in depicting the STASI, the members of the Staatssicherheit (the state security of the GDR) as potentially omnipresent, but mostly an anonymous or (yet) unknown menace. Seldomly the decisions to work for this governmental branch and its concrete daily routines are shown in those comics. Here again, the stories most often focus on those who suffered in the GDR.

It seems that here—like in comics regarding World War II or the Holocaust—certain tropes are about to become manifest, especially regarding the representation of persons that can be marked as perpetrators. Those comics also should, first and foremost, be understood as produced in a certain time and place and therefore a primary source of historical culture. It seems that the time frame when museums and memorial sites commissioned comics for educational purposes is slowly coming to a close as new forms of communication are established on the market. Comics most often were chosen because they seemed a promising way to engage with younger audiences that supposedly read comics. This seems to change in the digital age and tools that offer virtual and augmented realities seem to be more ‘up to date’ and offer a promise of an experience of the past. Comics (even digitally produced and published) can contrast and reflect those digital approaches through a very useful perspective: A comic is clearly marked as an interpretation of the past, this is a strength that should be fostered in museums and memorial sites as well.

Ewa Stańczyk: I think Nora Krug’s graphic memoir *Belonging* (2018) does an excellent job of exploring the quiet complicity of ordinary Germans. In her memoir, she traces the wartime trajectory of her maternal grandfather, Willi, in an attempt to deal with the sensitive questions of family history and memory. Sifting through archival materials, Krug discovers a postwar questionnaire of the American military authorities in which her grandfather categorized himself as a *Mitläufer* (follower), rather than an offender, due to his membership in the Nazi Party. In her memoir, this is accompanied by an evocative drawing of a sheep (see Figure 5) which is meant to depict many such followers who, in the author’s own words, were persons ‘lacking

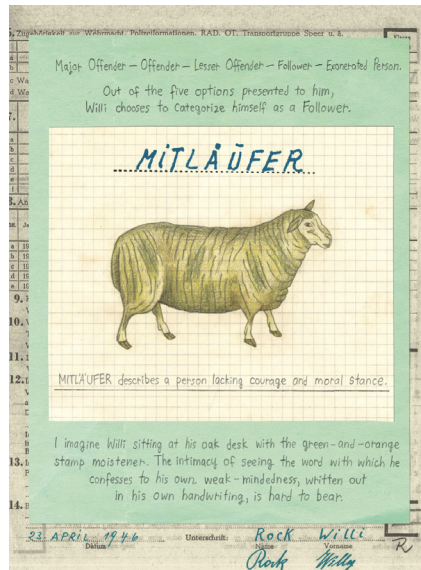


FIGURE 5: © Nora Krug, *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home* (2018).

courage and moral stance’.²¹ Here, Michael Rothberg’s term, ‘the implicated subject’, comes to mind. The implicated subject does not commit grave crimes. Nonetheless, s/he remains indispensable in providing legitimacy to genocidal policies and practices.²² Although Krug is relieved to have discovered other documents which officially confirmed Willi’s status as *Mitläufer* (rather than an offender), she is sceptical about the veracity of such labels. To her, archival documentation is imperfect; it rarely offers a complete window into the past. In her own words, archives cannot tell us whether Willi openly supported anti-Jewish discrimination and violence prior to the war, where he was during events such as the *Kristallnacht*, and how he reacted to the deportations of Jews from his hometown Karlsruhe. These questions are perhaps as important as the questions of direct involvement in the genocide because they concerned so many members of the general public.

21 Nora Krug, *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018), n.p.

22 Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), pp. 1–2.

There is no denying that, on a collective level, the curtain of silence surrounding World War II in Germany has largely been lifted. This is a result of the state-sponsored politics of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, initiated in the 1970s on the wave of the *Ostpolitik* and the 'Warschauer Kniefall' of Willy Brandt. And yet, what makes Krug's memoir special is its focus on family history. Earlier cultural representations, such as the fact-based feature film *Das schreckliche Mädchen* (The Nasty Girl, 1990), show how troubling it can be to zoom in on the question of complicity in local communities. Here, a young woman's attempt to uncover implicated subjects in her hometown is met with hostility and denial. That the film is based on a true story of Anna Rosmus who undertook research into the past of her home town Passau in the late 1970s makes for an even more persuasive portrayal of this difficult issue. When examined together, the film and Krug's memoir remind us that, although many communities chose to suppress certain 'inconvenient truths', the sense of guilt might live on at the individual or familial levels, even in the absence of actual memory (e.g. in the second and third generations). 'Who would we be as a family if the war had never happened?', asks Krug towards the end of her memoir, realizing that this question will never be answered.²³

What does this scarcity of sources mean for the educational setting? Germany has done a better job than any other country in Europe at incorporating the history of Nazi perpetrators and their collaborators into the national curriculum. But graphic memoirs, such as the one by Krug, are needed too. They tinge the national with the personal and hint at the commonality of moral dilemmas that many ordinary Germans must have faced following the rise of Hitler. We know from historical research that such dilemmas were not exclusive to Nazi Germany or to World War II. In fact, in many states that saw the rise of ethno-nationalist, antisemitic policies already in the early 1930s, those questions had been relevant long before the Holocaust. And while the stories of individual complicity might have been scrutinized in post-war retributive trials across many European states, individual efforts to reflect on one's involvement have been few and far between. In a similar way, complicity in the Holocaust would rarely feature in family discussions, the same way victimhood and survival does, so the lack of graphic narratives on the topic is not that surprising. While the exploration of transgenerational trauma has been a prominent subject

²³ Krug, *Belonging*, n.p.

in several memoirs written by second and third generation survivors (Art Spiegelman, Miriam Katin, Martin Lemelman, and Amy Kurzweil, to name a few), the topic of transgenerational culpability has not. Even Krug admitted that the traditional format of a graphic memoir did not fully suit her message. Instead, she chose the open format of a scrapbook which contains elements of traditional comics as well as photographs and visual renditions of archival documents and other sources. The question remains whether Krug's visual memoir will start a more prominent trend among other non-Jewish artists with similar histories of transgenerational guilt.

Kees Ribbens: Elizabeth Nijdam's suggestion that there are more graphic novels produced by German authors on the history of the GDR than on the genocide of Jews, Roma, and Sinti can probably be substantiated quantitatively, but, to my knowledge, in both cases the number of publications is not very large. If we widen our view by comparing the representation of the GDR in post-1989 comics with the representation of the Nazi regime in comics published in Germany since 1945, the result will probably be in favour of the latter. It should not be forgotten that the comic book market in the Federal Republic has been dominated for a long time by comic strips and graphic novels that came from abroad and reached a German readership in a translated form. Indisputably, only a limited number of comic strips about the Nazi era and World War II deal with this genocide, and then usually solely with the persecution of Jews. The position of Roma and Sinti in comic strips and other popular media, in Germany as well as in most other countries, can only be described as marginal.²⁴

In recent decades, a lively scene of comic book creators has emerged in Germany, which has resulted in an appealing high-quality production of graphic novels. In the German context, comics are therefore no longer predominantly an import phenomenon. The young generation of comic book creators—who in turn are breaking down borders, as publishers in Western Europe and North America releasing their work in translation—are to a certain degree focusing on autobiographical stories. It is, therefore, not surprising that these comics are often dealing with the relatively recent GDR past (in particular with the last, most recent years of the communist

²⁴ Some exceptions can be found in for instance France and Sweden: Kkrist Mirror, *Tsiganes 1940-1945: Le camp de concentration de Montreuil-Bellay* (Paris: EP, 2008); Gunilla Lundgren, *Sofia Z-4515* (Stockholm: Pionier Press, 2005).

regime) than with the now more distant Nazi past. Nevertheless, the Nazi past is also given a place, sometimes because of a connection with one's own family history (e.g., Barbara Yelin, *Irmina*, 2014), sometimes because of an artist's fascination with the appealing story of a particular Holocaust victim (e.g., Reinhard Kleist, *Der Boxer: Die wahre Geschichte des Hertzko Haft*, 2011). In my opinion, it is not so much a case of trying to look away from an all too painful history for which one feels a certain sense of responsibility. The fact that Germany has also seen the publication of graphic novels in which the contemporary activity of neo-Nazis is addressed (e.g., Nils Oskamp, *Drei Steine*, 2016) demonstrates that comics creators are not striving for an artificially sanitized self-image in the present or the past.

For some time already comic strips have been used in German education, particularly the aforementioned comic strips initiated by the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, distributed by German comic and educational publishers. This illustrates that the educational handling of the Holocaust is not entirely dependent on what German comic book authors have published on the subject. Yet, an increasing number of works by German comic book creators is becoming available. For example, at the Bayerische Landeszentrale für Politische Bildungsarbeit (Bavarian State Agency for Civic Education), not only a low-price version of Nora Krug's *Belonging* is obtainable (under the appropriate title *Heimat: Ein deutsches Familienalbum*), but also the comic book *Jesuran* (2020). Based on research by high school students, comic artist Alex Mage depicts the life of the Jewish Jesuran family from Nuremberg. This historical point of departure is used in accompanying educational materials to examine the phenomenon of exclusion and discrimination, and also to look at individual and collective cultures of remembrance.

The lack of publicly available sales figures makes it difficult to assess the extent to which these comics meet the demand of readers, but the appreciation by critics can generally be described as positive. The question remains as to what extent the available supply of comics meets the needs of history teachers and educational staff in museums and remembrance centers. An individual and recognizable local perspective probably works more easily for many pupils to reduce the distance between past and present and to strengthen their historical understanding; this may be taken as a plea to stimulate the creation of more comic strips so that a German perspective from 1933 onwards - with room for the roles and agency of both supporters of National Socialism, their victims as well as the bystanders - can be combined

with, for instance, French or Belgian perspectives in (translated) comic strips from those countries.

In the last decades we have seen a scholarly shift to an engagement with perpetrators that moves beyond the one-dimensional label of 'evil' to allow for a more thorough investigation of the reasons for participation in grievous acts of orchestrating and executing violence, while also offering more space to consider perpetration as a complex, multi-faceted and ultimately human act. How do comics relate to this shift, do we see similar developments?

Ewa Stańczyk: It varies widely. There is, for example, one interesting graphic narrative called *Stvoření světa* (The Creation of the World, undated) which was drawn already during World War II in the Terezín Ghetto. The author, Bohemian doctor Pavel Fantl, portrays Hitler as a tormented, and profoundly human, individual. In Fantl's representation, he suffers from an emotional deficit which is triggered by a sense of rejection. This is most likely a reference to Hitler not being admitted to art school, something he discussed in his autobiographical manifesto *Mein Kampf*. In another surviving work from the 1940s, *The Song is Over* (which is a single watercolour painting), Fantl depicts Hitler as a sad clown with a broken guitar at his feet, as if foretelling his imminent fall. These are unique works; also given the fact they were produced by a persecuted person. Having said that, Fantl is really an exception because most of the art from that period is geared towards documenting the inhumane conditions of camps and ghettos and is predominantly victim-focused. Fantl stands out in another way – he had a keen eye for satire which, I think, is one reason why his representations of Hitler went beyond the idea of pure evil. Unlike many other illustrators who attempted similar portrayals later on, Fantl was also close to the events, which gave him a very unique perspective.

Many contemporary representations of Nazi perpetrators bear the imprint of the Eichmann trial and even more so of Arendt's interpretation of Eichmann's personality as dull and banal. This idea of the perpetrator as a bureaucrat who only 'followed orders' has gained so much currency in popular culture that artists revert to it almost by default. This is visible in both Holocaust comics, to mention the Italian *Dylan Dog: Doctor Terror* (1993), by Tiziano Sclavi and Gianluigi Coppola, and in patriotic stories on national suffering, as in the scene of mass execution in the Polish comic on the Warsaw Uprising by Krzysztof

Gawronkiewicz and Marzena Sowa, *The Uprising* (2014). The recent growth of comics that blend various cultural references in a more postmodern way could also be credited with departing from the more traditional representations of perpetrators as purely evil, as seen in the Polish comic *Achtung Zelig!* (2004). Still, I wouldn't go as far as to say that they provide new or revealing insights into perpetrator characters. Newer work from German authors is slowly rectifying this gap and stories that focus on family history, such as Nora Krug's *Belonging* (2018), could be seen as contributing to this shift.

Christine Gundermann: It might also be helpful to again look out for the graphic novels written by authors of the second and third generation. Those approaches have been documented and explored in comic studies in recent years. There are nowadays a few examples of children of perpetrators who also engaged in the (sometimes reticent) pasts of their ancestors as the Dutch Peter Pontiac (pseudonym of Peter Pollmann) did with *Kraut* (2000), in which he reconstructs the life of his father, who volunteered as a war correspondent for the SS during World War II. Those comics might point to a change or opening in memory and comic culture that has also room for critical reflections on perpetrator history.

Kees Ribbens: In a broad sense, developments in academia, and thus also in the historiography of genocide in general and of perpetrators in particular, do not directly set the agenda for what is represented or imagined in the popular arts. An increasing number of comics creators make use of the works of historians, as well as of ego-documents or other archival records, but the more theoretical reflections from the fields of history, war studies, and political sciences often remain a certain terra incognita. This does not alter the fact that comics creators are interested in ambivalent, contrary characters and use graphic novels to present a layered, less one-dimensional image of their characters. The complexity of Fabien Nury and Sylvain Vallée's *Il était une fois en France* (*Once upon a time in France*, 2007-2012) for example, is successfully brought to the fore in the dramatized representation of Joseph Joanovici. As a Romanian Jew in Nazi-occupied France, Joanovici cannot be regarded as an example of a perpetrator, but his dual role as a persecuted but influential Jew and as a collaborator to the German occupier proves to lend itself well to an entertaining story in which the reader develops an insight into the dynamic complexity of

wartime history. To this end, extensive space is taken in five volumes to reveal the nuances and shades of individual behaviour and historical circumstances. In this way, the reader gains an understanding of history that can also contribute to a better understanding of perpetration as something that is more flexible and less unambiguous than previously often assumed by scholars, artists, and the general public.

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