Research article

History education as prevention: the topic of right-wing extremism in German educational media

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Abstract

The rise of right-wing populism and extremism has challenged Western societies in recent years and raised fears of the destruction of liberal democracy. Against this backdrop, it seems reasonable to encourage students in history lessons to study the rise of National Socialism in order to prevent similar developments today. However, researchers and educators have emphasised that 'learning from history' does not take place in a straightforward way; moreover, it is questionable whether contemporary right-wing extremism can be best understood by studying the Nazi era. In order to understand how history education could contribute to citizenship education in this respect, this article asks how the topic of contemporary right-wing extremism is approached in German educational media, and how it is linked to the Nazi era. Based on an analysis of the pedagogical approaches towards the topic in 28 history textbook series, it investigates how the pedagogical approaches, the narrative about right-wing extremism and the subject position of the reader/player are intertwined in two selected textbooks and in one serious game. In conclusion, the article reflects on whether the innovative educational

design of the serious game could inspire history education to find new approaches to the topic and thereby to contribute to citizenship education.

Keywords history education; citizenship education; right-wing extremism; National Socialism; prevention; history textbooks; serious games

Introduction

In the 1970s, when some history teachers in the Federal Republic of Germany started to teach about the Nazi era, they were motivated by the belief that their students would learn from history. Broadly speaking, there was hope that if students were provided with sufficient information about Nazi crimes, and could study the material and think about it independently, they would be immunised against Nazi ideology and extremist thinking (Alavi and Popp, 2012). The guiding principle of the approach was Theodor Adorno's (2003: 19) famous statement, that 'the premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz will not happen again'. Within this context, teaching about National Socialism was firmly embedded in citizenship education. There was a link drawn from the past to the present – not because it was necessary to make that past interesting or relevant, but because an endangered present needed to be protected against the lasting legacy of that horrific past. However, in history lessons, the link was usually rather more implicitly drawn; the focus lay on studying the historical topic, the Nazi era, while the ways in which the legacy of that era could threaten the present remained obscure.

The rise of right-wing populism and extremism in recent years has raised new fears regarding the destruction of liberal democracy in Western countries. In the public debate in Germany, there have been allusions to the rise of National Socialism and political commentators have spoken of a 'touch of Weimar' (Baum, 2020) with regard to the successes of the right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). As much as these developments underline the relevance of history and citizenship education within democratic societies, one wonders whether such comparisons actually help create an understanding of this contemporary form of right-wing extremism or how to prevent it. Similarly, there are a number of questions around whether 'learning from history' is an effective paradigm in this respect; researchers and educators have emphasised that the moral message may be too strong, that it often rests on a simplified understanding of the historical processes or that young people's own questions about their identity create an obstacle to such learning (Bilewicz et al., 2017; Chapman, 2020; Köster, 2021; Meseth et al., 2004; Zülsdorf-Kersting, 2007). Another reason for this potential ineffectiveness could be that the present challenges remain vague, as does their connection to the past. Therefore, I will ask in this article how the topic of contemporary right-wing extremism is approached in German educational media today, how it is linked to the Nazi era and how history education, by introducing the topic, might contribute to the prevention of right-wing extremism.

My interest in these questions was triggered by the strikingly new way in which the digital serious game *Hidden Codes* (Bildungsstätte Anne Frank, 2021) approaches the topic. Its educational design appears to support the supposition that an innovative educational media format can open up new possibilities of framing a topic and of pursuing an educational goal. In order to understand how *Hidden Codes* differs from the standard approaches to the topic, and how it may overcome the pitfalls of the 'learning from history' paradigm, I will analyse and compare it with the presentation of the topic in history textbooks. I will argue that history education should continue to play a role in citizenship education and try to contribute to the prevention of right-wing extremism, but that it should develop a nuanced understanding of the contemporary phenomenon, reflect on the way it connects the past and the present, and revise its approaches.

Theoretical and methodological approach

Educational media can give insights into the way history is taught due to their core role in education as interpretations of the curricula. While history textbooks, as a traditional, state-approved and widely used medium, reflect the approaches currently taken in schools, serious games are a more innovative form of

educational media, and they have the potential to implement or inspire new approaches since they do not have to be approved by state authorities and do not, therefore, have to please all societal actors.

In order to understand educational media in their material and symbolic complexities, I follow an interdisciplinary approach to history education that brings together insights from media and cultural studies. This approach is shaped by a sociocultural understanding of media as 'socially realized structures of communication, where structures include both technological forms and their associated protocols, and where communication is a cultural practice' (Gitelman, 2006: 7). This implies that media in general have an impact upon communication, and this includes textbooks or serious games that influence classroom communication. In addition, textbooks are understood both as constructs of knowledge and as pedagogical tools (Höhne, 2003). These two qualities can produce tensions because, on the one hand, the processes of the negotiation of knowledge in society are in many cases open and, thus, create ambiguity (Christophe et al., 2018), while, on the other hand, instructional processes tend to simplify knowledge in order to make it comprehensible. Finally, I understand games as systems 'in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome' (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004: 93). This definition emphasises that games are first and foremost systems and not narrations; however, narratives are produced within these systems. To investigate how history or present society are represented in games, it is therefore necessary to look at the relationship between representation and gameplay (Chapman, 2018). Digital games are not only defined by their use of digital technology; following Salen and Zimmerman (2004), they are, in comparison with non-digital games, often characterised by certain traits, such as immediate but narrow interactivity, information manipulation, automated complex systems and networked communication. In serious games that are defined by their educational aims, there is a tension between playing and learning which may impinge upon their quality as games (Geisler, 2016).

In following a qualitative methodology that fits these theoretical considerations, I faced, in terms of data collection, the double challenge of an imbalance between the multitude of textbooks and the low number of relevant serious games, as well as the difference between the modes in which the two media formats are used, that is to say, between reading and playing. This led me to collect and to investigate the two media formats in different ways. Given the quantity of history textbook series in the federal education system in Germany, I first decided on criteria for the selection of the examples. First, I chose history textbook series for the lower secondary level, as the units about National Socialism and contemporary German history, in which one would expect the topic of right-wing extremism to be addressed, are taught to all students in Years 8 to 10 (age 14–16) across Germany. Second, the textbooks needed to be in use in 2023 and to be not more than 10 years old (from 2014 onwards), since I wanted to get an overview of whether the topic is currently covered and how. Third, in order to ensure that the volume of data was manageable, I chose five states (*Bundesländer*) from across eastern and western Germany (Lower Saxony, North Rhine Westphalia, Saxony, Berlin and Brandenburg), a selection comprising the most populous states in both east and west Germany, and selected all history textbook series for both grammar schools (*Gymnasien*) and comprehensive schools (*Gesamtschulen, Hauptschulen, Realschulen, Sekundarschulen, Oberschulen, Gemeinschaftsschulen*) (see Appendix A). The selection covered 28 textbook series altogether, all edited by the four major publishers of history textbooks and in several cases comprising regional variations of individual titles; for example, there were editions of *Entdecken und Verstehen* (Discover and Understand) for all five states included. I reviewed the chapters on: (1) National Socialism; (2) the Federal Republic of Germany and German Democratic Republic since the 1970s; and (3) contemporary themes such as 'cultural encounters' or 'migration'. From these, I identified sub-chapters, paragraphs and photographs with the topic 'right-wing extremism'. Subsequently, I read the identified passages closely, and took notes and photographs.

By contrast, I identified three games with a focus on right-wing extremism that pursued an educational purpose, but *Hidden Codes*, the one that had triggered my interest, was the only one appropriate for use in schools due to the use of violence in the other two games. I therefore selected it as the example for the purposes of this article and explored it using the walkthrough method (Light et al., 2016), which included taking notes, screenshots and screencasts.

In terms of data analysis and interpretation, the textual and visual data produced by the reading and walkthrough processes were first examined with respect to the pedagogical approaches; subsequently, the narratives about right-wing extremism and the subject position of the reader/player were analysed in selected examples. First, the pedagogical approach refers to the way students are asked to 'do history' with respect to the topic of right-wing extremism and its connection to the Nazi past. The aspects of

history education that were particularly emphasised were examined using Barton and Levstik's (2004) categorisation of four stances – identification, analytic, moral response and exhibition – as a heuristic method. Second, historical narratives are understood as collective patterns of meaning that circulate in public discourse and contribute to shaping collective identity. In terms of the topic of right-wing extremism, I investigated how its relation to the Nazi past was established, how the presentation of the topic referred to explanations in the academic literature, and how the phenomenon was framed as a societal problem; for example, whether it is understood as a fringe phenomenon or a danger present throughout society. Third, there is an assumption that the success of educational endeavours that go beyond teaching knowledge and try to impart values and attitudes depends on the way students are spoken to and valued. The analysis therefore included the concept of the reader/player's subject position as created by the respective media. This refers to the way readers/players are addressed in terms of the norms communicated and the power relations generated (Reh and Ricken, 2012).

The challenge of contemporary right-wing extremism

Right-wing extremism is understood in this article as 'a collective term for all political attitudes and actions that reject the basic principles of modern democracy and an open society by valuing ethnic identity above those principles' (Pfahl-Traughber, 2019: 24, my translation). According to this broad understanding, the core idea of right-wing extremism is an ideology of inequality that can be shaped to different degrees. Right-wing extremist thinking is determined by ethnic and racist categories that are at odds with human rights, and it is dominated by the ideal of an ethnic homogeneous community as a counter-project to an open, pluralistic and democratic society. Hostility towards democracy, as well as authoritarian thinking, are integral parts of right-wing-extremist ideology (Pfahl-Traughber, 2019; Rippl and Seipel, 2022).

Right-wing extremism has been a consistent, although marginal, presence in the Federal Republic of Germany, both as a political movement and as a social milieu, since the country's foundation in 1949. Short-term mobilisations of voters in regional elections have regularly been followed by a retreat to the sociocultural sphere by partisans (Botsch, 2012). In the 1980s, the movement became more radical, and it was shaped by electoral campaigns organised by political parties, as well as by acts of violence and terrorism committed by neo-Nazi groups; the violent and xenophobic skinhead scene was mobilised to a certain extent for right-wing extremist aims (Pfahl-Traughber, 2019). As for the German Democratic Republic, the development of a right-wing extremist political movement was impossible for a long time within the framework of the anti-fascist socialist dictatorship. Nevertheless, in the 1980s, when the integrative power of the official socialist ideology began to wane, right-wing extremist skinhead groups developed as a violent anti-establishment youth movement here as well, and ethnocentric nationalism and xenophobia, although officially silenced, became generally more widespread (Bugiel, 2002). After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the number of violent racist acts rose massively, especially, but not only, in east Germany, where the disintegrating post-socialist society proved to be a fertile ground for right-wing extremist agitation (Pfahl-Traughber, 2019). Despite a slight decrease in the 1990s, right-wing extremist violence continued to be high in unified Germany, and it became especially visible in 2011, when a series of racist murders were found to have been committed by the neo-Nazi terrorist group Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund (NSU). In contrast, a new right-wing populist party, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), founded in 2013, chose another strategy: Even though it incorporated elements of right-wing extremist ideology, it dissociated itself from the right-wing extremist movement, and it established itself successfully as a party with a seemingly normal, moderate and middle-class appearance. Nevertheless, in the academic literature, the party is mostly considered to be right-wing extremist (Decker et al., 2022; Pfahl-Traughber, 2019; Rippl and Seipel, 2022; Salzborn, 2018), and regional sections of the party, such as the state association of Thuringia, were classified as a right-wing extremist and anti-constitutional force by the domestic intelligence services in 2021 (Freistaat Thüringen, 2022).

During the Cold War, there was a dominant discourse about right-wing extremism as a phenomenon of the fringes. Using the horseshoe metaphor, the far right and the far left of the political spectrum were both framed as 'extremist', meaning the centre of society was by definition free of 'extremist' attitudes (Salzborn, 2018). In the last two decades, however, it has been pointed out that some of those attitudes can also be found at the centre of society (Decker et al., 2020), and do not necessarily lead to action such as voting for extremist candidates, party membership or violence (Stöss, 2010). Furthermore, a closed right-wing extremist world view that is homogeneously structured and provides the individual with an

answer to all political issues has to be distinguished from right-wing extremist attitudes that are based on rather incoherent, volatile opinions (Salzborn, 2018: 22). This paradigm shift opened up the possibility for empirical research into how patterns of attitudes associated with right-wing extremism are distributed across society, and for the identification of interfaces between a small group of partisans holding closed world views and broader parts of society. Assuming that ideologies supporting inequalities are expressed by an affinity with dictatorships, by the trivialisation of National Socialism, by anti-Semitism and by social Darwinism, as well as by chauvinism and xenophobia, Decker et al. (2022) have measured the level of these attitudes in the German population since 2002.

One finding from this long-term series of studies is that there has been a decline in people with a coherent right-wing extremist world view in the last two decades, falling from 11 per cent of the German population in 2002 to 2.7 per cent in 2022 (Decker et al., 2022). The explicit and consistent approval of neo-Nazi ideology, which comprises an affinity with dictatorships, the trivialisation of National Socialism, anti-Semitism and social Darwinism, is low on average (under 4 per cent), although the approval of individual statements is higher (for example, 'What Germany needs now, is a single strong party embodying the national community' [14.5 per cent]; 'Even today, the influence of the Jews is still too great' [7.2 per cent]; and 'National Socialist crimes have been largely exaggerated by historiography' [5.3 per cent]). The explicit and consistent approval of chauvinist (12.1 per cent) and xenophobic statements (17 per cent) is more widespread compared to the approval of neo-Nazi ideology (Decker et al., 2022); the approval of individual items is even higher, and exceeds 20 per cent; for example, the statement 'The foreigners are just coming here in order to exploit our social systems' (27.4 per cent).

The findings suggest that, even though only a small percentage of the population holds a coherent right-wing extremist world view, some of these attitudes, especially those expressing xenophobia, are shared by people at the centre of society, and can therefore be used as 'bridges' for right-wing extremist activists in order to gain more support (Pickel et al., 2022). Furthermore, since the implicit approval of neo-Nazi ideology (respondents who partially agree with certain statements) is much higher than its explicit approval, such attitudes could become more popular once they are more socially acceptable. The rise of the right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which, according to opinion polls in 2023, has the support of over 20 per cent of the population (Ehni, 2023), illustrates that populist politics, the appeal to xenophobic prejudices and disguised extremist messages can be mixed successfully.

Against the backdrop of the historical experience of the rapid downfall of the Weimar Republic, the Federal Republic of Germany was established as a 'militant democracy' (Loewenstein, 1937a, 1937b; Salzborn, 2018), and it uses a range of different means to fight anti-constitutional, extremist political movements. All action against right-wing extremism, whether in the areas of policing, administration, jurisdiction, legislation or intelligence operations, has certainly to be balanced against the protection of fundamental rights. This includes preventive measures against right-wing extremism in education. Teaching about right-wing extremism in schools has to respect the freedom of expression in the classroom as guaranteed by the Basic Law, as well as the right of political parties to exist, so long as they are not extremist. However, the ideology of inequality, mentioned above, which values and devalues humans by their ethnicity, conflicts with the fundamental values enshrined in the Basic Law; it is therefore legitimate from the point of view of the state to combat such ideology through the education system.

In terms of the measures that can be taken in schools to prevent right-wing extremism, teaching about National Socialism and the Holocaust, as well as about right-wing extremism, is considered to be important (Jaschke, 2012; Salzborn, 2018), without, however, being able to serve as a 'form of deprogramming for individuals who have fallen under the sway of extremism' (Eckmann and Stevick, 2017: 295). Moreover, there is no clear empirical evidence regarding which approaches to the topics are most effective in addressing anti-Semitism and racism (Eckmann et al., 2017). For example, there is a danger that teaching about National Socialism and the Holocaust may, in fact, only teach students how to think and talk appropriately about Nazism, rather than to make an impact on a deeper level (Bilewicz et al., 2017). Furthermore, given the multitude of attitudes and convictions that can culminate in a right-wing extremist world view, helping students to 'learn from history' is not seen as sufficient. Prevention work in schools should therefore contain four key aspects: (1) fostering a culture of participation and democratic counter-practice; (2) developing appreciative and respectful interactions; (3) teaching knowledge about National Socialism and the Holocaust, democracy and right-wing extremism, prejudices and language and so on; and (4) reacting to students' behaviour and attitudes appropriately (Behrens, 2014; Jaschke, 2012; May and Heinrich, 2021; Salzborn, 2018). Hence, when analysing how educational media enable teaching about right-wing extremism, one level of prevention work is mostly addressed (Point 3); in order

to consider how students are seen as citizens who can participate in democratic practice (Point 1), and how they are appreciated and valued (Point 2), the subject position created by the respective educational media is included in the analysis.

Textbook analysis

A topic located in a dark past and a 'polished' contemporary history

In order to assess what kind of knowledge history textbooks produce about right-wing extremism, and which insights in terms of prevention, it is first of all important to examine whether the topic is covered at all. This is the case in more than half the selected examples: 16 of the 28 series include short texts, sections or chapters on right-wing extremism; mere allusions were not counted. While 9 of 11 series for comprehensive schools cover the topic, only 7 of 17 series for grammar schools do so. When the topic of right-wing extremism is covered, it is almost always located in the chapter about National Socialism; only 2 series include it in the chapter about German history since 1989 (ZuM NRW, 2022, 2023; GE NRW, 2021, 2023), while another series covers it in both units (ZR NRW, 2019). Some series had optional chapters on contemporary history, including one with a chapter 'Jewish life after 1945', which also covered the topic, in addition to the unit on National Socialism (DG NRW, 2022).

By introducing right-wing extremism as a lasting legacy of National Socialism and generally placing it at the end of the relevant chapters, the paradigm of 'learning from history' is structurally implemented in history textbooks. As a consequence of the connection from the past to the present being made in the chapters on National Socialism, the topic of right-wing extremism is mostly omitted from the chapters on German history post-1989. To a certain extent, this omission can be interpreted as an unintended effect caused by the material qualities of textbooks, such as the linear order and limited space. However, such omissions result in a 'polished' history of contemporary Germany, in which events such as the racist violence of the 1990s have no place. It is possible that the reasons for such omissions lie beyond the materiality of the textbook and reflect the quality of history textbooks as constructs of knowledge that tend to gloss over controversial and troublesome issues in favour of a positive national self-image (Cajani et al., 2019).

Overview of pedagogical approaches

The analysis of the pedagogical approaches focused on how students are asked to engage with right-wing extremism in contemporary German history and its connection to the Nazi past. With reference to Barton and Levstik's (2004: 8) four stances in history lessons, defined as 'combinations of practice and purpose', I examined whether the textbook authors wanted the students to focus on identification, analysis, moral response or exhibition. While textbooks may encourage more than one stance, it was generally possible to identify a dominant stance toward the topic in each textbook. The pedagogical approaches taken by the 16 textbooks that introduce the topic encourage practices that can predominantly be categorised as moral response (GuG NRW, 2021, 2022; ZR S, 2022, 2023; ZR NRW, 2019; ZuM NIE, 2019; ZuM NRW, 2022, 2023) and analytic (DG NRW, 2022; EuV BB, 2018; EuV NIE, 2014; EuV NRW, 2015; EuV S, 2022; FG NIE, 2017; FG S, 2022; FG NRW, 2021, 2022; ZR BB, 2018), and in two cases as exhibition-oriented (GE NRW, 2021, 2023; RidV NRW, 2014).

The common denominator of the moral response approaches is that the books closely connect the topic of right-wing extremism to questions of Holocaust remembrance. A moralising style can be distinguished from a more discursive style: some textbooks rather prescribe how to think about the Nazi era and contemporary right-wing extremism, an approach that can be seen in *Zeiten und Menschen (Niedersachsen)* (Times and Humans [Lower Saxony], ZuM NIE, 2019), as discussed below, whereas other books pose questions related to how and why the Nazi crimes should be remembered. For example, students are asked to discuss the aim of remembering the Nazi era, including the question whether it should 'immunise us against xenophobia and right-wing extremist propaganda' (GuG NRW, 2021: 208).

The analytic approach is characterised mostly by a rational, problem-oriented investigation of right-wing extremism as a contemporary phenomenon, often including a comparison of historical Nazi ideology with its present-day neo-Nazi version. In most cases, the topic is placed after the subject of remembrance, but it is addressed separately in its own sub-chapter. Some tasks may go beyond the analytic approach, for example, by asking students to research organisations or actions aimed at

countering right-wing extremism. In one case the focus on activism against right-wing extremism shapes the whole chapter by giving examples of citizens' initiatives against the right and encouraging students to design a poster for a demonstration against right-wing extremism (EuV NIE, 2014: 73).

According to Barton and Levstik's (2004) stances, the exhibition-oriented approach refers to classroom activities that focus on displaying historical information as an end in itself. While the authors doubt the value of such exercises in terms of democracy education, they do see a productive contribution towards this goal if a historical topic is exhibited as a service to others. In one of two such cases found in the textbooks, students are asked to research right-wing extremist violence since 1991, and to present their results to the rest of the class (GE NRW, 2023: 206). There are no further analytical questions or prompts to pass a judgement; however, students are encouraged to subsequently discuss in class what needs to be done to prevent such violence in the future.

One example each of the moral response and the analytic approaches are presented in more detail below in order to analyse how the pedagogical approach, the narrative about right-wing extremism and the subject position are intertwined. The first example was chosen to illustrate the pitfalls of the 'learning from history' paradigm, the second to reflect on the gaps in the analytic approach.

Moral response approach: 'a past that does not go away'

In *Zeiten und Menschen (Niedersachsen)*, the double-page spread that introduces the chapter on National Socialism (ZuM NIE, 2019: 108–9) starts by explaining to students why the topic is still relevant today. The authors define the Nazi era as being different from others, as a 'past that does not go away'. They argue that even though there are now few people remaining who have personal memories of the era, it is a topic of intense public debate, specifically they point to the questions surrounding the extent to which Germans supported National Socialism and took part in Nazi crimes, and the reasons why. By presenting an overarching question that connects the past with current needs for orientation, the authors engage in a practice generally recognised in history teaching (Körber et al., 2007; Seixas and Morton, 2013); however, they start with a question that they assume students would have – and they do not ask what questions the students might actually have.

Three photographs on the right-hand page show contrasting responses by young people to the Nazi past: one picture shows German football players visiting the Auschwitz memorial site during the European Championship in Poland and Ukraine in 2012. The other two photographs depict skinheads making the Hitler salute, and a 'wanted' poster from 2011 depicting three members of the Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund (NSU), the neo-Nazi terrorist group that committed nine racist murders. Clearly, these images frame three groups of young people as juxtaposed moral examples – one good and two bad ones. Even though the moral unambiguousness of the topic leaves little room for ethical discussions in general, the dualistic presentation of two possible ways of dealing with the Nazi past, one of which is neither legitimate nor legal, risks frustrating any independent contemplation of the lessons of the past by students.

The moralising design of the introduction appears even more problematic when the subsequent narrative about right-wing extremism is considered. The double-page spread stresses that right-wing extremism is rooted in National Socialism, and it is portrayed as a violent movement, as a danger to democracy that is not abstract, but is still happening here and today. While such aspects are accurate and important, by creating an image of right-wing extremists as skinheads, terrorists and murderers wanted by the police, the textbook conveys the message that right-wing attitudes can only be found on the margins of society, which might be taken as an invitation to dismiss the problem. Furthermore, right-wing extremism is not only presented as a legacy of National Socialism, but as a fate that keeps coming back and is difficult to escape from, a sentiment expressed by the last sentences: 'The years 1933–1945: This was only twelve years and German history is much longer and it has many good sides. But these twelve years were painful. They were so influential that we are always caught up by the past' (ZuM NIE, 2019: 109, my translation). While rightly pointing to the challenges of right-wing extremism in today's society, this deterministic view of German history, which appears to be hijacked time and again by groups of ruthless Nazi criminals, can inspire the wish to fight against these dangers, but it could also – contrary to the intentions of the authors – create a sense of helplessness and despair.

In terms of the subject position created for the readers, the approach is further complicated by wishing to inspire not only a moral response, but also identification. In line with the moralising style, students are not addressed as real citizens who are invited to form an opinion, but as citizens-to-be

who need to be provided with a moral compass and have their national identity explained to them. By making the students part of a 'we' that shares a common negative history, the usual way of building social identities is turned upside down, since group identities tend to be strengthened by historical master-narratives that are biased toward the deeds of the in-group (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Turner, 1999). Certainly, from an enlightened history education point of view (Carretero, 2017), the objective of history lessons is to also face the dark sides of the past in order to remember the victims and build a better future. It should not be forgotten, however, that building a national identity based on a catastrophic past may be a challenge for adolescents (Bilewicz et al., 2017). Moreover, the framing of the readers as 'we', and therefore as Germans and implicitly as Nazi descendants, presupposes an ethnically homogeneous society – a feature of German textbooks that has been subject to criticism in the past (Höhne et al., 2005; Niehaus et al., 2015). Given the significant percentage of students whose families moved to Germany after the Nazi era, such language not only conveys an outdated picture of today's society, but also excludes many students.

This moralising version of the moral response approach may be implemented for good reasons, as it tries to emphasise the relevance of the Nazi past for today's society and the personal lives of students. The example shows, however, that there are two major pitfalls: first, it is generally problematic when moral judgements are prescribed, because young people need to be given room for their own contemplation; second, framing identities for young people that implicitly presuppose a nationality or even ethnicity, and tying it to a dark past, is an ambivalent way of stimulating a responsible appropriation of that difficult history.

Analytic approach: 'a legacy of National Socialism?'

The example of the analytic approach contrasts with the previous case. In *Forum Geschichte (Niedersachsen)* (Forum History [Lower Saxony]), the sub-chapter 'Right-wing extremism today' (FG NIE, 2017: 162–3) is located at the end of the chapter on National Socialism, and follows the sub-chapter on 'The culture of Holocaust remembrance'. At the beginning of the double-page spread, the key questions regarding the causes of right-wing extremism and how society should deal with it are posed. The extent to which it is connected to the Nazi past is questioned under the headline 'A legacy of National Socialism?' in a text which briefly presents the history and current state of right-wing extremism in the Federal Republic of Germany. The material in the sub-chapter includes a report by a dropout, an extract from a survey that shows how widespread some so-called 'right-wing extremist' attitudes are, and an extract from a report on extremist activities on the internet. The presentation is matter-of-fact and although the dangers are mentioned, this is not done in an alarmist way. Three tasks ask students to analyse the material; two alternative research assignments address the trial against the NSU terrorist group and the failed proceedings to ban a neo-Nazi party, and ask students either to write a diary entry from one day of the trial from the point of view of one of the prosecutors or a relative of a victim, or to discuss whether anti-constitutional parties should be banned.

In terms of the narrative about right-wing extremism, the material contributes to a complex picture of the phenomenon that corresponds with the current state of research: right-wing extremism is depicted as an extremist movement that has incorporated most parts of Nazi ideology, but that presents itself as modern and mainstream. Its ideology and its violence make it a danger to democracy, but, in spite of that, some parts of its ideology, especially xenophobia, are shared by people at the centre of society. The modern appearance of the movement, currently driven by small organisations, is conveyed, and its clever use of social media, through which it successfully addresses young people, is highlighted. By pointing to the modern and mainstream facade of the movement, the authors highlight both the deceitful character of current right-wing extremism and its differences from, and similarities to, the Nazi movement.

Concerning the subject position of the readers, the examination reveals that the chapter imparts valuable information which puts students in a position to assess the topic and the challenges themselves. Thus, students are addressed mainly as cognitive learners who are able to analyse the material and reach a conclusion on their own. Since the topic is presented in the same way as any other, the students also have to judge for themselves whether it has implications for their personal lives.

The analytic approach can be viewed as state-of-the-art history teaching, in which the topic of contemporary right-wing extremism is presented as a complex problem that allows both its connections to Nazism and new tendencies to be identified. Instead of 'learning from history', students are given the opportunity to learn about right-wing extremism today. The disadvantage of this approach may be that

students do not feel prompted to take a position as citizens, or to discuss the problem as a political issue or one that impacts on their own lives, since they are addressed as cognitive learners who simply have a list of tasks to work through.

Analysis of a serious game

Story and design of *Hidden Codes*

The serious game *Hidden Codes* was developed by the educational centre Bildungsstätte Anne Frank, a non-profit association in Frankfurt, whose many activities are guided 'by Anne Frank's wish for a world without hatred or violence and by the humanistic message of her world-famous diary' (Bildungsstätte Anne Frank, 2023; my translation). The game aims to educate young people about radicalisation in the digital era, and it is aimed at schools, although not only for history lessons, and other educational programmes. The single-player, narrative game, designed to be played on a mobile phone, is structured into four independent episodes, and it imitates a chat app: the main activity is chatting with (virtual) friends by choosing between two or three possible answers. The episodes are interrupted several times by statistical feedback from the app that shows the decisions taken by the players as a whole; if played in a class, the feedback presents the playing behaviour of the class.

At the beginning, the player can create his or her own avatar by selecting a name and face, and then choosing skin colour, hair colour and style, clothes and so on. Players also create a social media profile in the game, by writing a sentence about themselves and choosing photographs of favourite activities. The walkthrough of the game suggested, however, that the qualities of the avatar and the social media profile do not influence the ludonarrative. The basic plot of the first episode, which was the focus of this study, is that the player is a student at a new school in a new city. She or he has already become friends with a girl from the neighbourhood, Emilia, who helps him or her join the team who run the school magazine. In the first editorial meeting, they discuss an incident that has just happened at school: somebody has stuck neo-Nazi stickers on a poster announcing an event for Holocaust Memorial Day. A member of the editorial team suspects that a schoolmate, Patricia, who is a friend of Emilia, is responsible for the stickers. The group is upset, and decides to start the online campaign *#wirgegenrechts* (#usagainstright). It becomes clear that Patricia is indeed associated with the right-wing extremist movement, and the aim of the game is then to convince Emilia to end her friendship with Patricia, distance herself from right-wing extremism and join the campaign.

For the player, there are two levels of challenges: first, the other members of the school magazine's editorial team ask the player to look for neo-Nazi symbols on Patricia's social media profile and to explain their meaning to Emilia. The player has to activate his or her knowledge of social media, and to process the information provided by the other schoolmates. These tasks assign the role of a learner to the player, and they are easy to complete thanks to the instructions from the player's peers. Second, the player has to communicate appropriately with his or her peers. There is some conflict concerning what kind of pictures or videos ought to be posted, so the challenge is to meet social expectations, to position oneself publicly and to assume responsibility. This role of a friend or schoolmate is more difficult to fulfil, since there are no specific instructions or guidelines in this regard.

At the end, regardless of whether the aim of the game has been achieved, a short video provides the historical context by conveying information about right-wing violence in recent years. It also dedicates the episode to the victims of the NSU terrorist group.

Problem-solving approach: '#usagainstright'

In pedagogic terms the game adopts a problem-solving approach which is – given its focus on the present – not usually applied in history lessons, and it is, therefore, not an approach considered by Barton and Levstik (2004). Since artificial conflicts are at the heart of games, digital games have the capacity to create virtual problem spaces (McCall, 2012), and thus to offer an alternative learning space to textbooks. Certain learning principles that have been described as the special remit of digital games (Gee, 2005) contribute to this approach. Players are involved in constant *interaction* with their peers, and they need to develop a sense of *agency* and control. The players quickly realise that if they can explain the meaning of the symbols to Emilia, she will at some point believe them and eventually join the school magazine's campaign against right-wing extremism. *Meaning is situated*, which means, for example, that

the players learn through their exchanges with Emilia that right-wing activism can be attractive and cool for some people. Furthermore, information is provided to the players '*just in time*', which means that they receive information about the way right-wing extremists use symbols, but not much information about the connection between the Nazi era and current right-wing extremism. The connection to the past is only made, in this case, with the incident at the beginning which exemplifies the conflict over Holocaust remembrance. The story is only put into historical context at the end, after the game has finished.

The problem-solving approach, as well as the story and the design, produce a complex narrative about right-wing extremism that has some similarities with the one in the textbook series *Forum Geschichte (Niedersachsen)* examined above. Right-wing extremism is presented in both media as a movement with which students could be confronted in their own school, regardless of where they live, illustrating that such extremism extends beyond small circles of fanatics. The story of the game demonstrates that contact may indeed come through a friend (of a friend), and that young people may be addressed through social media or fashion without the violent face of extremism being immediately visible. When Emilia joins Patricia at a demonstration in support of women's rights that is simultaneously directed against immigrants, the modern appearance of right-wing extremism is further highlighted by mixing progressive concerns with a racist and xenophobic ideology. The dangerous and violent side of the movement is shown in other incidents, for example, when the shop of a schoolmate's family is attacked. As mentioned above, the connection to Nazism is indicated by the conflict over Holocaust remembrance, but it plays a subordinate role thereafter.

In terms of the subject position, players are addressed in several roles: first, as young people who are looking for friends at school and have to deal with conflicts; second, as learners who do not learn from their teachers, but from their peers; and third, as citizens who have to decide what action they are going to take when confronted with neo-Nazism in school. Moreover, they are given the choice of how to be and how to act within these multiple roles. This conveys the message that students can define their own identity, and everybody can play a part in the school community and society. That being said, the variety of choices, such as chat answers or features of the avatar, is predetermined, and hence limited by the game. The subject positions are also the product of an idealistic and artificial story, which may appeal to some players more than to others.

The problem-solving approach affords students an active role, and it enables them to grasp the topic as a contemporary problem. The game emphasises the modern and attractive character of right-wing extremism, as well as its diffusion in society, well beyond the fringes. It lets students explore the difficulties of acting and arguing against it in a certain social context, but it also opens up the possibilities for common action. Furthermore, the game conveys an image of a diverse society whose members play different roles and can create and reflect on their own identities.

Comparison of the examples

Right-wing extremism is represented differently in these three examples: while the first example follows the tradition by presenting it primarily as a legacy of Nazism which attracts people on the fringes of society, the two other examples characterise it – in line with current research – in a more nuanced way as a violent political movement displaying a modern face while disseminating an anti-democratic, illiberal and racist ideology that appeals to people beyond small groups of dedicated converts. Hence, the narrative about the topic, and the complexity with which it is presented, are not dependent on the media format.

In terms of the pedagogical approaches, a moral response approach that equates with moralising and which implicitly prescribes a national identity to students cannot avoid the pitfalls of the 'learning from history' paradigm discussed in existing research (Chapman, 2020; Meseth et al., 2004). In contrast, the analytic approach is a productive way of engaging with right-wing extremism on a cognitive level that questions the 'learning from history' paradigm. At the same time, it not only avoids all moral questions, but also generally refrains from connecting the topic to the lived experience of the students, thereby risking being associated with the usual 'school stuff' that students, doing their 'job' as students (Breidenstein, 2006), do not pay much attention to.

If the entire selection of textbook series is considered, there is no clear trend towards one approach or another. The example of the textbook series *Zeiten und Menschen* may indicate, however, that the moralising version of the moral response approach, exemplified by the edition for Lower Saxony (ZuM NIE, 2019), is perceived as increasingly problematic. The more recent edition for

North Rhine-Westphalia (ZuM NRW, 2022) not only dedicates four pages to contemporary right-wing extremism, but also combines a discursive moral response approach with analytic and exhibition approaches by guiding students to create a podcast discussing a case of extremist violence. By giving more space to study the topic and to reflect on it, and by refraining from implicitly prescribing a national identity to students, the example corresponds with attitudes of textbook editors and authors who wish to convey a more inclusive image of contemporary society (Chiriac and Spielhaus, 2022).

The problem-solving approach, the implementation of which is made possible by the affordances of the medium, is innovative with respect to both the narrative and the subject position: first, it offers – similarly to the analytic approach, but more consistently – a new perspective by addressing right-wing extremism as a contemporary problem and, thus, looking beyond the question of how it is connected to the Nazi past. This takes into account that approval ratings for neo-Nazi ideology, including the trivialisation of National Socialism, are significantly lower than approval ratings for an ethnocentric attitude (Decker et al., 2022), which, in turn, supports the assumption that the effectiveness of the 'learning from history' paradigm is limited. Second, as players are addressed in multiple roles in which they are required to make political, moral and social choices, the notion of a complex and diverse society is conveyed, in which people have to deal with the, sometimes contradictory, demands of their various roles. Third, it offers a 'we' to players that does not refer to the nation in the same way as *Zeiten und Menschen (Niedersachsen)* (ZuM NIE, 2019), but instead references a group of like-minded friends with diverse backgrounds at school, thus evading the question of who is a member of the nation as an imagined community with a common history. By depicting diversity as a societal norm, it answers criticism directed towards German history textbooks (Niehaus et al., 2015). Furthermore, by detaching Holocaust remembrance from questions of German national identity, the game enables the topic to be broached from multiple points of view, which corresponds with recommendations for history education in a migration society (Georgi et al., 2022). Finally, leaving aside the notion of democracy as a set of abstract principles, institutions and formal processes, it offers a vision of democracy as a way of life in which everybody can take part here and now, but which is also fragile and needs to be defended.

While the problem-solving approach allows a degree of complexity, both in terms of the narrative about right-wing extremism and in terms of the subject position, there are also downsides when compared with the analytic approach. As the topic is conveyed through a story in a game, students may be more likely to acquire accidental rather than systematic knowledge of it. Moreover, one innovative feature of the game, the decoupling of the problem of today's right-wing extremism from the legacy of Nazism, may also be seen critically, as it leaves a gap that may confuse students. Finally, this vision of democracy largely ignores the significance of the legal and institutional democratic framework, for example, when the school magazine team dismisses the possibility of reporting the incident to the headmaster straight away. While in the game, this is certainly a device that assigns an active role to the player and sets the game off, it could be criticised for imposing a certain manner of political activity on the students as players, and not giving them enough options for political action within the democratic framework, including the possibility to refrain from acting at all. In order to open up the narrative design for discussion, it would be crucial, as with any other game used in teaching, to reflect with students on the game, and particularly on the roles of the players, either during the interruptions in the episodes or after playing (Garris et al., 2002; Preisinger, 2022).

Conclusion

The study revealed that a number of history textbooks have made an effort to depict today's right-wing extremism as a complex phenomenon, and to analyse its connection to the Nazi past, while others still adhere to the 'learning from history' paradigm that has a tendency to simplify the topic. However, when history textbooks do address the topic, their structure supports this paradigm even if the topic is approached in an analytical way: the location of the topic at the end of chapters about National Socialism, a commonality of almost all the books examined, still draws a close link between the Nazi past and contemporary right-wing extremism. This decision to lock the problem away in the chapter about the Nazi past impedes it from being embedded and understood in the context of contemporary history, and contributes, in addition, to a 'polished' narrative about unified Germany. While links to the present can certainly be made when teaching about the Nazi era, the problem of contemporary right-wing extremism should be integrated into a more critical history of unified Germany in order to

approach the topic of nation building and how migration society has developed since 1989 with more analytical distance (Georgi et al., 2022; Warda and Poutrus, 2023).

As has been emphasised in extant research, the contribution of history education to the prevention of right-wing extremism is important, but limited. The strength of the game *Hidden Codes* in this respect is to create a problem space (McCall, 2012) in which players have to focus on their possible contribution to the defence of democracy, and which offers players complex and empowering subject positions. As it is produced by an organisation committed to the legacy of Anne Frank, it is obvious to the players that it also encourages them to draw lessons for today's society from the Nazi past. It is reasonable to assume that students may interact differently with a game that does not, unlike standard approaches, prescribe or ignore their identities as citizens of a diverse migration society (Eckmann and Stevick, 2017; Georgi et al., 2022). However, whether games such as *Hidden Codes* can open up spaces where discussions can take place regarding the relevance of the problem for the personal lives of students, or for society as a whole, needs to be investigated by empirical research that looks not only at the game itself, but at the gameplay by students.

Data and materials availability statement

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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Appendix A. Textbooks selected for the analysis

Title	State	Year	Publisher
Anno 5	Sachsen	2015	Westermann
Anno 6	Sachsen	2015	Westermann
Anno 5	Sachsen	2022	Westermann
Durchblick Geschichte 3	Nordrhein-Westfalen	2022	Westermann
Das waren Zeiten 2	Berlin/Brandenburg	2018	C.C. Buchner
Das waren Zeiten 4	Niedersachsen	2017	C.C. Buchner
Entdecken und Verstehen 9/10	Berlin/Brandenburg	2018	Cornelsen
Entdecken und Verstehen 3	Niedersachsen	2014	Cornelsen
Entdecken und Verstehen 3	Nordrhein-Westfalen	2015	Cornelsen
Entdecken und Verstehen 8	Sachsen	2022	Cornelsen
Forum Geschichte 9/10	Berlin/Brandenburg	2018	Cornelsen
Forum Geschichte 9/10	Niedersachsen	2017	Cornelsen
Forum Geschichte 3	Nordrhein-Westfalen	2021	Cornelsen
Forum Geschichte 4	Nordrhein-Westfalen	2022	Cornelsen
Forum Geschichte 9	Sachsen	2022	Cornelsen
Forum Geschichte 10	Sachsen	2023	Cornelsen
Geschichte entdecken 3	Nordrhein-Westfalen	2023	C.C. Buchner
Geschichte entdecken 4	Nordrhein-Westfalen	2023	C.C. Buchner
Geschichte und Geschehen 9/10	Berlin/Brandenburg	2018	Klett
Geschichte und Geschehen 5/6	Niedersachsen	2017	Klett
Geschichte und Geschehen 3	Nordrhein-Westfalen	2021	Klett
Geschichte und Geschehen 4	Nordrhein-Westfalen	2022	Klett
Geschichte und Geschehen 5	Sachsen	2016	Klett
Geschichte und Geschehen 6	Sachsen	2017	Klett
Horizonte 9	Berlin/Brandenburg	2018	Westermann
Horizonte 10	Berlin/Brandenburg	2018	Westermann
Horizonte 3	Nordrhein-Westfalen	2021	Westermann
Horizonte 4	Nordrhein-Westfalen		Westermann
Die Reise in die Vergangenheit 9/10	Berlin/Brandenburg	2018	Westermann
Die Reise in die Vergangenheit 3	Nordrhein-Westfalen	2014	Westermann
Die Reise in die Vergangenheit 8	Sachsen	2021	Westermann
Die Reise in die Vergangenheit 9	Sachsen	2022	Westermann
Zeit für Geschichte 9/10	Niedersachsen	2017	Westermann
Zeitreise 9/10	Berlin/Brandenburg	2018	Klett
Zeitreise 3	Nordrhein-Westfalen	2019	Klett
Zeitreise 8	Sachsen	2022	Klett
Zeitreise 9	Sachsen	2023	Klett
Zeiten und Menschen 4	Niedersachsen	2019	Westermann
Zeiten und Menschen 3	Nordrhein-Westfalen	2022	Westermann
Zeiten und Menschen 4	Nordrhein-Westfalen	2023	Westermann