



The American Jewish Committee

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June 8, 2005

CLASSROOM CHALLENGES TO COMBATING ANTISEMITISM
Side event, OSCE Conference in Cordoba

Thank you, Kathrin, for inviting me to present an overview of the challenges inherent in today's classrooms when teaching the Holocaust and combating contemporary trends in antisemitism. The report by ODIHR is an important achievement in this area. It gives us the first comprehensive overview of educational activities on the Holocaust in the OSCE region, together with recommendations for ways in which to keep the Holocaust relevant to our educational systems. In addition, it outlines an array of approaches educators have begun developing the past three years to deal with the persistent problem of antisemitism.

Teaching history is a complex task. It requires teachers to transmit national identity, while incorporating other national perspectives and often contradictory personal narratives. This takes place against a background of rapid shifts in the evaluation of contemporary history, due to developments such as the collapse of the Soviet empire, the expansion of the European Union, the increasing globalization of production, and patterns of migration.

These trends have had an unexpectedly strong impact on our understanding of the Holocaust. The political restructuring in the OSCE region has ignited heated debates among scholars and in public discourse on our concepts of victimhood, responsibility, guilt, and collaboration. Even the definition of the Holocaust as a state-driven extermination of the Jewish people is under discussion, as other victim groups demand inclusion under the term Holocaust.

Antisemitism – which was long considered to be yet another form of racism - is also being regarded in a new light. Hatred toward Jews is now being treated by intergovernmental organizations such as the OSCE and the EU as a form of hatred requiring distinct treatment specific to the phenomenon. The OSCE Berlin declaration last year declared that the new forms and expressions of antisemitism we are witnessing pose a threat to democracy, the values of civilization and to security in the OSCE region and beyond.

The result of these profound political and social changes is that we are reevaluating the history of the Holocaust through a new prism. Accusing the Jews of inventing the Holocaust now seems as ingrained in the ideology of certain extremist circles as is their belief in the authenticity of the sham document of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. Comparing Holocaust victims to civilian victims of World War II has become commonplace discourse. Victims of communism are demanding parity with Holocaust victims ever more frequently. Lines between perpetrators and victims are sometimes becoming blurred in discussions about historical memory. The sensitive issue of collaboration is only now starting to be examined in more detail.

Meanwhile, acts of antisemitism have reached new post-WWII levels the past five years in many countries throughout the OSCE region. Antisemitic myths have spilled over so strongly into the Arab and Turkish- speaking world, also in Europe, that the existence of the Holocaust and the state of Israel are sometimes treated as Jewish fabrications. The internet, satellite television and cell phones and other forms of mass communication have created unprecedented access to the antisemitic concepts that are an integral component of right-wing extremist propaganda. The direct comparisons of behavior of democratically elected Israeli officials to those of officials in the authoritarian Nazi regime, once voiced chiefly by left wing intellectuals, are beginning to enjoy wide acceptance, according to some recent opinion polls. Abstruse theories about Jews allegedly orchestrating the rise of communism are cited by public figures. The two elements that sustain most of these myths and stereotypes cut across the political spectrum: criticism of Israel that crosses the line to antisemitism and conspiracy myths that assign blame to the Jews for most of the wrongs in the world.

The sweeping changes this is prompting in the nature of antisemitism today are having a strong impact on classrooms throughout the OSCE region. In order to effect changes there, curricula need to be rewritten, the attitudes of teachers, administrators and parents need to be addressed, teachers and youth leaders need to be trained, and society needs to start an honest reckoning with the popularity of antisemitic conspiracy theories.

In Germany, a group of educators and NGO representatives began meeting at the AJC Berlin office about four years ago to delve more deeply into the problem of antisemitism inside and outside the classroom. Since then, this group of about 40 experts has met on a regular basis to exchange ideas and try out new concepts. Last year, shortly before the OSCE conference in Berlin, the Task Force Education on Antisemitism held a three-day European workshop, inviting representatives from five other countries. Many of the ideas and concepts that have evolved from the regular meetings of the Task Force, as well as from the European workshop, are part of the ODIHR report, which was written by a team led by education specialist Hanne Thoma, a long-time member of the Task Force and the co-organizer of the European workshop. The report also includes the result of in-depth research into best practices in four OSCE countries.

Four main areas are targeted in the ODIHR report to help educators to combat antisemitism:

- 1) Holocaust education should focus more strongly on the overriding element of antisemitism, looking both at its development in Nazi ideology, as well as its historical roots in European history. This needs to be done in a manner mindful of the changing ethnic and religious composition of the student body in classrooms throughout the OSCE region. This means that teachers need to find bridges to the discrimination and persecution of other ethnic and religious groups, while helping students understand the distinctiveness of antisemitism. Teachers need ongoing training to help them to confront a growing culture of Holocaust denial and trivialization, which is imbedded in right-wing ideology as well as in extremist Islamic theology. These ideas are more accessible than ever to students due to the internet.

- 2) Contemporary expressions of antisemitism, such as conspiracy theories, exaggerated criticism of Israel and clichés about Jews gaining currency in the Muslim world, should be confronted directly. Some of the ways in which educators have begun to do this involve role-playing and other interactive educational approaches that help students to understand the dangers of simplifying solutions to complicated problems. This is particularly important to help to prevent the spread of conspiracy theories and exaggerated criticism of Israel from moving from the margins to the center of society.
- 3) Students should learn more about the full historical sweep of Jewish history and contemporary Jewish culture. The propensity to portray the Jews primarily as victims of the Holocaust robs students of the ability to understand more fully the integral role of Jews and Jewish culture in each country's national history.
- 4) It is critical to teach pupils about the history of modern-day Israel and the sources of the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a balanced and fair manner. Little is taught at all currently about Israel, which allows stereotypes to flourish about the interchangeability of Jews and Israel as well as about the nature of Zionism.

A certain degree of antisemitic stereotypes are difficult to combat. For this reason, the report emphasizes the value of educators targeting those outside the circle of hardcore ideologists and their sympathizers. It is important to narrow the space in which antisemites are able to express their opinions with impunity. This means that attitude changes and prevention are important educational strategies, particularly for those at risk of succumbing to the simplicity of antisemitism as an explanation for all problems. This strategy can be even more successful if ethnic groups that are often on the margins of society, such as those living in districts primarily inhabited by immigrants, are more accepted by mainstream society.

Antisemitism is not only a problem of youth. The report points out the importance of targeting teachers, parents and others in the social sphere of young people to help recognize patterns of antisemitism, in order to better combat such manifestations. While Jewish organizations can be

important partners, the success of such cooperation is dependent in good part on the degree to which Jews and Jewish organizations are integrated into mainstream society.

Another tool of growing importance is the ability to analyze critically information in the media and on the Internet. As a longtime journalist, I know only too well the dangers of one-sided reports and inaccurate information. Few young people are trained to recognize bias and stereotypes that are often transmitted – consciously or unconsciously – in the media. Without the critical faculty of the reader to recognize bias, antisemitic stereotypes can be all too easily transported in the media and on the Internet. Furthermore, intensive exposure to television can prompt young people to overestimate their knowledge of the Holocaust and Jewish affairs, if they are not given a solid framework for information they receive on television in a piecemeal fashion.

The ODIHR report warns that neither human rights education nor tolerance education can be the solution to combating antisemitism. Instead, teachers need to address these age-old stereotypes in a much more specific manner, confronting stereotypes directly, in part through teaching more about Jewish life and modern-day Israel. Given the ever more heterogeneous nature of classrooms, this means that no one approach will be the suitable response for all students.

The list of expectations of teachers and school systems is long. The question is, how many of these ideas and concepts can be realistically integrated into existing school curricula? We know that throughout the OSCE region, even the Holocaust is mentioned only briefly, if at all, in many history classes. The history of antisemitism, elements of Jewish history, the achievements of Jewish citizens, contemporary Jewish life and the history of modern Israel are discussed rarely, if at all, in most classrooms.

An ongoing focus of national governments on combating antisemitism can do much to prompt more interest among educators and educational authorities to integrate these subjects into the curricula. The growing understanding that antisemitism is a threat to the fabric of democracy is good reason for the subject to be accorded more attention in the classroom. Even more fundamental is the necessity for widespread teacher training, to help teachers gain teaching tools and knowledge to deal with the issue more effectively. Curricula must be urgently developed, specific to national

contexts. NGOs working on the issue should work more closely with school administrations and governments to help develop the necessary programs and resource materials.

The recommendations in this report by ODIHR are ambitious but not unrealistic. However, it will take more financial resources than is currently given to the fight against antisemitism. We need more teacher training, curricula, and resource materials to help schools to deal with antisemitism. This should be supported by research, evaluation and the exchange of best practices to ensure the quality of programs to counter antisemitism. ODIHR itself also needs more resources to support the development of such programs. With the commitment of national governments, in a partnership with Jewish and non-Jewish NGOs, I am convinced that it is possible to start countering antisemitism among the young in a much more systematic manner. The lessons of antisemitism flourishing unchecked remain painfully present to us. With the flare-up of antisemitism in the past few years, it has become clear that it is necessary to commit the necessary resources to stop antisemitism from becoming entrenched once again. The OSCE has demonstrated leadership in bringing this issue to public attention the past two years. Now, it is time for ODIHR and the OSCE member nations to conceive and implement the programs that can counter antisemitism.