Teaching about Anti-Semitism through Holocaust Education

Teaching Aid

WORDS INTO ACTION
TO ADDRESS ANTI-SEMITISM

OSCE ODIHR
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Teaching about Anti-Semitism through Holocaust Education

Holocaust Education is teaching and learning about the genocide of the Jewish people, alongside the persecution and murder of other groups, by Nazi Germany and its collaborators during World War II. Holocaust education is taught intensively within the school curricula in many countries. This is a welcome and important development, but it is not an adequate substitute for education about anti-Semitism. If anti-Semitism is exclusively addressed through Holocaust education, students might conclude that anti-Semitism is not an issue today or misconceive its contemporary forms. Teachers must keep in mind that education about the Holocaust cannot ensure the prevention of contemporary anti-Semitism, which may be based on different ideological assumptions and manifest itself in different contexts.

At the same time, it is appropriate and necessary to incorporate lessons about anti-Semitism into teaching about the Holocaust because it is fundamental to understanding the context in which discrimination, exclusion and, ultimately, the destruction of European Jews took place. Stereotypes that fed ideologies that culminated in the Holocaust still exist today. Teaching this topic can also serve as an entry point to consider contemporary anti-Semitism, racism and other human rights issues. Traditional Holocaust education can inadvertently fuel anti-Semitism, so care is needed in planning these lessons.

This teaching aid will provide guidance on how to confront contemporary anti-Semitism through Holocaust education. With the help of this aid, teachers will be able to:

- Understand how a racist and anti-Semitic ideology informed the development of the Holocaust; and
- Recognize anti-Semitism and other forms of hatred in today’s world.

Background

Anti-Semitism was not invented by the Nazis, and it did not end with them. The racial ideology that characterized the Nazi philosophy emerged decades earlier in the late nineteenth century, drawing on previous forms of Christian anti-Jewish sentiment while incorporating new elements. The term “anti-Semitism” was popularized in the 1870’s by Wilhelm Marr, a German political agitator and journalist, at a time when pseudo-scientific theories of racial superiority and inferiority emerged. The term was created specifically to define the hatred of Jews as a “race”, as opposed to a religion.\(^2\)

Many of the stereotypes and myths about Jews employed by the Nazis in the lead up to the Holocaust to promote support for their “Final Solution” were recycled from the medieval period, and myths from both the medieval and modern periods still resonate today in contemporary anti-Semitic propaganda.\(^3\) For a description of the most common anti-Semitic myths and stereotypes, see ODIHR teaching aid no. 3, “Addressing Anti-Semitic Stereotypes and Prejudice.”\(^4\)

Some of these same myths are recycled again now. Examples include the myth of blood libel, which emerged in the Middle Ages and is still visible today in images found in churches throughout Europe.\(^5\) Such imagery was frequently recreated in Nazi pamphlets, and is evident in modern-day forms of anti-Semitic propaganda.

The myth of Jewish world domination is another recurring theme in contemporary anti-Semitism and can be traced back decades before the Holocaust. This myth is interconnected with others, such as those claiming that Jewish people

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\(^2\) The etymology of the term “anti-Semitism” itself has led to misunderstandings about whether it encompasses bias against other groups who are also described as “Semitic”. Anti-Semitism does not refer to hatred of speakers of Semitic languages. Common usage of the term anti-Semitism has referred only to a negative perception of the Jewish people, actions motivated by bias or hatred and ideologies that sustain it.

\(^3\) The “Final Solution” refers to the Nazi plan to bring about the mass extermination of Jews in Europe. For more information, see: Holocaust Encyclopedia, “Final Solution: Overview”. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/final-solution-overview>.


control the banks, the media and politics

Images can be effective in demonstrating how anti-Semitic myths manifest both in the past and in the present.

However, they are not necessarily recommended for the classroom. Supervision and support must be provided to students asked to engage in independent research to find contemporary examples of old myths, since they risk encountering very dangerous websites that may well reinforce old stereotypes.

At the same time, educational policy and practice needs to allow space for teachers to address contemporary manifestations of anti-Semitism in the classroom. According to a study on anti-Semitism in Germany, commissioned by the German Parliament, Holocaust education is inadvertently fuelling anti-Semitism in Germany. The study warns that stereotypes can be conveyed by one-sided presentations of Jews as victims and accounts of Nazi propaganda that are not presented carefully. Similarly, despite the fact that Holocaust education is a mandatory part of the official school curriculum, France has been the location of several violent anti-Semitic attacks since 2012, while a 2015 survey found that 59 per cent of French people think that members of the Jewish community are at least partially responsible for anti-Semitism.

Education about the Holocaust should be an opportunity to sensitize students to the dangers of stereotypes and prejudice and to confront learners with the possible consequences of anti-Semitism, intolerance and racism. It can also highlight difficult moral questions and the consequences of choices made by individuals in the face of discrimination.

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and persecution in an environment of war. Educating students about how these stereotypes were weaponized into the murder of six million Jews in the Holocaust can encourage learners to speak out and overcome indifference in situations where Jews and others face discrimination today.

Education about the Holocaust is highly relevant in the context of efforts to promote and uphold human rights in general. For example, teaching and learning about the Holocaust:

- demonstrates the fragility of all societies and of the institutions set up to protect the security and rights of everyone, and shows how these institutions can be turned against one segment of society;
- highlights aspects of human behaviour that affect all societies, such as susceptibility to scapegoating and the role of fear, peer pressure, greed and resentment in social and political relations;
- demonstrates the danger of prejudice, discrimination and dehumanization;
- deepens reflections on the power of extremist ideologies, propaganda and hate speech; and
- draws attention to international institutions and norms that were developed in reaction to crimes perpetrated during World War II.\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{10} Detailed learning objectives pertaining to education about the Holocaust can be found in \textit{Education about the Holocaust and preventing genocide: A policy guide} (Paris: UNESCO, 2017), <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000248071>.
Classroom Strategies for Initiating Difficult Conversations, Including about Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust

Activity:

Glossary board
Explain to the class that for each lesson a glossary will be developed to help students explore complex topics. Starting with four key terms, guide the class to come up with their own words to describe how to conduct the discussion. The following are some sample words with target answers:
• Respectful: feeling or showing deference;
• Attentive: paying close attention to something;
• Honest: free of deceit and untruthfulness; sincere; and
• Perspective: a particular attitude toward or way of regarding something; a point of view.

Rules of engagement
Underscore that, because the class will be discussing difficult subjects, it is important that everyone’s opinion is heard. To make this happen, it is necessary to set up rules of engagement to support and protect students as they navigate thorny issues during their discussions.

Write “Rules of Engagement” on the board and ask students to come up with the rules. Ask them to consider how they would like to be heard by their classmates, and how they would like to be spoken to. Start by writing several examples on the board and then invite students to add to the list.

Target answers: student responses should include or be similar to the following:
• Be a respectful and attentive listener;
• Use respectful speech;
• Give each discussion participant equal time to speak (“mic sharing”);
• Be honest and have honest intentions;
• Allow others to keep or change their perspectives; and
• Have the intention to create trust and learn from each other, rather than discredit others.

Keep the rules of engagement posted and visually accessible throughout the discussion.

DISCUSS PATTERNS OF STEREOTYPING BEFORE DISCUSSING SPECIFIC STEREOTYPES

Teachers should hold discussions about general patterns of stereotyping as an entry point for raising awareness about specific stereotypes, including anti-Semitism. This may involve using examples of types of stereotypes and related patterns to guide students to understanding the negative impact of stereotyping and the (often attractive) simplified approach to complex issues that it encourages and enables, as typified by the Holocaust.10

What to do if ...?

...a student says, “Why are you always speaking about the Jews? Why not speak about the Rwandan genocide, slavery, persecution of the Roma, the Gulag, etc.?”

The educational opportunity presented by the Holocaust to teach about anti-Semitism can be utilized most effectively by being proactive rather than reactive. In approaching the topic in class, consider your students’ interests, strengths and weaknesses, and individual backgrounds. This will increase the effectiveness of the lesson in driving home the dangers of anti-Semitism, and preempt resistance from students to engaging in the topic of Jews and the Holocaust.

Explain the magnitude of the Holocaust with reference to its impact on international human rights law. Highlight that it led to the adoption of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide – a cornerstone of international law concerning human rights and genocide. This may be a good time to review or learn about the

Caution! Use stereotypical images carefully

Teachers must exercise caution if they choose to use anti-Semitic images and pictures in Holocaust education, and more broadly. They must be aware that brains process images differently from words, and that the images are likely to become imprinted in the students’ minds, particularly if the students were previously unfamiliar with the images.

When using images, choose material with care, following a recommended methodology, such as provided by the Teaching Tolerance project, to enable students to understand how images can distort reality.

Learn more about the Teaching Tolerance project of the Southern Poverty Law Center here: <https://www.splcenter.org/teaching-tolerance> and <https://www.tolerance.org/>.

Primary sources are first-hand accounts of an event, and can be used to help drive home the reality of the Holocaust. Primary sources include photographs, interviews and personal narratives. In a multicultural classroom, it can be useful to introduce historical documents that refer to the countries of origin of students’ families. Nazi Germany’s reach extended quite far, and stories of resistance and righteousness could inspire students with positive values. Search by country in the Yad Vashem database of Righteous Among the Nations for role models of all backgrounds: <https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous.html>.

Convention and to discuss other genocides such as the Rwandan or Cambodian genocides.¹²

For example, students may first need to see that a subject that is of personal significance to them, their identity or heritage (such as genocide, colonization, slavery or discrimination) is recognized within the classroom as a topic worthy of memory transmission, before being open to focusing on anti-Semitism as a phenomenon deserving specific attention. There are many different entry points that a teacher can take to introduce the Holocaust and to assist students in understanding how anti-Semitism operated before and during this period. For example, a teacher can do the following:

• Give students the space to speak about historical events that they personally find important. Even if these events are not connected to World War II or the Holocaust, this will give them a chance to feel recognized and perhaps to find parallels with the early stages of Nazi anti-Jewish policy.

• Review some key terms to secure students’ understanding of the conceptual framework, including words like “scapegoat,” “stereotyping,” “prejudice” and “discrimination.” Invite students to discuss these in small groups and to either formulate a definition of each term or to transcribe their ideas onto a mind-map. Next, explore these ideas as a class. Finally, encourage students to provide concrete examples from the past and the present that help to illustrate these terms. As a class, evaluate how valid the examples are in capturing what the terms mean and what they refer to. Be sure to include some examples of contemporary anti-Semitism in case the students do not offer any themselves, such as a recent hate crime in which Jewish property or people were attacked.¹³

• If you have undergone training on the Holocaust, consider developing a lesson on one of the pillars of the Nazi’s racist


¹³ For examples of recent hate crimes committed in your country or region, refer to the OSCE/ODIHR Hate Crime Reporting website: <http://hatecrime.osce.org/>.
Bias refers to an “inclination or prejudice for or against one person or group, especially in a way considered to be unfair.”

Discrimination is the “unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people”.

Source: Concise Oxford English Dictionary, ninth edition

Stereotype refers to an “oversimplified image of a certain group of people.”

Prejudice is “a feeling about a group of people or an individual within a group that is based on a stereotype.”

Source: Addressing Anti-Semitism Through Education: Guidelines for Policymakers, p. 41.

Scapegoat is “a person who is blamed for the wrongdoings, or faults of others, especially for reasons of expediency.”

Source: Oxford English Dictionary Online

For teaching resources on pre-war Jewish communities in Europe, see the following syllabus prepared by Yad Vashem: <https://www.yadvashem.org/education/online-courses/prewar.html>.

A resource pack created by the United Kingdom’s Holocaust Education Trust that includes photographs for classroom lessons is available for download here: <https://www.tes.com/en-ie/teaching-resource/pre-war-jewish-life-6163128>.

ideology, such as National Socialism, eugenics or Social Darwinism. This should be approached not as a lesson on Jewish victimhood, but as a lesson in how a racist ideology can serve a political aim. This should help students become more receptive to empathizing with the Jewish people for the anti-Semitism they faced before, during and after the Holocaust. Keep in mind that focusing on the perpetrators can detach students from the victims and their experience. It is important to humanize victims taking a victim-centred approach.

...a student asks, “Why can’t the Jews just get over it and move on? They are using the Holocaust to hide the real power they have today.”?

It can be difficult for those who have never been victimized to appreciate the long-term impact that the Holocaust has had on Jewish families and communities, their demographics and their collective psyche. For students, the Holocaust can feel very far back in history, but for the Jewish people, it is still a significant part of the living memory of survivors’ families, their children and grandchildren. It can be helpful to explore the presence and contributions of Jewish communities in your country/region prior to the Holocaust, with an emphasis on humanizing their experiences, to help students appreciate what was lost in their decimation.

The ODIHR teaching aid no. 1, “Increasing Knowledge About Jews and Judaism” provides a complementary resource to help teachers lead students to a better understanding of Jewish communities around the world and their diversity. It is also worthwhile considering a visit to the local Jewish museum for a guided tour that highlights Jewish life as an integral part of your town’s history, or to read, listen or watch testimonials of Holocaust survivors.

The second part of the statement above is likely rooted in stereotypes about the Jewish people (see ODIHR teaching aid

To provide contemporary relevance to the topic of human rights alongside examples from World War II, see the teaching resources at Teach Human Rights: <http://www.teachhumanrights.com/genocide.html> and the RFK Human Rights’ Defenders Curriculum: <https://rfkhumanrights.org/work/teaching-human-rights>.

Teaching resources on Nazi and contemporary propaganda are available at:
• United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: <https://www.ushmm.org/educators/lesson-plans/redefining-how-we-teach-propaganda>
• Mind over Media: <https://propaganda.mediaeducationlab.com/teachers/>
• Echoes and Reflections: <http://echoesandreflections.org/unit-2-antisemitism/>
• Berlin Museum of Film and Television: <https://www.deutsche-kinemathek.de/en>

no. 3, “Addressing Anti-Semitic Stereotypes and Prejudice”) and could be questioned further to uncover the source of the idea. It could be interesting to explain that “powerful” was a stereotype actively promoted in Nazi propaganda to stir up hostility against the Jewish people. In hindsight, this stereotype was clearly a falsehood.

...a student says, “The Germans must have been stupid to just do what Hitler told them!”?

Explore with students the concept of propaganda:14

• How can it be defined?
• How does it function?
• Why are people vulnerable to it?
• In what ways does propaganda function in the world today?
• How can we spot it and be critical of it?
• What effect does propaganda have on our societies?

The Nazis were particularly skilled in generating and spreading anti-Semitic and other types

Facing History and Ourselves: <https://www.facinghistory.org/topics/antisemitism-religious-intolerance> provides teachers with detailed lessons on addressing anti-Semitism through and within education. There is a specific unit on the different forms of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust that may be useful to explain the variation of Jewish experiences in this time:


See the teaching resource on “Dilemmas, Choices and Responses during the Holocaust” from the United Kingdom’s Holocaust Education Trust: <https://www.tes.com/member/HolocaustEducationalTrust>. Complement this by providing examples of the dilemmas people experience when faced with prejudice and discrimination today, being sure to include anti-Semitic scenarios alongside other forms of intolerance.

Socialism took hold, it is also useful to provide a more empowering narrative of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust. This can help counter the idea that Jewish people are profiting from their victimhood and, therefore, not “getting over it”. Students might not have considered Jews as human rights defenders or civic activists, either during World War II or in the present day, and Jewish individuals or groups can be included alongside examples of human rights defenders from other countries and struggles in the world.

In addition to the question of resistance, students can also explore the different roles that people play in situations that compromise human rights, including leaders, bystanders, victims and perpetrators. What were and are the dilemmas that different actors faced, the choices available to them and the considerations they made when deciding whether or not to take a stand?

Der Stürmer was at the heart of their propaganda machine, operating from 1923 to 1945. Choose some examples from the newspapers of the time, from Germany or another country, and analyse them with students, one by one, taking care to avoid perpetuating stereotypes.

- What is the message saying?
- What is its purpose?
- What stereotypes does it apply?

- How is this propaganda dangerous?
- Can these types of messages still be found today?
- What kinds of groups or individuals are promoting such messages and for what purpose?

Neither anti-Semitism nor the history of the Jews can be reduced to the Holocaust. In addition to exploring the vitality of Jewish communities across Europe before National Socialism took hold, it is also useful to provide a more empowering narrative of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust. This can help counter the idea that Jewish people are profiting from their victimhood and, therefore, not “getting over it”. Students might not have considered Jews as human rights defenders or civic activists, either during World War II or in the present day, and Jewish individuals or groups can be included alongside examples of human rights defenders from other countries and struggles in the world.

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Primary source materials on the Holocaust can be found in the Yad Vashem database of the Righteous Among the Nations, see: https://righteous.yadvashem.org/index.html.


A teaching resource pack for lessons on “Pre-war Jewish Life” can be downloaded here: www.tes.com/en-ie/teaching-resource/pre-war-jewish-life-6163128.

The online portal Virtual Shtetl documents the history of Jewish communities, Jewish social life, religion, tradition, education, economy and culture in Eastern and Central Europe, with information on over 1,900 cities, towns and villages, spanning the territories of today’s Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, Latvia, Estonia, Russia and Moldova: www.shtetl.org.pl

For an online multimedia guide to the Polish capital as seen through the history of its Jewish residents: http://warsze.polin.pl/en


For resource packs on Jewish resistance, see:

Teaching resources on Nazi and contemporary propaganda are available at:
• “Why Propaganda Education Matters”, Mind Over Media, 

• “Antisemitism”, Echoes and Reflections, 
  http://echoesandreflections.org/unit-2-antisemitism.

Resources for teaching on the contemporary relevance of human rights:
• “To Repair the World: Becoming a Human Rights Defender”, AFT Human Rights Resources, 

• Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights organization gives information about human rights and its work, here: 
  https://rfkhumanrights.org/work.

• “A World Made New: Human Rights After the Holocaust”, Facing History, 

For more advice on teaching about human behaviour during the Holocaust, see: “Holocaust and Human Behavior”, Facing History, 