



Addressing Holocaust Denial, Distortion and Trivialization

*Teaching
Aid*

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Addressing Holocaust Denial, Distortion and Trivialization

Teachers in the OSCE region have reported encountering anti-Semitic ideas when teaching about the Holocaust.¹ Anti-Semitism exists today as prejudice in which Jews are confronted with hostility and treated as inhuman, or as an out-group. It can be manifested in individuals as attitudes, in culture and various forms of expression.² Anti-Semitic sentiments can fuel resistance to the topic of the Holocaust and may manifest as denial, distortion or trivialization of historical facts.

Sometimes, for example, where the Holocaust is not explored fully as part of the school curriculum, young people may distort the Holocaust in ignorance of the historical facts, or they may deny it as a form of adolescent provocation or rejection of an established narrative. Whatever lies behind Holocaust denial and distortion, it is often accompanied by or promotes classic anti-Semitic themes, such as accusations of greed, power, deceptiveness and criminality.

The purpose of this teaching aid is to provide a better understanding of these expressions of anti-Semitism and to support teachers in countering the following:

- resistance to lessons about and from the Holocaust;
- misinformation about the Holocaust among students; and
- incongruous or flawed parallels made between what the Jews experienced during the Holocaust and how other groups are suffering or have suffered.

¹ M. Eckmann, S. Doyle and J. Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, J. (eds.), *Research in Teaching and Learning About the Holocaust: A Dialogue Beyond Borders* (Berlin: Metropole Verlag, 2017), p. 233, <https://holocaustremembrance.com/sites/default/files/research_in_teaching_and_learning_about_the_holocaust_web.pdf>.

² *Addressing Anti-Semitism Through Education: Guidelines for Policymakers* (Warsaw: OSCE/ODIHR, 2018), p. 12, <<https://www.osce.org/odihr/383089>>.

In 2013, the member countries of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) agreed on a Working Definition of Holocaust Denial and Distortion:

“Holocaust denial is discourse and propaganda that deny the historical reality and the extent of the extermination of the Jews by the Nazis and their accomplices during World War II, known as the Holocaust or the Shoah. Holocaust denial refers specifically to any attempt to claim that the Holocaust/Shoah did not take place.

Holocaust denial may include publicly denying or calling into doubt the use of principal mechanisms of destruction (such as gas chambers, mass shooting, starvation and torture) or the intentionality of the genocide of the Jewish people.

Holocaust denial in its various forms is an expression of antisemitism. The attempt to deny the gen-

ocide of the Jews is an effort to exonerate National Socialism and antisemitism from guilt or responsibility in the genocide of the Jewish people. Forms of Holocaust denial also include blaming the Jews for either exaggerating or creating the Shoah for political or financial gain as if the Shoah itself was the result of a conspiracy plotted by the Jews. In this, the goal is to make the Jews culpable and antisemitism once again legitimate.

The goals of Holocaust denial often are the rehabilitation of an explicit antisemitism and the promotion of political ideologies and conditions suitable for the advent of the very type of event it denies.”

SOURCE: For the full definition see IHRA’s “Working Definition of Holocaust Denial and Distortion”, adopted on 10 October, 2013, at: <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/working-definition-holocaust-denial-and-distortion>

Background

The following terms are frequently used to describe the methods of Holocaust denial or distortion:

- **Historical revisionism:** advocating a review of a certain interpretation of historical events based on new evidence or information.³
- **Historical “negationism” or denial:** denying that an event took place, or downplaying its scale and impact.⁴

During World War II, the Nazis and their allies started to promote the idea that the genocide of Jews was not happening, that the gas chambers did not exist and that the number of Jewish victims was much lower than six million. This type of Holocaust denial or “negationism” continues today, and aims to present the Nazi regime and its collaborators in a favourable light and erase any memory of the horrors that occurred.

The process of coming to terms with the Holocaust has, in some countries, resulted in what has been defined as “secondary anti-Semitism”, which refers to the notion that the very presence of Jews reminds others of the Holocaust and thereby evokes feelings of guilt about it, for which Jews are blamed.⁵ Secondary antisemitism allows speakers to express anti-Semitic sentiments indirectly and is usually considered a reaction to

³ Ronald J. Berger, *Fathoming the Holocaust: A Social Problems Approach* (Aldine Transaction, 2002), p. 154.

⁴ Some historians of the Holocaust have noted that Holocaust denial often masquerades as revisionism – a legitimate form of historical critique. See: Omer Bartov, “Introduction” in Omer Bartov (ed.), *The Holocaust: Origins, Implementation, and Aftermath* (Routledge, 2000), pp. 10-12.

⁵ Peter Schönbach, *Reaktionen auf die antisemitische Welle im Winter 1959/60* (Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1961), p. 80.

feelings of guilt that challenge one's sense of a positive national identity.

Furthermore, processes of historical revisionism can sometimes omit or manipulate facts in order to serve certain narratives of national identity that are more psychologically comfortable or politically expedient. However, denying that there were those who collaborated with the Nazis is a distortion of the facts and dishonours the memory of the six million Jews who were killed during the Holocaust.

In many cases, the aim of Holocaust denial is to challenge the history of Jewish people's

suffering during the war. This is also the aim of efforts to trivialize what happened. It can be motivated by hatred of Jews or victimhood competition, and builds on the claim that the Holocaust was invented or exaggerated by Jews as part of a plot to advance Jewish interests. There are conspiracy theories circulating that claim that the "hoax" of the Holocaust was created to benefit or advance the interests of the state of Israel, an idea often instrumentalized within anti-Zionist discourse. Holocaust deniers depend on, and reinforce, anti-Semitic ideas.

Holocaust denial takes many forms and, in some cases, can be seen as part of an "anti-

"The primary motivation for most deniers is anti-Semitism, and for them the Holocaust is an infuriatingly inconvenient fact of history."
Source: Walter Reich, "Erasing the Holocaust", The New York Times, 11 July 1993.

For a timeline of Holocaust denial, see: "Holocaust Denial: Key Dates", United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <<https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10008003>>.

establishment" movement that aims to mobilize youth through popular culture. For example, a French "comedian" has used a narrative whereby Jews and Israel are depicted as the devil manipulating the "system", and who must be resisted. This is a common and long-standing anti-Semitic trope.⁶ Adherence to these ideas is symbolized by a hand gesture called

For the main sources of information about the Holocaust used during the trials of Nazi perpetrators after the war, see: "Evidence from the Holocaust", United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/combating-holocaust-denial-evidence-of-the-holocaust-presented-at-nuremberg?series=20792>

⁶ These actions led to convictions in Belgium in relation to anti-Semitic speech and in France in relation to incitement to racial hatred under the 1990 Gayssot Act.

the “quenelle”, which is circulated in photos through social media and often in front of Holocaust memorial or Jewish religious sites.⁷

The murder of six million Jews during the Holocaust is the most widely documented genocide in history. During the course of the Holocaust, the Nazis and their allies kept meticulous records, including hundreds of millions of pages of documentation that outlined the planning and execution of this atrocity. There is also a vast amount of film and photographic documentation of the aftermath of the Holocaust, including the liberation of the concentration camps, mass graves being uncovered, innumerable eyewitness accounts and testimonials from Holocaust survivors.

Despite this extensive documentation, Holocaust denial persists today. It is frequently used to attract new followers to neo-Nazi or other extremist movements. It is important to note that, while there is no consensus in the OSCE

as to whether speech should be criminalized, denial of the Holocaust is a criminal offence in several OSCE participating States.⁸

Effective education about the Holocaust should enable students to identify and reject messages of denial and distortion of historical facts. Educators should discuss the motivations behind using Holocaust denial as a propaganda tool. This is essential because Holocaust deniers spread falsehoods and misinformation that can appear reasonable to an uninformed reader. It is important

for both educators and students to acquire skills that allow them to articulate concise answers and refute denial claims when they encounter them.

It may be counterproductive in many settings to emphasize victim suffering in an effort to evoke sympathetic reactions and reduce prejudice.⁹ Teachers can help minimize the risk of secondary anti-Semitism by teaching about the Holocaust in a non-accusatory manner and empowering learners to actively address contemporary anti-Semitism.

UN General Assembly Resolution 61/255:

“1. Condemns without any reservation any denial of the Holocaust; 2. Urges all Member States unreservedly to reject any denial of the Holocaust as a historical event, either in full or in part, or any activities to this end.”

SOURCE: UN General Assembly, *Resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly on Holocaust denial*, on 26 January 2007, A/RES/61/255, <<https://www.un.org/en/holocaustremembrance/docs/res61.shtml>>.

⁷ Sometimes called an inverted Nazi salute, this gesture became an international news story in 2013, experiencing a surge in interest on Google, after several high-profile professional athletes used it (see: “Quenelle”, Google Trends, <<https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=2014-01-01%202014-12-31&q=quenelle>>). For media discussion in France, see, for example: “«Quenelle», comment un geste antisémite est devenu un emblème [‘Quenelle’: how an anti-Semitic gesture is becoming an emblem]”, *Le Monde*, 11 December 2013 (in French), <https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2013/12/11/quenelle-comment-un-geste-provocateur-est-devenu-un-embleme_3528089_823448.html>.

⁸ Professor Michael J. Bazyler, *Holocaust Denial Laws and Other Legislation Criminalizing Promotion of Nazism*, Yad Vashem website, <<https://www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/holocaust-antisemitism/holocaust-denial-laws.html>>.

⁹ R. Imhoff and R. Banse, “Ongoing Victim Suffering Increases Prejudice: The Case of Secondary Anti-Semitism”, *Psychological Science*, Vol. 20, No. 12, 2009, pp. 1443-1447.

Classroom Strategies for Addressing Holocaust Denial

Regardless of the nature of Holocaust denial, distortion or trivialization that may surface in the classroom, teachers have a responsibility and opportunity to address this complex topic. Teachers need to strategically consider their pedagogical approach to ensure that it has the potential to transform any resistance to the subject from students into an appreciation for the lessons that this collective trauma in modern history can offer society today.

The following section provides some pedagogical tools to support teachers in their efforts to address this complex issue.

What to do if ... ?

...someone remarks, “But [...] group was just as much a victim of the Nazis as the Jews”?

It is vitally important to acknowledge all victims of the Nazi atrocities. There were many victims, each with their own distinct and terrifying experience. It is helpful to make clear from the beginning who was persecuted under National Socialism and why, and to include reference to the different groups in your teaching about this period.¹⁰

The Nazi ideology was violent and toxic, mostly notably defined by its theory of race in which the German “Aryan” race was considered superior to all others and in need of protection from so-called “biological threats”.

In line with the Nazi “racial theory”, the Roma and Sinti were considered to be racially inferior, and seen as “asocials” (i.e.,

falling outside what Nazis considered to be “normal” society). They were targeted on racial grounds and subjected to internment, deportation, forced labour, shootings and sent to death camps, in what became the Roma genocide. Their fate closely paralleled that of the Jewish people.¹¹

Poles, and the Slavic and so-called Asiatic peoples of the Soviet Union were also considered “racially inferior”. Their intellectual, cultural and political elites were targeted for mass murder. During the winter of 1941-1942, around two-million Soviet prisoners of war died due to the dire conditions they were intentionally being kept under.¹² Under Nazi occupation, Poles were subjected to forced labour, deportation and incarceration in concentration camps.¹³

¹⁰ The workshop “Nazi Ideology and Victims of the Holocaust and Nazi Persecution” led by Dr. William Frederick Meinecke, Jr., available on the website of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, emphasizes the primacy of the Jews as victims of Nazi terror, discusses Nazi intent, and explains how and why additional groups were targeted, <https://www.ushmm.org/educators/online-workshop/guest-lecture-nazi-ideology-and-victims/overview>.

¹¹ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Genocide of European Roma (Gypsies), 1939-1945”, <<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/genocide-of-european-roma-gypsies-1939-1945>>; and “Sinti and Roma: Victims of the Nazi Era”, <<https://www.ushmm.org/learn/students/learning-materials-and-resources/sinti-and-roma-victims-of-the-nazi-era>>.

¹² United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Mosaic of Victims: In Depth”, <<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/mosaic-of-victims-in-depth>>.

¹³ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Polish Victims”, <<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/polish-victims>>.

Institutionalized people with disabilities, children included, were targeted for mass murder in Nazi Germany.¹⁴ Homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses and so-called "asocials," as well as real or perceived repeat criminal offenders were persecuted and incarcerated in concentration camps, very often resulting in death. Real or perceived political opponents were also persecuted, interned in concentration camps or murdered.¹⁵

Jews were singularly targeted by the Nazis and their allies for systematic and deliberate physical annihilation. The Nazis used the code term "Final Solution" to refer to these extermination plans that ultimately aimed for the annihilation of all European Jews.¹⁶ Jews were classified by the Nazis as the priority "enemy." The Nazis and their allies succeeded in killing two thirds of all European Jews, including over a million Jewish children.¹⁷ These ideological aspects make the Holocaust a unique, unprecedented and unparalleled event in modern history.

Understanding what might be behind a person's refusal or resistance to acknowledging the extent of the horrors suffered by the Jews in the Holocaust will help you to respond effectively in this situation. Possible reasons are outlined in the following paragraphs, alongside suggested responses:

A need for recognition of the suffering experienced by their own family or people

It is possible that this response is informed by anger, frustration or resentment at what is perceived as insufficient recognition of the suffering experienced by another victim group. Recognizing the many victims of Nazi ideology can make students more open to empathy with the Jewish people for the severity of what they experienced during this period.

Consider asking students to research their own family background from the time of World War II. Ask them to reflect on the wartime reality faced by

their ancestors, and perhaps even to open up a conversation within the family about their experiences. If their family migrated to Europe from another region of the world, ask about how their family might have fared under the Nazis. Would they have been perceived and protected as part of the "superior race"?

Resistance to perceiving Jews as victims because of a perception of or attachment to the idea of Jews as persecutors

Try to understand what is at the core of this resistance:

- Is this resistance linked to information, possibly oversimplified or biased, about historical or contemporary circumstances?
- Could it be influenced by, or even have roots in, anti-Semitic prejudice, such as conspiracy theories?

This will help you determine the best approach. You may need to:

¹⁴ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "'Euthanasia' Killings": <<https://www.ushmm.org/learn/students/learning-materials-and-resources/mentally-and-physically-handicapped-victims-of-the-nazi-era/euthanasia-killings>>.

¹⁵ Genocide of European Roma, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *op. cit.*, note 12.

¹⁶ "The Final Solution to the Jewish Question" was a set of plans presented by SS General Reynhard Heydrich chief of the Reich Security Main Office to top Nazi officials at the Wannsee Conference in January 1942. It laid out the plans of Nazi Germany to annihilate 11 million European Jews, including from the parts of Europe not controlled by Nazi Germany and their allies. See: US Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Wannsee Conference and the 'Final Solution'", <<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/wannsee-conference-and-the-final-solution>>.

¹⁷ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Children during the Holocaust", <<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/children-during-the-holocaust?series=19126>>.

For more information, see ODIHR’s teaching aids no. 3 and no. 4. “Addressing Anti-Semitic Stereotypes and Prejudice” and “Challenging Conspiracy Theories”.

- Explain how the Holocaust affected Jews and deconstruct any anti-Semitic prejudices.
- Provide more comprehensive and accurate information about a particular circumstance in which Jews are perceived to be oppressors.

Factual accounts of the atrocities are difficult to digest, and should be delivered to students at levels of details appropriate for their age and maturity.

...someone says that the suffering of Jews during the Holocaust is the same as the suffering of other people or group of people whose rights are being infringed upon today?

Students’ empathy for a group of people who are suffering injustice and human rights violations can sometimes lead them to compare contemporary human rights violations and injustice to the Holocaust. It is important to recognize this empathy and acknowledge what can be atrocities

experienced by many people and groups of people around the world.

Without minimizing the struggles of any other people or group, it is equally important to convey that the Holocaust is an unparalleled event in history for the reasons mentioned above.

Additionally, understanding the specific elements of the definition and the origin of the term “genocide” is also helpful in explaining the magnitude of the Holocaust when it is being compared with other types of human rights violations. The term was coined in 1943 by the Polish Jewish lawyer, Raphael Lemkin, who combined the Greek word “genos” (race or tribe) with the Latin word “cide” (to kill). Lemkin’s efforts paved the way to the adoption of the UN Convention on Genocide in December 1948, which came into effect in January 1951. In the Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed **with intent**

to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group:

- Killing members of the group;
- Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; and
- Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.¹⁸

...someone says, “Hitler should have finished the job”?

This statement may be revealing more extreme anti-Semitism, or it may have been said as a provocation in class, to get attention. The response to it should be shaped by the motivation and influences driving the

¹⁸ United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, Article II (9 December 1948), <<https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/volume%2078/volume-78-i-1021-english.pdf>>. This was enforced by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) (see: Statute of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, Article II (31 January 2010), <<https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/8732d6/pdf>>) and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) (see: Updated Statute of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, Article IV (September 2009), <http://www.icty.org/x/file/Legal%20Library/Statute/statute_sept09_en.pdf>), who ruled respectively that the massacres in Rwanda (1994) and at Srebrenica in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1995) were genocides.

Activity

Spend some time with the class looking at how Jews took part in different parts of life in your town, country or in Europe throughout the ages – before the Holocaust and after it. Developing an under-

standing of what the Jewish presence has meant for Europe's development over hundreds of years can help students to appreciate the significance of the loss of two-thirds of Europe's Jewish population in the 20th century.

statement. It could be informative to explore the statement further, while taking care not to give extremist views a credible voice in class, by asking what would be gained in such a world? Most likely, exposing the student's reasoning behind this statement will show it to be flawed, but the answers will help you to determine how deeply rooted this person's belief is in a particular ideology, political agenda or prejudice. Once you have more clarity as to the underlying causes of this statement, it will be easier to decide what kind of follow-up would be most appropriate.

You may also decide that it is most appropriate not to give the student an opportunity to expand on her or his views. In

this case, let the class know that statements like these, which disrespect victims, or call for violence against any group of people, will not be tolerated. The statement, and other students' reaction to it, can be an indication that a deliberate and phased approach is needed to address anti-Semitism in the classroom. Try to have a private conversation with this student to better understand what underpins her or his beliefs. In certain OSCE countries, it may be necessary for the student(s) to be made aware that some forms of hate speech or denial of the Holocaust are forbidden by law.

...a student insists that the reality of the Holocaust is somehow different, e.g., fewer people were killed?

If a student in the class expresses opinions that distort or trivialize the reality of the Holocaust, use her or his opinion as a "teachable moment". Without putting the student on the defence, try to understand her or his source of information. It may be that the student is operating from her or his own family history of suffering or persecution.

An educational approach, perhaps in co-ordination with family, social workers or other members of the school's staff, may be sufficient if the student:

- is open to other views;
- appears to have superficial knowledge; and
- has a range of friends who hold different viewpoints.

Try to identify what is at stake for the student when he or she insists on minimizing or denying the facts of the Holocaust. How would recognizing the experience of the Jewish people challenge the student's life or worldview?

It is important to understand the source of information or inspiration for a student's expression of Holocaust distortion, trivialization or denial, as it may also indicate an exposure to, or involvement in extremist activities. If this is the case, it is better to address the problem early on to prevent any further escalation, such as violent behaviour. You may want to consult with a relevant contact point or specialist in extremism in your school or district for advice on which indicators are serious and which are less cause for concern.

Resources and Materials for Further Reading

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) offers several sets of educational resources. See: “Educational Materials”, IHRA, www.holocaustremembrance.com/index.php/educational-materials.

To find your nearest Holocaust resource organization, memorial site or museum, see also the IHRA International Directory: <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/itfdirectory/organization>.

ODIHR offers several teaching guidelines and resources for addressing anti-Semitism through Holocaust education including *Education on the Holocaust and on Anti-Semitism: An Overview and Analysis of Educational Approaches* (Warsaw: OACE/ODIHR, 2005), www.osce.org/odihr/18818.

For books providing background on Holocaust denial, see:

Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Denying The Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (New York: The Free Press, 1994); and

Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Assassins Of Memory: Essays on the Denial of the Holocaust*, translated by Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

Yad Vashem provides the largest repository of information on the Holocaust, including easy access to digital collections, e-learning for professionals, a database of Shoah victims’ names and a wealth of historical information in several languages: www.yadvashem.org.

Genocide Watch is an excellent online resource for understanding genocides past and present: www.genocidewatch.org.

Echoes and Reflections provides extensive downloadable curricular resources and online learning opportunities: www.echoesandreflections.org.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website offers online workshops on “Teaching about the Holocaust”, “Nazi Ideology and Victims of the Holocaust and Nazi Persecution”, and “Personal Testimony”, as well as numerous lesson plans for teachers and an annotated Glossary of Neo-Nazi and White Supremacist Terms and Symbol, see: www.ushmm.org/educators/online-workshop; www.ushmm.org/educators/lesson-plans; and www.ushmm.org/confront-antisemitism/origins-of-neo-nazi-and-white-supremacist-terms-and-symbols.

Mémorial de la Shoah provides numerous resources for educators, including a Multimedia Encyclopedia and Frequently Asked Questions for primary and secondary school teachers, see: www.memorialdelashoah.org/en/education-training/references-for-teachers.html.

The Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial Museum website offers many resources, including downloadable publications and an extensive series of e-learning courses: www.auschwitz.org; and <http://auschwitz.org/en/education>.

