



United Nations
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Cultural Organization

UNESCO EXPERTS-MEETING

HOLOCAUST EDUCATION **IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT**

Report

Section of Education for Peace and Human Rights

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BACKGROUND

- The Holocaust took place more than half a century ago. The last survivors and eye-witnesses of the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazi regime and its collaborators against the Jewish people and other groups are now disappearing. Nevertheless, more than ever, research and educational programmes keep developing, to document, research, disseminate knowledge, and to educate about the history of the genocide of the Jewish people and other crimes of the Nazis.

The Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust in 2000, gathering 48 countries, mostly European, constituted a seminal moment in the process of acceptance by Europeans of their own past, and the launching of new policies in favour of Holocaust education. A Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research (ITF), a body composed of non-governmental organizations and governmental representatives, was set up at that moment to provide impetus to this process. This organization now has 30 member states. UNESCO has Permanent Observer status.

In addition, various declarations and commitments within the frameworks of the European Union, the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) were adopted. This contributed to the inception of new educational and remembrance programmes throughout Europe.

- This work took a truly global nature with the adoption in November 2005 of a United Nations General Assembly resolution on Holocaust remembrance (60/7), establishing 27 January as the International Day of Commemoration in Memory of Victims of the Holocaust. The resolution urged “Member States to develop educational programmes that will inculcate future generations with the lessons of the Holocaust in order to help prevent future acts of genocide”. This was followed in 2007 by a new UN resolution condemning Holocaust denial (61/255).

Consequently, UNESCO was entrusted in 2007 with the responsibility of “promoting awareness of Holocaust remembrance through education” by resolution 34C/61 of its General Conference.

- Teaching and learning about the Holocaust, which until this point had largely been a matter of regional interest, for Europeans, as well as North Americans and Israelis, became officially an issue of universal concern. Other countries are now invited to teach about the Holocaust even if they do not have a direct link to the event. This raises many issues concerning the pedagogical implications of this global perspective on Holocaust education. **Why and how is the Holocaust taught in countries that have no connections with the genocide and the history of the Jewish people? How does this history connect and resonate with the preoccupations of these countries? Generally speaking, what could be the purposes and the benefits of teaching about the Holocaust globally?**

- In order to address these issues, UNESCO organized an experts-meeting on 27 April 2012, in partnership with the Topography of Terror Foundation (Berlin, Germany).¹ The purpose was specifically to clarify the following questions:
 - What are the current trends of Holocaust education worldwide?
 - How can the Holocaust be studied in a comparative fashion in the classroom?
 - In which ways does Holocaust education contribute to the prevention of genocide? Furthermore, how is it taught in a human rights education perspective?
 - Can the Holocaust provide a suitable framework to address other traumatic events of the past?

¹ This experts-meeting was not the first event organized by UNESCO on the subject of Holocaust education in a global context. A conference entitled "International Perspective in Holocaust Education" had taken place on 28 January 2012. It gathered renowned Holocaust historians, such as Yehuda Bauer, Dina Porat and Georges Bensoussan, as well as scholars working in the context of societies where the Holocaust is taught and that were affected by other atrocities.

PARTICIPATING EXPERTS

In order to assist in providing policy advice for its member states, UNESCO brought together experts in education and academics, from the field of Holocaust and genocide studies, from all continents to explore these issues related to the emergence of the Holocaust as a major moral as well as pedagogical reference point for mass violence globally.

Several came from countries where the Holocaust is taught while having no strong relation with its history. Often however, those countries have themselves experienced mass violence (China, Argentina, South Africa, Spain, and Rwanda).

Others came from countries where issues related to the Holocaust have raised and may still raise difficult debates, although very different from a country to the other, between several categories of the society (Austria, Croatia, France, Germany, and Israel).

In addition, the discussion encompassed also the cases of countries where the history of the Holocaust is not yet taught but where interest could spark (the Arab and Muslim world, Côte d'Ivoire).

Several member states were present as well (Croatia, Hungary, Israel, Poland, Sweden, Tanzania, Turkey, United States, and Viet Nam) and also international bodies (ITF, OSCE).

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With the participation of the Permanent Delegations to UNESCO of Belgium, Croatia, Hungary, Israel, Poland, Sweden, Tanzania, Turkey, Uruguay and the United States of America

KEY FINDINGS

Holocaust education for the prevention of genocide and the promotion of human rights

1. The Holocaust is an event of particular significance in human history, and can be **a meaningful point of reference in order to address a wide range of issues related to the history of genocides and mass atrocities**, in education as well as in academic research, globally.

The Holocaust is often described as “unprecedented” (Yehuda Bauer), which means that although it has the characteristics that can be found in other instances of genocide (specific victim group, mass atrocities perpetrated with intent to destroy the group in whole or in part, etc.), it contains elements that cannot be found prior to its time (systematisation and “industrialization” of mass murder, intention of the perpetrators to kill every Jewish person in the territories under their domination, strictly ideologically-driven motivations of the perpetrators). In that regard, the history of the Holocaust can provide the starting point to address any other instance of genocide or mass atrocity that occurred after as well as before its time.

This conception places the study of the Holocaust at the forefront of the prevention of genocide: although the Holocaust was unprecedented, it can also set a precedent and therefore can be repeated. Indeed other genocides took place after the Holocaust. Learning about the Holocaust in that regard means raising awareness about the root causes of genocidal events, i.e. on the cumulative processes of stigmatization, discrimination and persecution that eventually can lead to mass murder and genocide. This education therefore also becomes instrumental in disseminating knowledge of international tools designed to prevent and to punish genocide. Understanding why and how genocides occurred is the key to preventing their repetition in the future, and their destructive impact at the local and global levels.

Situated in a global perspective, the overarching objective of Holocaust education appears to be first and foremost - as stated in the United Nations resolution on Holocaust remembrance - the prevention of genocide.

2. This globalization process leads also to a shift of paradigm in Holocaust education. Increasingly, as is visible in textbooks and curricula, the Holocaust is taught less **from a national historical perspective and more from a global human rights perspective**. The “nation-centred” approach in history teaching is progressively replaced by a cosmopolitan, de-territorialized, education driven by a growing universal concern for the promotion of human rights. Holocaust remembrance has become core in this development, the genocide of the Jewish people being presented as the preeminent symbolic reference of human rights violations.

In countries where the Holocaust took place, and especially those that contributed directly to the destruction of the Jewish people, the emergence of the Holocaust as a growing transnational reference for human-rights violations has been conflicting with prevailing historical narratives conveying a positive national consciousness (emphasizing the history of “resistance” to the Nazi regime for instance). This opened the way to a more empathic approach towards the fate of the Jewish people and other groups persecuted, and allowed a broader reflection including collaboration, indifference and apathy of the majority population.

On the other hand, a negative consequence of this supranational human-rights-oriented approach in education is the possible “de-contextualization” of the Holocaust: the events tend to become disconnected from the history of Europe or of given countries, and from the narrower history of Nazi crimes and of World War Two. This runs the risk of leaving aside fundamental historical issues that must be addressed in order to understand the ramifications of the genocide. It also takes the risk of presenting the Holocaust, not as a historical event that can be studied and explained, but as a universal moral standard setter for “good” and “evil”.

3. This trend to teach the Holocaust from a universal human rights perspective is also manifest in the development of a pedagogy using **Holocaust history as a basis to promote the values of democracy.**

This has proved successful in the case of the United States, thanks to the methodologies developed by the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, or in the case of the international initiative Facing History and Ourselves. In the context of societies, such as the United States or Canada, the purpose of Holocaust education is twofold: raise awareness about the root causes of genocide and, through an analysis of the steps leading to genocide, explore history in ways that highlight the responsibility of citizens and institutions in influencing society, with a view of upholding democratic ideals. The US Holocaust Memorial Museum’s objectives are in that regard to contribute to reinforcing active citizenry of students and reach out to professional categories holding responsibilities and power over the liberty of citizens (law-enforcement personnel, media) or, in some cases, that are in a position to contribute to the prevention of genocide in other parts of the world (military, diplomatic staff).

Pedagogically speaking, this leads to presenting history as a result of political choices (of individuals and institutions), in order to show that the Holocaust was not inevitable. Furthermore, learners are enabled to make connections with their own lives. Holocaust education is then supposed to contribute to uphold individual responsibility and a sense of commitment in the society. Teaching methods therefore tend to focus on personal histories, on the behaviour of individuals in challenging situations and on the impact of their decisions and actions on history.

In this context, Holocaust education indeed addresses issues of universal relevance and concern, which can be transferred in a variety of national environments.

4. Holocaust education also provides a framework for societies dealing with their own past of human rights abuses. In that regard, education about the Holocaust functions as a “prism” or a “catalyst”, providing a conceptual framework to refer to one’s own history by interrogating contentious aspects of the past which may have remained taboo. Addressing the history of the Holocaust constitutes in this way a rhetorical method providing a safe environment to address local traumatic issues and thus contributing to the articulation of more inclusive national cultures of remembrance.

Several cases were discussed.

- **China**

Holocaust education in China is first and foremost related to the development of Judaic studies during the eighties and nineties, notably in connection with the normalization of relations between China and Israel. Before this period, only limited attention was given to the Holocaust, the focus being naturally on what happened in China at that time. Furthermore, the communist vision of Nazi crimes was not taking into consideration the genocidal nature of the destruction of European Jewry. On the contrary, the dominant historical narrative conveyed a vision encompassing indistinctively all civilian casualties as a result of “Fascist-Capitalist” war crimes.

In this new context, Holocaust education contributes to sensitizing students to concepts of international law and to familiarizing them with the notions of human rights, crimes against humanity and genocide. For instance, it attracted indirectly the attention of scholars to the Nanjing massacre of December 1937 and led to the re-examination of the history of the Japanese occupation. It also provides a new conceptual framework which contributes to reassess events of the Chinese past.

- **Latin-America**

Several countries of Latin America have introduced the Holocaust in their curriculum and a number of organizations are active in promoting the subject. However, there are a great diversity of situations over the continent, depending on the national cultures of remembrance.

First, dealing with the Holocaust in South America is a starting point to consider the genocidal history of the continent and the destruction of indigenous populations by European colonizers. Long term traumas inherited from the colonialist past become less overshadowed as people realize that the continent is born to modernity also by way of mass murder.

Second, the attention given to the history of Holocaust was determined by the political agendas of the time. Growing awareness for this period of European history in the mid-eighties coincides with the process of democratization of several countries of the region. In this regard, the Holocaust is studied and interpreted by the yardstick of South America’s own history of authoritarian regimes, therefore creating a strong articulation between the history of the Holocaust and the local narrative of oppression. This is particularly visible in the case of Argentina where Holocaust education is widely developed and was promoted at both government and civil society levels: Argentinean membership to the ITF, establishment of a national day of Holocaust remembrance, new programmes developed by the Ministry of

Education, etc. The influence of the Holocaust is now visible in various sectors of the society and plays a fundamental role in Argentina's own memorial processes.

- **South Africa**

Holocaust Education has been included in the national school curriculum of South Africa since 2007. There is a strong connection between the apparition of democracy and the development of Holocaust studies (starting with the creation of a Holocaust Centre in Cape Town in 1999 at the initiative of the Jewish community). In this case, there exists a strong willingness to contextualize Holocaust education in South Africa's own history of racial discriminations and human rights abuses.

The Holocaust is taught as an extreme case of human rights abuse, and is presented as an opportunity to address issues of prejudice and discrimination in contemporary South Africa. Students are invited to engage with their own past and make connections with their present realities. The purpose of Holocaust education is to support the creation of responsible and active citizens, confronting racism and defending human rights. In the context of an emerging democracy, Holocaust education was seen as a tool of transformation. The timing in introducing the Holocaust in the curriculum bears particular significance in that regard.

- **Spain**

The introduction of Holocaust education in Spain is concomitant with the emergence of a more opened public debate about the crimes perpetrated during the Civil War and under the Franco regime. Holocaust education was first of all a way to reassess the role of Spain in World War Two, its complicity to Nazi Germany and its connections to the fate of the Jewish people. It also contributed directly to the on-going constitution of a Spanish culture of remembrance and triggered the emergence of a dialogue between multiplicities of narratives, sometimes competing with each other. Additionally, this led Spain to develop a new interest in its Jewish heritage and history before the expulsion of 1492.

- **Rwanda**

The case of societies with their own history of genocide is not substantially different, although it may raise other difficult issues. The urgent priority in Rwanda for instance is to teach and to research about the country's own history of genocide in the context of transition. The introduction of genocide studies, especially the history of the Holocaust, can provide a theoretical framework and critical reflection which will help fostering research and education about the genocide of the Tutsi and increase public awareness about the nature and causes of crimes perpetrated in 1994.

Students can learn from history. Comparing and contrasting one's own and other countries' history can provide learners with essential tools to explore new dimensions of their own country's difficult past and eventually draw lessons from it. They may come to understand that history - more precisely the "making" of history - is the result of multiple narratives, different interpretations of the facts, and a variety of experiences that can conflict with each other. The idea of understanding and reconciliation in a society goes hand in hand with accepting conflicting memories. These narratives and memories cannot be abolished, but they can be negotiated through a mutual acknowledgement of the sufferings of different groups and their divergent perceptions of history. Holocaust education is a frame to deal with such dilemmas and ambiguities.

Challenges for Educators

5. Whether the Holocaust is viewed from the perspective of the prevention of genocide, taught to support a broader human rights vision, or introduced with a view of reassessing one's own traumatic past, one of the main issues that emerge in both academic and educational frameworks is the challenge of comparison between events of mass atrocities in an educational setting. By definition, the globalization of Holocaust education leads students and teachers to build connections between the history they teach and learn and other historical events that have occurred in their country or elsewhere.

It is obvious that, like any other historical event, the Holocaust must be compared to be better understood. Furthermore, comparative studies of genocide and crimes against humanity constitute a developing area of Holocaust education. Adopting a comparative approach in the framework of Holocaust education can indeed be educationally very valuable. It helps students learn about the conditions of the emergence of mass violence, identify the "warning signs" and understand the common patterns and key-differences of instances of mass atrocities throughout history. Additionally, a comparative study may also contribute to the understanding of the particular historical significance of the Holocaust.

But this can risk also very important pitfalls and serious challenges, which educators should be aware of in this new, globalized environment:

- Especially when taught in a human rights education framework, educators should be wary of extrapolations when it comes to the history of the Holocaust, and have a good understanding of concepts, vocabulary and historical contexts: all state crime is not a crime of genocide and any type of discrimination, oppression, or violence does not necessarily lead to genocide. In fact, it is not necessary to refer to an extreme example of mass violence such as the Holocaust to teach about human rights, although it is obvious that teaching about the Holocaust will provide important insights about the need to protect individuals' rights and universal human rights values.
- Likewise, educators must be aware of the danger to equate or to diminish or to trivialize either the Holocaust or other genocides to which it is compared. Another pitfall consists in drawing false comparisons, such as in the context of competing memories or with the view of pursuing a political agenda (i.e. equation of Communist and Nazi crimes, Middle-East conflict, etc.).
- Different cases of genocides have different causes. A study of the Holocaust will help comprehend and conceptualize genocidal processes, identify patterns and warning signs, etc. but it cannot be the explanatory framework for other instances of genocides. Events unfold in their own historical environment. Educators must concentrate on the policies particular to a given historical event, and analyse it in its own terms. Hence the difficulty for educators to be able to teach about several extremely complex historical moments. For a comparative study of genocide and mass atrocities to be meaningful, substantial knowledge and sufficient curricular time is required.

- It is critically important to not attempt creating hierarchy of sufferings. It is legitimate and useful to compare structures of events and explore differences, but no assumptions can be made about the sufferings of victims or victimized groups.
6. The extension of the memory of the Holocaust as a supranational symbol of evil, whether used as a “template” for human rights standard setting or as a framework in the formation of new cultures of remembrance, induces new challenges to the teaching of history.
- Dealing with the Holocaust and genocide can be very distressing for students. First, it conflicts with dominant historical narratives and collective memories that may not incorporate those crimes. Second, it also exposes pupils to cases where entire societies collapse and become complicit of genocidal actions, therefore confronting them with the worst of human actions.

Educators must be prepared to deal with the emotional charge related to this type of subject, and adopt methodologies appropriate to the cognitive abilities of students, taking into consideration the complexity of the subject.

- Last, the most important problem lies in the utilization of Holocaust history as a “vehicle” for transmitting values and viewpoints, for stressing moral and ethical lessons or for shaping attitudes. Such educational approaches run the great risk of distorting and simplifying historical facts to make them fit to the political, social or moral agenda they are pursuing.

In fact, educators must avoid providing simple, moralistic or “redemptive” answers to eminently difficult interrogations about human nature. The Holocaust cannot be simply explained: historical events are the results of multiple and complex economic, social, political and psychological factors. The issues genocide raises, at the individual, the collective and political level, can never be easily settled or resolved. One should not expect a study of the Holocaust to bring more moral clarity in the minds of students. But one can expect that the questions this history raises will sharpen their critical thinking.

The Holocaust can indeed be explained in historical terms, which will leave the learner with a greater sense and appreciation for the complexity of historical events. Studying the Holocaust is an opportunity to reflect upon the responsibility of citizens and organizations in the face of human rights abuses, the role of ideologies and propaganda, the ramifications of prejudice and racism, and the many other factors that lead to the genocide. This may help them see parallels with their own life and come to understand their own responsibility as citizens in the society they live in.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Holocaust history has become a universal frame of reference for mass violence but education about this particular period of European history must be adapted to the local conditions and preoccupations of the countries in which it is taught. There are a variety of experiences in teaching and learning about the Holocaust, which have shown their successes and limits.
- UNESCO must consult directly with member states and discuss ways in which Holocaust history can be introduced into the curricula of interested countries. UNESCO is invited to cooperate with civil society and specialized local and international NGO's to make sure that Holocaust education is presented to policy-makers and taught in a way that is relevant to the particular environment of interested countries.
- In a non-European context, it is recommended that UNESCO promotes learning and teaching about the Holocaust from the perspective of the prevention of genocide. This will make the history of the Holocaust immediately relevant to many. Drawing on the specificities of the genocide of the Jewish people in world history, Holocaust education is integrated in a broader effort to promote knowledge about the history of genocides and mass atrocities and the ways to prevent their occurrence. From this viewpoint, the contribution of Holocaust education to the promotion of human rights and peace becomes evident to policy-makers.
- The globalization of Holocaust education comes with a number of potential pitfalls, notably the utilization of Holocaust history to support contemporary agendas, whether it leads educators to convey a simplistic vision of the event or, worse, to political manipulations. The dissemination and/or adaptation of pedagogical materials and academic publications as well as the training of teachers will be crucial to any future initiative to introduce this subject in schools.