



2. The Global Prevention of Genocide: Learning from the Holocaust



The Holocaust and the United Nations Outreach Programme produced a study guide on Women and the Holocaust. Partners included the International School for Holocaust Studies at Yad Vashem and the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education.

Photo Credit: Yad Vashem Photo Archives



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The Global Prevention of Genocide: Learning from the Holocaust

by Edward Mortimer

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From 28 June 2010 to 3 July 2010, a group of international experts from the fields of Holocaust and genocide studies, Holocaust and genocide education, human rights protection and genocide prevention met at the Salzburg Global Seminar for a conference entitled “The Global Prevention of Genocide: Learning from the Holocaust”. The conference was developed in cooperation with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and chaired by Dr. Klaus Mueller, the Museum’s European Representative.

The explicit goal of this conference was to explore the connections as well as the divisions between the fields of Holocaust education, genocide prevention, and human rights. Participants considered if and how Holocaust education could raise awareness of contemporary genocides, strengthen a culture of genocide prevention, and contribute to human rights education. They debated whether we improve our understanding of past genocides and contemporary human rights

infringements by connecting them, or if by doing so we endanger the recognition of their vast differences. One of the topics that participants returned to again and again was the complex relationship between teaching *about* the Holocaust and learning *from* the Holocaust. Participants debated the contribution that Holocaust education makes or could make to raising awareness of contemporary racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia or the situation of Roma and Sinti today. They sought to understand whether – and if so, how – Holocaust education could contribute to understanding and preventing future genocides.

Among policy makers and within the scholarly literature, there tends to be a belief that Holocaust education can be an effective tool for teaching students about the importance of protecting democracy and human rights, preventing racism and anti-Semitism, and promoting mutual respect between people of different races, religions, and cultures. Scholars have argued for example that, “studies of the Holocaust, genocide and human rights are inseparable”¹, and that “Holocaust education can make a significant contribution to citizenship by developing pupils’ awareness of human-rights issues and genocides and the concepts of stereotyping and scapegoating”². A 2004 report by the Stanford Research Institute suggested that, “Holocaust education is not merely an academic undertaking but the best hope for inoculating humankind against future instances of genocide”³. Academics have made similar arguments, stating for example that Holocaust education can sow “seeds of concern...that produce ideas that bloom into ongoing considerations about one’s own place in the world, and what it means to be a citizen in a democracy”⁴.

1 David A. Shiman and William R. Fernekes, “The Holocaust, Human Rights, and Democratic Citizenship Education” *The Social Studies* (March/April 1999), pp. 53- 62.

2 Henry Maitles, “Why are we learning this?: Does Studying the Holocaust Encourage Better Citizenship Values?”, *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 3 (December 2008), pp. 341-352.

3 SRI International, “National Study of Secondary Teaching Practices in Holocaust Education, Final Report”, August 20, 2004. Available from: www.policyweb.sri.com/cep/publications/SRI_Natl-Study_TeachingPractices.pdf.

4 Samuel Totten, *Holocaust Education: Issues and Approaches* (Boston: Alyn and Bacon, 2008), p. 138.

Based on this theory, that Holocaust education can play an important role in preventing racism, anti-Semitism, and ethnic conflict and promoting human rights, many states around the world have instituted mandatory Holocaust education programmes at the secondary school level. However, recent studies and surveys have shown that most Holocaust education programmes in both schools and museums do not explicitly link the history of the Holocaust with the history of other genocides or with larger human rights issues.⁵ At the same time, there is little empirical evidence to suggest that Holocaust education, on its own, can necessarily teach students about the ongoing contemporary dangers of racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and genocide. The 2010 Salzburg conference aimed to engage practitioners from the various fields of Holocaust education, genocide prevention, and human rights protection, with these issues and was guided by a series of overarching questions regarding the purpose of Holocaust education. Is it to provide students with knowledge about the Holocaust? Is it to make them “think harder about civic responsibility, human rights, and the dangers of racism”?⁶ Or, can it be both?

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The Holocaust, Other Genocides, and Human Rights Education

One of the major issues discussed during the week in Salzburg was the compatibility of Holocaust and human rights education. For the purposes of this article we rely on UNESCO’s definition of human rights education as “Education, training and information aimed at building a universal culture of human rights...human rights education fosters the attitudes and behaviors needed to uphold

⁵ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, “Discover the Past for the Future: A study on the role of historical sites and museums in Holocaust education and human rights education in the EU”, Main Results Report, January 2010.

⁶ Kofi Annan, “The Myth of Never Again”. *New York Times*. 17 June 2010.

human rights for all members of society".⁷ On the one hand, some participants argued that it was critical to connect these two areas and advocated a pedagogical approach that would situate Holocaust education within a larger discussion and context of human rights. They argued that teachers should be encouraged to make links between the Holocaust and human rights issues today — for example by stressing historical links between the Holocaust and the Genocide Convention and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Other participants disagreed, suggesting that Holocaust and human rights education should not be conflated and that they constitute separate fields with different goals, methodologies and focuses. This disagreement was highlighted by a panel presentation that focused on education in museums. One speaker suggested that Holocaust museums and memorials can and should connect the Holocaust and human rights, and specifically use the Holocaust as an example of the ultimate human rights violation. According to this panelist, knowledge of the Holocaust and past human rights violations could lead to a fruitful discussion of contemporary human rights violations. Another speaker pointed out, however, that there is an important difference between *understanding* history and drawing lessons from it.

While participants disagreed about whether it was appropriate to locate Holocaust education within the framework of human rights education, in general, most of the conference participants recognised the value and importance of teaching students not only about the Holocaust, but also about other genocides. Many participants argued that comparing the Holocaust, which is often considered to be the paradigmatic case of genocide, to other genocides and crimes against humanity might improve our understanding of other genocidal events and, by the same token, of the Holocaust itself. At the same time, they noted the challenges of such a comparative approach and highlighted the importance of differentiating between

⁷ UNESCO, Plan of Action. World Programme for Human Rights Education, New York and Geneva, 2006:1.

the Holocaust, genocide, and other instances of mass violence, human rights abuses or ethnic conflicts within the classroom.

The Holocaust and Lessons for the Future?

The conference highlighted many different opinions regarding the purposes of Holocaust education. On the one hand, some participants explicitly advocated the importance of learning *from* the Holocaust and other genocides and getting students to make connections between contemporary events and the past. One participant for example suggested that the purpose of Holocaust education is to learn about and understand human cruelty and violence and how to prevent it. This participant suggested that in some places it might be more appropriate to focus on other genocides and conflicts to teach these lessons. Other participants remained wary of such an approach and instead advocated a more straightforward approach to teaching *about* the Holocaust and not explicitly drawing connections to other events, whether past or present. They expressed some uneasiness with the notion that the aim is to learn something from the Holocaust and suggested that it is relevant and important in itself to study the Holocaust as an historical event.

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As part of the conference programme, educators from around the world showcased some of the different ways in which they and their institutions define the purpose and limits of Holocaust education. One speaker, for example, described a well-established educational programme based in the United States that focuses on using Holocaust education for adolescents as a tool for preventing violence and potentially also genocide. This speaker emphasised that if we are interested in instilling particular values or lessons in adolescents then we need to take adolescent development and behaviour into

account. He advocated a multidisciplinary approach through which students not only learn about the Holocaust and other instances of genocide, but are encouraged to reflect on their own lives and the connections (as well as differences) that exist between contemporary events and past instances of genocide. A second speaker advocated a similar approach and described the development of a state sponsored curriculum in Ecuador on “Human Rights, Holocaust, and other Recent Genocides”. This programme was developed for students aged 16 and 17. The justification for teaching these subjects in high school is that it is critical to introducing an ethic of compassion in students and teaching them citizenship values. These values are key to promoting non-violence, and more positive attitudes towards foreigners and aliens. According to this presenter, keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive in the context of teaching about human rights issues and modern genocides is crucial for showing students that we must care about others for our own sake and for that of humanity.

In contrast to the first two speakers, who explicitly promoted programmes that encourage students to make links between the Holocaust, other genocides, human rights issues, and their own lives, a third speaker suggested an approach that remains much more focused on teaching about the history of the Holocaust and promoting Holocaust remembrance as a distinct and unique topic. This third speaker described the work of a European Holocaust memorial that focuses explicitly on the remembrance of the Holocaust and does not consider genocide prevention or human rights education its primary mission. He preferred a reflexive approach to history and suggested that the purpose of Holocaust education is to learn *about* the Holocaust rather than to learn *from* the Holocaust.

The fourth and final panelist outlined the multidisciplinary approach to learning about the Holocaust and the prevention of genocide taken by the “Holocaust and the United Nations Outreach Programme”. Under its General Assembly mandate, the Programme organises an annual day of remembrance observed by United Nations offices around the world, and partners with civil society

to further understanding of the Holocaust and the causes of mass violence, which can lead to genocide. The Programme also develops educational seminars and materials that underscore the essential links between this history and the promotion of human rights and democratic values today.

Confronting Local Realities

While the question about how to teach the Holocaust and whether it is better to embed it within a curriculum that is focused strictly on history, or one focused on human rights, or one focused on comparisons with other genocides and contemporary events remained a point of disagreement, all conference participants acknowledged the extent to which local histories and contexts place constraints on the forms that Holocaust education can and should take. A separate panel that focused on the challenges and successes of contemporary Holocaust education shed further light on the extent to which the stated purpose of Holocaust education programmes and the ways in which they are implemented vary and are reflective of particular local realities. For example, one Austrian speaker explained that in Austria learning about the Holocaust is a mandatory part of the secondary school curriculum. However, within “erinnern.at”, an institute that trains teachers and develops material for learning about the Holocaust on behalf of the Austrian Ministry for Education, it has been decided that for the time being, the Holocaust should not be taught in conjunction with other genocides or within a broader human rights curriculum. The main reason for this decision is that the history of the Holocaust remains a charged topic in Austria where many conflicting memories and narratives still exist. The biggest challenge continues to be the conflict between the official narrative of Austrian perpetration (i.e. participation in Nazi atrocities) and the Austrian family narratives that focus on Austria and its citizens as victims of or, at most, forced participants in, the Holocaust.

In Ukraine by contrast — as the next speaker explained — the Holocaust is not a standard part of the school curriculum. In fact,

according to this speaker, fewer than 10 per cent of history teachers in Ukrainian secondary schools are trained to teach about the Holocaust. He noted that there are bureaucratic, as well as political impediments to instituting effective Holocaust education programmes in the Ukraine. Some of the biggest challenges include: a tradition of silence (Ukrainians do not believe that the Holocaust was a Ukrainian event or perpetrated by Ukrainians); a competition

of victims (a sense that the number of victims of the Ukrainian famine must be higher than the number of victims of the Holocaust); and the “nationalisation” of Ukrainian history through which Jews and other minorities are marginalised or ignored.

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As these and other presentations clearly demonstrated, different institutions, countries, and educators take very different approaches to teaching about the Holocaust. There are important pedagogical, political, and historical factors that influence the ways

in which Holocaust education is implemented and whether it is linked to other genocides, human rights, or local histories.

Conclusion

Returning to the original questions posed at the conference regarding the purpose of Holocaust education, we would like to suggest that there is validity to all of the arguments presented and dispute the notion that there is a single “right way” to teach about the Holocaust. The Holocaust was clearly an important and pivotal event in the history of the twentieth century. For that reason, it is important for students to study and learn about it. Particularly when talking about education within universities, the notion that we must learn something from the Holocaust is, in some ways antithetical to the entire notion of research and study. We do not deem a subject worthy or unworthy of study simply because it is something that

we can or cannot draw lessons from in our contemporary societies. At the same time however, we recognise that education is never value neutral and that education broadly defined, functions as one of the most effective vehicles through which nations inculcate certain values and ethics (both constructive and destructive) within their citizens. In our increasingly global world we believe that it is crucial to teach students about the dangers of racism, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia and instill them with a respect for human rights. We believe that an important aim for education is to create a culture in which students are willing and able to challenge intolerance, injustice, and genocidal violence. As one of our conference participants noted in a panel entitled “The Roots of Genocide”, we need to focus our attention and energy on creating an anti-genocidal culture if we want to prevent genocide in the future. While learning about the Holocaust can be an important component in creating an anti-genocidal culture, on its own it is not enough. Students must be shown the extent to which “genocide is a common human tragedy that has occurred far too many times in the past”.⁸ The Holocaust cannot be taught or understood as an aberration in the history of humanity. Instead, we should show students that while the Holocaust might be the most extreme case of genocide, it shares distinct similarities with more recent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda and Bosnia. If we want to prevent genocide in the future, we must educate students about the prevalence of genocides and genocidal conflicts throughout modern history and teach them about how and why such conflicts arise.

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⁸ Francis Deng, “In the Shadow of the Holocaust”, *Holocaust and United Nations Discussion Papers Journals*, Discussion Paper 7 (United Nations, 2009).

At the moment there are relatively few educational models that successfully combine teaching about the Holocaust with teaching about other modern genocides, human rights, and genocide prevention. One of the clear findings of our conference was that more cooperation and collaboration between practitioners and educators working across these fields is needed if we hope to eventually create a pedagogical model that allows for the incorporation of these different areas into a single educational framework. To this end the Salzburg Global Seminar, in cooperation with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, has created an initiative around the topics of Holocaust education and genocide prevention that will engage with these issues and create an interdisciplinary network of experts who can learn from each other with the aim of promoting quality educational efforts and cultural initiatives that support awareness and teaching of the Holocaust and other genocides, with a view to combating hatred, racism and anti-Semitism, and promoting the protection of human rights and genocide prevention.

Please see page 22 for discussion questions



The winning entries of the design student poster competition were exhibited by the global network of United Nations Information Centres (UNIC) to mark the International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust on 27 January 2012. Visitors to the exhibit mounted by UNIC Asunción in Paraguay are pictured here. Photo Credit: UNIC Asunción



Kimberly Mann, Manager of the United Nations Holocaust Programme, leads a session on learning from remembrance, at the Educators' Institute for Human Rights, held at the Kigali Memorial Centre in Rwanda.

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Discussion questions

1. Why is it important for students around the world to study the Holocaust?
2. In what ways are studies of the Holocaust, genocide prevention and human rights inseparable? In what ways are they distinct?
3. What are some the potential dangers and benefits of linking the study of the Holocaust with other genocides?
4. What are the lessons of the Holocaust? Do these apply to your everyday life and to your interactions with others?
5. Do you think Holocaust education could help to prevent future acts of genocide? Please explain why or why not.