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Holocaust Education and Contemporary Antisemitism

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Executive Summary

- It has become an article of faith in Europe that Holocaust education in schools is necessary and useful.

- But does Holocaust education as it is currently practiced help young people to understand either a) the genocide of the Jews; b) antisemitism?

- The evidence suggests not. It indicates that Europe is experiencing a) rising levels of antisemitism; b) rising perceptions of antisemitism and c) a growth in Holocaust education.

- Too often Holocaust education is presented as a simple, catch-all answer in combatting antisemitism.

- However, if Holocaust education is going to be productively linked to combatting antisemitism, then we need better Holocaust education.

Introduction

A 2019 Eurobarometer Report on 'Perceptions of Antisemitism' in twenty-eight member states found that 50% of Europeans considered antisemitism to be a problem in their countries. This trend was intensified in certain nations. For example, a majority of the participants in Sweden (81%), France (72%), Germany (66%), the Netherlands (65%), the United Kingdom (62%), Italy (58%), Belgium (50%) and Austria (47%), believed that antisemitism is a problem in their country.

Concerns about the resurgence of antisemitism in Europe are thus widespread. This is particularly in Western Europe, although instances of antisemitism, which are often linked to far right and more commonly, radical right revivalism are also present in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states. Articulations of antisemitism include murder, physical and verbal attacks, assaults on Jewish private and communal property (such as synagogues, schools and cemeteries), as well as various forms of hate speech, including online and off-line forms of Holocaust denial.

Alongside far right organizations and populist radical right parties, groups in Europe which are commonly identified as demonstrating a proclivity to the articulation of contemporary forms of antisemitism include left-wing anti-Zionist movements. These use antisemitic tropes and stereotypes

to attack the legitimacy of the state of Israel. The radical antisemitic actions of individuals ascribing to Islamist ideologies have also been an area of major concern. High profile Islamist terrorist incidents have included the shooting of four people during Mohamed Merah's attack on a Jewish school in Toulouse (19 March 2012) and Mehdi Nemmouche's killing of four people during an assault on the Jewish Museum in Brussels (24 May 2014).

Given that central to the historical study of the Holocaust is the historical analysis of the Third Reich's racial antisemitism and its genocide of European Jewry, it would seem safe to assume that its study would sensitize students to historical forms of antisemitism, with the strong possibility of generating awareness of contemporary forms of antisemitism. However, evidence from teaching and learning practice in Britain, Germany, Lithuania and Poland suggests that this is not always the case. If Holocaust education is going to achieve its potential of sensitizing young people against antisemitism, teachers and instructors must learn from problematic practice in order to provide forms of Holocaust education that are historically accurate, culturally sensitive and in dialogue with the challenges presented by contemporary forms of antisemitism.

Holocaust Education and Antisemitism in Europe, 2000-2020

The idea that Holocaust education can combat antisemitism is not new. It is well established and institutionalized across Europe. The civic aim of public campaigns like the Swedish government's mass distribution to teenagers of the Holocaust history book, *Tell Ye Your Children* (1997) was to promote engagement with the politics of liberal democracy, the ethics of tolerance, combat the far right and sensitize students against antisemitism and racism. Similar aims discursively framed the invocation of the importance of Holocaust education in international documents such as 'The Stockholm Declaration' (2000). This document is the organizational manifesto that underpins major bodies promoting Holocaust education such as the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA).

In 2005, the OSCE and the ODIHR completed a report on 'Education on the Holocaust and on Anti-Semitism: An Overview and Analysis of Educational Approaches'. Although this data was collated fifteen years ago, and needs to be updated, it is helpful in showing how long policymakers and educators have known about challenges in this area. The report surveyed 54 OSCE member states and found that 49 of these responded that the Holocaust was in some way incorporated into that country's curriculum. However, at the same time many respondents admitted that there was both inadequate teaching time and pedagogical materials devoted to the study of the Holocaust in schools. In countries such as Sweden, the UK, Lithuania, Romania and the USA, the Holocaust was taught more in-depth through extra-curricular or optional activities, often run by NGOs and charities. There was also significant variance in relation to the amount of state support that was dedicated to the development of Holocaust education. The report also highlighted that greater resources and opportunities were needed to be made available for teacher training.

The OSCE/ODIHR report was also important in noting that while teaching the history of the Holocaust is important in showing how antisemitism was central to Nazi ideology and provides the evidential and factual basis for refuting Holocaust denial, other pedagogical strategies needed to be used alongside Holocaust education in order to combat antisemitism. The report was keen to highlight that the history of the Holocaust should be taught as an end in itself (not simply as a case study for the promotion of civic values). It also noted the proclivity of Holocaust education to reduce Jewish history and culture to the status of victimhood, stressing that wider forms of teaching about

Jewish history and culture are also important within educational curricula. It also commented that in order to battle contemporary forms of antisemitism, specific interventions needed to be designed by pedagogues.

Other international organizations have also put forward and reaffirmed a number of resolutions to promote specific national policies and international cooperation projects in relation to combating antisemitism. These resolutions often include sections which detail the importance of continued education about the Holocaust in the belief that this sensitizes people, especially young people, against antisemitism and neutralizes Holocaust denial. In line with this, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe passed a resolution in 2007 on combating antisemitism in Europe and renewed this commitment in 2016. The 2016 resolution focused on seven recommendations, one of which stated the need for continued education about antisemitism and the Holocaust. Equally, the 2017 European Parliament resolution on combating antisemitism confirmed the importance of teaching about the Holocaust, but also recommended a review and update of current teaching materials to make sure that Jewish history and life are represented in a balanced fashion.

Critical Evidence from the Pedagogical Front-Line

Despite all of these issues being known to policymakers and Holocaust education experts, research by a range of academics over the last ten-years has demonstrated the persistence of many of the issues identified fifteen years ago by the 2005 OSCE/ODIHR report. To evidence this claim, a small sample of research will be drawn on here from four countries, which have very different national relationships to the history of the Holocaust: Britain, Germany, Lithuania and Poland. The examples are admittedly eclectic and cover a range of perspectives and methodologies, from the practical experiences of teachers to student responses. However, worryingly all highlight the limitations of Holocaust education in promoting student understanding of Jewish persecution and genocide during the Third Reich, and its relationship to sensitizing them to contemporary forms of antisemitism in the present.

Britain. Stuart Foster's critical review (2013) of preliminary findings from the national research study conducted by the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education entitled, *Teaching about the Holocaust* suggests that there are pedagogic issues which might limit the extent to which Holocaust education can specifically sensitize students to antisemitism. 52.5% of the 2108 teachers surveyed defined the Holocaust by referring to all victim groups of the Nazis, with no sense of what was particularly extreme about the Nazi's global antisemitic exterminatory project. Clearly, it is important to teach about all victim groups, but this must be within a context that both eschews negative potentials for victimhood hierarchies, but which also recognizes not just similarities, but also specificities and differences in patterns of Nazi persecution and violence. Other issues identified included a tendency to focus on perpetrator driven narratives in history lessons which relegated Jews to the status of passive victims, rather than accounts which take into consideration pre-war Jewish life and Jewish resistance during the Second World War. These deficiencies were not without consequence. The findings of the final *Teaching about the Holocaust in English Secondary Schools* report (published in 2016) found that many students lacked historical understanding of Nazi antisemitism, and some displayed a concerning tendency to uncritically repeat myths and misconceptions about Jews.

It is also within the British context that researcher, Geoffrey Short has conducted a survey of teacher's experiences of educating about the Holocaust in fifteen English schools, from five local educational authorities in the south-east, where the majority of the students were Muslims. Short's

work was completed against the backdrop of concerns about rising antisemitism in British Muslim communities as a result of conflicts in the Middle East. It was also handled within the context of his awareness that student perceptions of the meaning of Holocaust education more broadly can be affected by factors such as their ethnicity, religion, gender and geographical location.

In results published in 2008, Short found that most of the teachers interviewed said that students in their schools were responsive to learning about the Holocaust, although he did find that in one of the schools surveyed there had been severe issues in relation to antisemitism. Short also felt that in these schools, teachers could have made more productive pedagogical use of examples of where the history of the Holocaust intersects with Muslim histories, such as the rescuers of Jews in North Africa or the actions of the Waffen-SS Handschar Division in the Balkans.

Germany. A number of studies have been conducted in German classrooms, with more critical analyses disputing the idea that learning about the Holocaust un-problematically imparts civic lessons, let alone greater resilience against antisemitism. Silviana Stubig's study published in 2015 surveyed five-classes of ninth-grade pupils in a school in North Rhine-Westphalia. The students were surveyed twice, once before and once after their module on the Holocaust. Questions asked sought to measure their feelings of national attachment towards Germany, attitudes towards Europe and feelings of antisemitism and xenophobia. Stubig concluded that there was no marked increases in tolerance or decreases in antisemitism and/or xenophobia. Students did, however, report lower levels of national pride after being taught the module on the Holocaust. Stubig also surveyed students in relation to their experiences of learning about Nazism and the Holocaust. She found that students were most likely to agree that from learning about this subject they should have acquired new knowledge, but the second most selected option was that they were supposed to learn how to talk about the Holocaust in a socially acceptable manner. Stubig's research suggests that in the land where the history of the perpetration of the Holocaust is most intense, moving understanding of this history beyond socially acceptable and performed ritual is a real issue for educators.

Lithuania. Christine Beresniova has explored the dynamics of Holocaust education in Lithuania including national initiatives, the role of local teachers, the impact of international interventions and the concerns raised in relation to antisemitism by ultra-nationalist marches in public life. Her analysis of resources and activities used to educate about the Holocaust in Lithuania, specifically analyzes the issues posed by the lack of wider historical consciousness of the history of the Jews in Lithuania. This lack of knowledge and awareness, provides the background for the problems caused by the continuing prevalence of antisemitic Jewish stereotypes and nationalist myths in public life, which are often entangled with Lithuanian national narratives of suffering under communism. These types of myths and stereotypes are not just a problem in Lithuania, but also in post-Soviet Eastern Europe and the Baltic States more broadly.

In 2019, Beresniova published an analysis of interviews with nine educators and three community leaders who teach young people about the Holocaust in Lithuania. These interactions showed the challenges to formal education posed by long-standing cultural attitudes and practices which exist beyond the classroom. Beresniova's respondents spoke of difficulties such as negative parental influence leading to the reinforcement of young people's antisemitic attitudes. A teacher also expressed concerns that pushing the Holocaust education agenda too hard would alienate them from colleagues and parents.

Poland. Jolanta Ambrosewicz-Jacobs has articulated concerns about the effects that the right-ward swing in Polish politics is having on Holocaust education. This is particularly since 2015 when the Law and Justice Party have formed the majority government. In January 2018, a controversial law was

passed in Poland which criminalizes the use of the term ‘Polish death camps’, and after revision in June 2018 threatens financial penalities and civil suits for those who practice ‘defamation of the Polish nation’ through claiming that Poland is responsible or co-responsible for the Third Reich’s crimes. Admittedly, the law does include a clause excluding artistic and academic works from prosecution. Nonetheless, in a 2019 article, Ambrocewicz-Jacobs has argued that this wider cultural context shows that there is a push in Poland to shape the interpretation of the history of the Holocaust by, “emphasizing the Polish Righteous and denying the role of Polish citizens who were complicit with German occupiers.” (Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, 330). This suggests how discourses surrounding Jewish rescue can be integrated into contemporary national narratives of the Nazi-era, which provide comforting as opposed to nationally self-critical perspectives on the Holocaust-era past. Nationally self-critical perspectives would be more likely to interrogate issues such as regional forms of antisemitism or local acts of exploitation and plunder of expropriated Jewish communities.

From a pedagogical perspective, as these difficult issues may challenge positive feelings of national identification and invoke secondary feelings of guilt in learners, it is important to address them as sensitively as possible in order to mitigate against risks of provoking ‘secondary forms of antisemitism.’ As the UNESCO/OSCE/ODIHR *Addressing Antisemitism* report (2018) notes, it is important to broach these areas with students in a non-accusatory way and give learners the critical tools to tackle present-day forms of antisemitism.

Moreover, despite extensive post-Communist reviews of the exhibition content at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, it still seems that many young Poles who visit the site continue to interpret it primarily through a Polish national framework. For example, Alicja Bartuś conducted a survey of a two-day study visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau, which was attended by 720 high school pupils from 17 urban communities in southern Poland. Despite this intensive educational opportunity, following the visit the majority of young Poles indicated that Poles were the primary group murdered at the site rather than Jews. The Polish case demonstrates how strength of national identification can potentially disrupt factual learning about the genocide of the Jews during the Second World War.

These findings suggest that the extent to which Holocaust education is effective in engendering resilience to antisemitism is highly dependent on: the placement and time devoted to the subject within the school curriculum; the knowledge and commitment of teachers; the pre-existing cultural capital of students and the specific history of Jewish communities, antisemitism and the Holocaust in the country or locality where the subject is being taught. If the Holocaust is not taught with a sensitivity towards these issues, then pedagogically productive ethical possibilities of drawing comparisons between Nazi antisemitism and contemporary forms of antisemitism may be lost.

Current Examples and Best Practice

Despite the evidence that exists to the contrary, a 2018 UNESCO/OSCE/ODIHR report, *Addressing Antisemitism through Education: Guidelines for Policymakers* has reaffirmed the importance of teaching about the Holocaust in order to increase young people’s resilience against antisemitism. The report recommends that both antisemitism and Holocaust denial are addressed as part of Holocaust education curricula. However, significantly the report also stresses that Holocaust education cannot be the only educational strategy employed by governments, schools and NGOs to combat antisemitism among young people. The danger with too much of an emphasis on the

Holocaust in education about antisemitism is that it is both extreme in its violence and risks relegating antisemitism to the past.

As part of its findings, the report draws attention to a number of best practice examples in promoting young people's resilience against antisemitism. These initiatives are often run by Holocaust related institutions or projects, and their content may include elements of the history of the Holocaust, yet they are also clearly broader in the approach that they take to battling contemporary forms of antisemitism. These include the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's suite of lesson plans, podcasts and videos on antisemitism and the booklet, *A Human Being is a Human Being* produced by the Austrian project "National Socialism and the Holocaust: Memory and the Present." Also mentioned is the French Mémorial de la Shoah's workshops for teachers and students on social media, antisemitism and conspiracy theories. This workshop run by the long-established Holocaust remembrance organization asks students to look at conspiracy theories linked to antisemitism which are expressed in social media through messages, video and montages. They are asked to critically interrogate this media through fact-checking and crucially, questioning and learning about stereotypes and false representations. However, although cited as best practice, no evaluative data is included to verify these claims in terms of how this activity has influenced the attitudes of young people.

In terms of educating about the Holocaust and antisemitism specifically, it is useful to bear in mind the approach of the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education. Namely, to encourage teachers to move away from forms of Holocaust education that are framed by simplistic moral lessons but not substantive knowledge; to a mode of education that is built on rigorous historical knowledge which also includes critical reflection on the past and how it shapes young peoples' attitudes towards present-day social and cultural issues. The Centre advocates Continuing Professional Development for teachers and more evaluation studies of the impact of Holocaust education in the classroom in order to understand the dynamics that lead to effective pedagogy.

The Centre has produced an activity called 'Unlocking Antisemitism', and the process underpinning the creation of this activity has been the subject of critical reflection by Darius Jackson. He provides a detailed analysis of how this activity for Year 9 students or above uses a comparative history of antisemitism in medieval England and Nazi-occupied Poland in order to explore the roots and development of antisemitism in Europe. The activity highlights key issues in relation to the importance of historical continuity, change and context. Jackson's work is important because it is crucial that students understand the changing function of antisemitism in different historical and cultural contexts. Understanding these nuances helps young people to comprehend and critically reflect upon how antisemitism takes different forms in the present. Some students will be able to make these connections independently, while others may require teachers to facilitate initial discussions.

For example, the extreme exterminatory antisemitism of the Third Reich, predicated on racial hygiene and paranoid fantasies of Judeo-Bolshevik dominance, performed a quite different social, political and military function, to contemporary strains of antisemitism expressed by, for instance, the radical left in the UK and America. By way of an example, the 'Freedom for Humanity' (2012) mural by artist Mear One (also known as Kalen Ockerman) was removed by London's Tower Hamlets Borough Council because of its use of representations which resembled conspiracy theories about Jewish bankers – a classic antisemitic trope that cuts across many historical periods, cultures and ideologies. Yet, the function of this antisemitism was specific to its context. Mear One tried to justify the mural by saying that it was a political protest against contemporary global capitalism and class relations. Clearly, when current non-Jewish students encounter antisemitism in everyday life it will

not be wearing a Nazi uniform. It will instead require students to make sometimes quite complex judgements about cultural representations of antisemitic stereotypes which appear both off-line and online.

Conclusion

If public investment in teaching about the Holocaust is going to be productively linked to educating about antisemitism, there needs to be: 1) a serious consideration of how pre-war Jewish life, Jewish resistance and post-war Jewish life are represented in teaching and learning materials about the Holocaust; 2) specific and critical teaching about Nazi ideology and the particular role played by antisemitism within that belief system; 3) an awareness that knowledge about contemporary antisemitism may need to be either taught separately or in sensitive comparative contexts which highlight both continuity and rupture between the Third Reich's antisemitism and more contemporary forms of Judeophobia; 4) Support for the continuing professional development of teachers in this area; and 5) evaluation of education programmes to ensure that Holocaust education is effective in sensitizing young people to antisemitism.

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