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# Strengthening Holocaust Education

*by Janine Wulz*

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EUROPEAN  
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# Strengthening Holocaust Education

Janine Wulz, *University of Victoria*

## **Executive Summary**

Whenever politicians or scholars are confronted with hate crimes, antisemitism, or racism, the call for more or “better” Holocaust Education is usually not far. However, the question of “how” we should educate about the Holocaust is rarely defined in political speeches. Present day Holocaust Education is often understood as either learning about the past with a focus on history education, or as learning from the past, with a focus on today’s life and Human Rights. Most approaches do not reflect education about the Holocaust as embedded in (trans-)national memory politics. Holocaust memorialization is high on political agendas worldwide, it is tied to understandings of “good” and “evil”, loaded with ethics and morals and used for national identity building. Memory politics define Holocaust Education, as in what is included in classes, what is left out and how it is taught.

This policy paper argues for an understanding of Holocaust Education as embedded in local and (trans-) national memory politics. This requires learners to reflect on the influence of memory politics on understanding the past and negotiating past and present, interact with complex history and de-construct ideas of national identity-formation. To develop policies in support of an understanding of Holocaust Education, that is relevant for the present and the future, this policy brief suggests a range of measures, including the development of national strategies, monitoring, teacher education programs, teacher education and stronger involvement of local initiatives.

## The Policy Memo

### *Background*

Over the past decades, remembering the Holocaust and learning from and about it became a relevant element of transnational and national politics. Museums, memorials, and organizations were founded, as the IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance) or EHRI (European Holocaust Research Infrastructure), the Holocaust is part of the UN SDGs Educational goals and there is an International Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 27<sup>th</sup>, the day of the liberation of Auschwitz. The Holocaust and its memorialization is one of today's political key issues, as it is closely tied to understandings of ethics and morals (Pearce, 2020, p. 2) and a defining building block of European identity (Verovšek, 2021, p. 846).

With the founding of the USHMM (US Holocaust Memorial Museum) in 1993 and the inclusion of Holocaust Education in many countries' school curricula since the 1980s, today's younger generations should be well educated about the Holocaust and societies should be aware of this difficult past. However, international studies among younger generations provide insights in today's youth lacking from knowledge and awareness about the Holocaust (Claims Conference, 2020, p. 156), and antisemitic hate is growing across the world. Politicians in several countries exploit Holocaust memorialization for nationalist purposes, the last years COVID-19 protests used numerous antisemitic symbols and slogans, including stars of David (Brunner, 2021) and just in summer 2023, Bavaria's Vice-Premier Hubert Aiwanger was accused of being the author of antisemitic pamphlets.

As a reaction to cases like these, scholars and policy makers alike expect Holocaust education to effectively address antisemitism, calling for "Never Again!". However, the questions of what "Never Again!" actually means for contemporary societies, what to teach and how to achieve these learning goals seem not to have clear answers (Eckmann et al., 2017, p. 30), and would be answered different, depending on national contexts and their understanding of commemorating and educating the Holocaust (Pearce, 2020, p. 7).

This policy brief looks into finding suggestions for strengthening Holocaust Education in a world of complex memory politics and diverse understandings of learning goals. Based on an extensive literature review, it aims at developing strategies on how to implement Adorno's imperative of "the premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again" (Adorno, 1966) in educational systems in the 2020s.

### *Key findings*

We can distinguish different approaches towards Holocaust Education. One approach is focused on learning about the Holocaust, understanding its history and considers the Holocaust as a unique historical event, unprecedented in history in the industrial character of mass murder and decision to completely exterminate a specific group constructed and labeled as a race (Wogenstein, 2015, p. 547). Learners need to gain understanding of complex history in a specific context and gain knowledge about perpetrators, victims, bystanders, and rescuers. Today's society, values and actions can be reflected based on historical knowledge (Ballis, 2019, p. 4). However, this approach's focus on learning is criticized for being "stuck" in the past.

The second approach understands the Holocaust as a formative event of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, providing the foundation for cosmopolitan memory, transcending ethnic and national boundaries, forming transnational memory cultures, resulting in memorialization also by people without direct connection (Levy & Sznajder, 2002, p. 88). The universal moral relevance of the Holocaust as a global cultural symbol of evil (Bromley & Russell, 2010, p. 155) is understood as a cultural foundation for global Human Rights politics (Levy & Sznajder, 2002, p. 88). Learners look for historical or present connections to the Holocaust, understanding it as a central, albeit not singular example for genocides and atrocities (Ballis, 2019, p. 4).

With the growing recognition of genocides and atrocities committed worldwide, many countries shift towards embedding Holocaust Education in the framework of universal Human Rights violations (Bromley & Russell, 2010, p. 156). However, there are also critical voices worrying that comparisons without foundational knowledge about the complex history of the Holocaust might lead to oversimplifications, and parallels between today's politics and the Shoah are made too easily (Alba, 2020, p. 613; Eckmann, 2010, p. 10). Another criticism reflects the national differences of memory constructions and variety of experiences and perspectives. The need for self-critical reflection in relation to history and national identity formation, can be buried under a blurry, "Americanised" and locally disconnected transnational concept of memory (Assmann, 2010, p. 100).

While there are many arguments for each approach, both have a central weakness: they consider Holocaust Education detached from critical reflection of (trans-)national memory politics. Therefore, this policy paper suggests a third perspective on Holocaust education, that is embedded in global, regional, and national contexts.

Learning about the Holocaust cannot be separated from national and transnational politics, myths and identity-building. As a product of social interaction, memory politics shape education and awareness of the past, together with each learner's individual history and culture (Gross & Stevick, 2015, p. 495). How and what dimension of the Holocaust are discussed in classrooms is politically and culturally shaped: What knowledge is taught and legitimated? What is ignored or selected? How is it interpreted? (Gross & Stevick, 2015, p. 490).

Strengthening Holocaust Education means to make it matter in today's complex world. Understanding the Holocaust not as something in the past, but history that is influencing our world and society today, and is therefore very present. This understanding requires a shift towards questioning national myths and narratives (Davis & Rubinstein-Avila, 2013, p. 151), challenging ethical frameworks and creating complexity rather than complacency when negotiating present and past (Alba, 2020, p. 614).

### *Recommendations*

- **“Look into the distorted mirror” (Davis & Rubinstein-Avila, 2013, p. 151):** Critically reflect your country's history and how it is memorialized. This might include a reflection on commemorations, creation of new memorials for victims that are not represented yet, and the funding of research investigating “blind spots”.

- **Combat antisemitism, racism and hate:** To understand hateful ideologies, we need to learn about their history and use in history. This way we can discuss both, solutions that are targeting systemic questions (as laws or policies) as well as individual responsibilities. Intervention at the policy level can include the development of strategies against antisemitism, racism and hate; monitoring and analysing of incidents, training of employees in administration.
- **Involvement of local initiatives:** Initiatives working on local histories might include interested communities, families of survivors or educators. They are invested in the history of their community and often have extensive knowledge about it. The inclusion of these initiatives in Holocaust education can benefit learners by getting involved with activists, learning history of their region as well as learning to critically reflect their work. This can be supported by funding for field trips to visit local initiatives, the creation of a list of speakers in the local community that can be invited to schools and funding for community projects.
- **Teacher education:** A critical Holocaust education requires educators who are equipped to work with difficult and complex history as well as the tools to critically reflect them in the context of today's memorialization practices. As Holocaust Education is complex, and many educators feel not prepared enough for teaching it, the topic should be included in pre-service teacher training for several subjects (for example, history, social sciences, literature, politics, geography, foreign languages,...) as well as in professional development settings. Curricula for teacher education should be reviewed and adapted accordingly and professional education offers could be created in collaboration with NGOs, museums and other initiatives.
- **Development of teaching materials:** Teaching materials need to embed learning about the Holocaust in present day contexts of memory politics and critically engage with national myths and identity. To support educators, teaching materials should be developed following these principles in collaboration with researchers, educators, and teachers. Public administration, universities, museums or NGOs could lead this process.

## AUTHOR

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Janine is a PhD candidate and lecturer in German Studies and Holocaust Studies at the University of Victoria. She studied Political Science and Public Management in Vienna, Warsaw, and Klagenfurt. Janine worked as a researcher for 3s in Vienna on European educational politics before joining UVIC. Janines work is focused on Holocaust education and teacher education, memory politics and Holocaust graphic novels. She was co-leading the EUCA network European Memory Politics Study Tour in 2023.

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The Jean Monnet Network has established a transnational team of scholars and collaborators addressing the politics of memory, its use in the mobilizing efforts of populist-nationalist parties across the continent and the tension to an emerging transnational memory culture in the EU.

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