

Meranda Zent

Rachel Hallote

Senior Project

04 June 2021

Holocaust Education Comparison

The Holocaust was an extremely complex event, the details of this historical event have proven difficult to speak about and even more of a challenge to teach to younger generations. There are some major differences in Holocaust education based on where a person receives their education, the two countries that can easily be compared are Germany and the United States. Scholars have written about the importance of how and when to teach a child about the Holocaust. The topic of what age should school-aged children learn about the Holocaust alone has its own challenges, the two countries handle this complicated issue, among many other issues, in different ways. The United States and Germany both have some type of Holocaust education, yet they have very different approaches to how they educate their youth.

Before a proper comparison between how the United States educates its youth and how Germany educates its youth about the Holocaust; it is very important to have some of the general background information about the Holocaust itself. Having the general information about the Holocaust will allow a better understanding of how the education of the youths in the two different countries developed, and in turn the ability to draw comparisons between the two.

The Holocaust did not start with mass collection with the thought of extermination of the Jewish people. It began with the isolation of the Jewish people. The Nazis were very systematic

in almost everything they did, they started small so as to not raise any alarm when it came to isolating the Jews. They would enforce a labeling system to easily identify if a person was Jewish or not by forcing them to wear a yellow Star of David on their clothing. Then it progressed to Jewish people no longer being allowed to do certain things such as go to the movies or even sit on a park bench. This process was slowly forcing the Jews to lose the majority of their resources. One of the larger turning points which caused many Jewish people to flee Germany was the creation of the ghettos. The people of the Jewish faith were forced from their homes and told that everything would be fine if they moved and stayed in these horrible living conditions.

One of the many reasons so many Jews were murdered in the Holocaust was due to this slow isolation process. This was not the first time the Jews had faced persecution and antisemitism. Therefore, a large number of the Jewish leaders believed everything would turn out to be alright if they followed the German orders. The Nazis did not want the Jews to trust each other either, so they created what was known as the Kapos. The Kapos were primarily used in the camps, but some did exist in the ghettos; they were Jews who were given special privileges such as more food in exchange for information.¹ This, unfortunately, leads to the Jews being packed up like cattle onto cargo trains and transported to the concentration camps.

The Holocaust was considered to be one of the most brutal genocides in history by many historians. This was because of how systematic the mass murder was.² The process was so systematic it was considered to be machine-like in how the Nazis went about carrying out what Hitler would later refer to as the “final solution”. Around six million people of the Jewish faith

¹ “Concentration Camps,” Kapos, accessed June 6, 2021, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/kapos>, 1.

² Kirsh, “The Book Report,” 1.

were murdered during the Holocaust. Either being killed in the massive death camps, such as the most infamous one being Auschwitz, or passing away during what was known as a death march; or dying due to malnutrition and exhaustion at a work camp.³ A death march was when the Jewish prisoners were transported between two different camps by being forced to walk many miles without any food or water, and they were given few if any chances to rest. While many died during these death marches, the majority of the systematic murder happened in the death camps.

Those who could not work in the labor camps to help provide for the Nazi war effort were sent straight to death camps such as Auschwitz. They were led to what is known now as the gas chambers. These chambers looked very similar to a large shower area, instead of water coming out of the pipes it was a deadly chemical meant to murder those who entered the chamber. This was the Nazis primary way of murdering the people who were in the death camps; they would then force the Jewish prisoners who could still work to take the bodies away to massive cremation ovens. Hitler's final solution was to have all of the Jews murdered, he even collected the Jews' belongings they left behind when they were taken to the camps to create what he called a museum for an extinct race.⁴ The mass murder of the Jews to be known as the Holocaust would become a very complicated event in history.

After all of the concentration camps were liberated, and a few years have passed, the question arose on how to educate future generations about the events that occurred during the Holocaust. The United States and Germany both faced this question in different ways.

³ Kurzweil, "Facts and Fictions about the Holocaust." 1.

⁴ Bernard Weinraub, "TROVE OF JUDAICA PRESERVED BY NAZIS TO TOUR U.S.," The New York Times (The New York Times, September 20, 1983), <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/09/20/us/trove-of-judaica-preserved-by-nazis-to-tour-us.html>, 1.

The United States started teaching about the Holocaust in 1958. The first ever graduate seminar on Nazi totalitarianism and religious minorities was created by professor Franklin Littell at Emory University in 1958-60.⁵ There was very little being taught about the Holocaust at this time in the United States, people often preferring to remain silent on the matter during the 1950s.⁶ Moving into the 1960s one of the major events that opened the door to more Holocaust education in the United States was the capture of Adolf Otto Eichmann. This capture brought worldwide attention to the Holocaust and sparked a global interest in the historical event; spurring the need for more education.

It was also during the 1960s the now famous book written by Elie Wiesel titled *Night* was published.⁷ This was a major success in making information about the Holocaust accessible to the public. Even in the modern day, Elie Wiesel's *Night* is used in some school curriculums. The majority of the advancement in Holocaust education in the United States truly began in the late 1960s into the 1970s.

The key events that occurred in the 1960s led to the ability for Littell and Locke to organize the first scholars' conference in America about the Third Reich and its attack on Christianity and Judaism in 1969-1970. This conference then opened the door for larger conferences such as the International Conference on the Church Struggle and the Holocaust to happen.⁸ The purpose of the conference was to strengthen Christian/Jewish understanding in two primary areas, in the academic world, by interfaith, international, and interdisciplinary study of

⁵ Littell, "Breaking the Silence," 127.

⁶ Littell, "Breaking the Silence," 125.

⁷ Littell, "Breaking the Silence," 128.

⁸ Littell, "Breaking the Silence," 129.

the Nazi assault on the Jews and such Christians who remained Christian. In the political arena, by joint study and support of Israel's survival and well-being.⁹

This conference was successful in that it became so important it became an annual conference, yet it was not successful in that it was not allowing the information to be shared on a more public scale. This would become a common theme in Holocaust education across the United States. There would be some access to Holocaust education and the general public level, but during the 1960s the only real source of Holocaust education was in higher education programs.

The more international attention the Holocaust received, the more important it became to create a way to educate younger generations on a public scale about the historical event. More public education on the Holocaust began to develop more in the 1970s in the United States as a result of the prior conferences in the 1960s.

There was a major protest in a Chicago suburb by the name of Skokie in 1977. It was a planned march by neo-nazis in a town that was known to have a large amount of Holocaust survivors living in it. This march never actually happened, due to the counter-protesters that showed up to support the survivors of the Holocaust.¹⁰ This event eventually was the reason a Holocaust museum was established in 2009 in Illinois. It's one of about 15 Holocaust museums in the U.S. that share a link with the Skokie revolt of 1978.¹¹ The 1980s showed a slightly different approach to the Holocaust.

⁹ Littell, "Breaking the Silence," 131.

¹⁰ "Skokie: The Legacy of the Would-Be Nazi March in a Town of Holocaust Survivors," ABC News (ABC News Network), accessed June 6, 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/skokie-legacy-nazi-march-town-holocaust-survivors/story?id=56026742>, 5.

¹¹ Belkin, "Holocaust Survivors' Protest Still Echoes in Illinois Suburb," The Wall Street Journal (Dow Jones & Company, April 18, 2009), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB124001198935030861>, 1.

In 1988 the musical work *Triumph of Death* was a great example of how the Jewish people were attempting to now cope with the massive amount of lives that were lost during the Holocaust. The song brought more attention to the gravity of how truly devastating the Holocaust was.¹² Music, this song specifically, can also be seen as an education tool. This song shows how the survivors internalized the trauma of what they went through in order to cope.¹³ Music was just one of the ways that people found comfort in coping with the loss of so many lives. It is because of all of the small steps that have been taken to open discussions about the Holocaust, which started in the 1960s in the United States, that we have much easier access to information about the Holocaust.

Museums are one of the most common ways people have preserved history, and one of the more accessible forms of education to the general public outside of a school environment. With this in mind, it is rather odd to discover it is not as common as a person would expect that a group of high school-aged students would have a scheduled field trip to a museum. Especially in current times, dealing with a pandemic has made it all the more challenging to expose these students to all the information a museum can offer. The current struggles the pandemic has presented has only highlighted how important museums are when it comes to education.¹⁴ While some still offer in-person visits with tickets bought in advance, this is still not an option for everyone. Each specific museum across the country is operating differently following the guidelines of their states.

¹² Kutschke, "On Rzewski's *The Triumph of Death*," 644.

¹³ Kutschke, "On Rzewski's *The Triumph of Death*," 643.

¹⁴ Laura Lott, "Public Schools Are in Crisis. Museums Can Help Fill the Gap-But Only If They Survive," *Artnet News*, October 21, 2020, <https://news.artnet.com/opinion/schools-are-in-crisis-museums-can-help-fill-the-gap-but-only-if-they-survive-19168> 21, 1.

One museum in the local area around and inside of New York City would be the Museum of Jewish Heritage – A Living Memorial to the Holocaust. This museum, in light of the pandemic, is offering online classes to further educate the general public for a small fee. While a person can still visit with the purchase of a ticket in advance; the online option allows a larger group of people to be able to access more information about the Holocaust. This specific event currently has three classes with topics about Jewish life starting from the end of World War I and ending after World War II.¹⁵ There are many other museums across the country with a large amount of information about the Holocaust.

There is another Holocaust museum in Huston Texas called, Holocaust Museum Huston. Their website alone offers a great amount of different information that can be very easily accessed. They have several easy-to-navigate links that lead to more information about Ruth Schnitzer’s survivor story, what genocide actually is, and more information about Krakow, Poland.¹⁶ Going to a museum focused on the Holocaust and human rights can offer a more hands-on experience for people to gain a better understanding of not only a large historical event; but a complex and sensitive part of history.

Outside of going to a museum, there are many different websites that offer great information about more specific details about the Holocaust. Websites are not only a great way for more information to be accessible, but it is also an easier way for a person who cannot afford to travel to a museum for whatever reason. For example, the *Holocaust Center For Humanity* is a website that has great information about the Holocaust; more specifically about some of the

¹⁵ “The Museum of Jewish Heritage - A Living Memorial to the Holocaust,” Museum of Jewish Heritage - A Living Memorial to the Holocaust, March 8, 2021, <https://mjhnyc.org/>, Event Details.

¹⁶ “Holocaust Museum Houston,” Holocaust Museum Houston, accessed March 24, 2021, <https://hnh.org/>, Home Page.

survivors. On this website, a person can find a first-person account of Holocaust survivors talking about their journey from escaping or living through the Holocaust and making their way to America and how difficult that journey was to make.¹⁷

The United States has a decentralized education system that has allowed individual states to determine their own Kindergarten-12th grade curriculum in all subjects. There are only five states that have mandated the teaching of Holocaust and Genocide Studies for K12. Many states have strongly suggested the teaching of Holocaust and Genocide Studies, so long as it was compatible with the common-core curriculum standards within their state requirements.¹⁸ This means there are states that will have textbooks given out with no reference to the Holocaust at all. For example in the textbook “27.1 The Origins of War: Europe, Asia, and the United States - U.S. History.” The only mention was focused on Hitler and how he was able to rise to power so quickly with his charm and wit. There was no mention at all about the Holocaust and the targeting of the Jewish population.¹⁹ The modern way the United States teaches about the Holocaust truly depends on what state the education comes from.

The inconsistencies that can be found across the United States public education system regarding the Holocaust are very problematic. In recent years, Holocaust education in the United States has faced many extreme internal challenges. The first well-trained, committed Holocaust studies teachers are now retiring. New younger teachers are focused on attaining tenure and making school administrators happy who may not support teaching school-aged children about

¹⁷ “Home,” Holocaust Center for Humanity, accessed May 10, 2021, <https://holocaustcenterseattle.org/>, Survivors page.

¹⁸ Littell, “Breaking the Silence,” 132.

¹⁹ “27.1 The Origins of War: Europe, Asia, and the United States - U.S. History,” OpenStax, accessed May 10, 2021, <https://openstax.org/books/us-history/pages/27-1-the-origins-of-war-europe-asia-and-the-united-states>, 27.

the Holocaust and would rather focus on standardized testing.²⁰ With the lack of teachers who are knowledgeable about the subject matter and not worried about making sure they do not lose their jobs due to issues with administration; finding a proper Holocaust education on a high school level can prove difficult.

The United States is well known for its higher education programs, yet some of its public education programs for younger high school-aged children seem to be lacking in some key areas. While the Holocaust is a very widely known topic now, most American children in the high school age range do not know too many details about it. Other than the general sense when it comes to Germany and its role in World War II, most high school-age children do not know much about the Holocaust until they take further classes through college; or take it upon themselves to do their own research about the subject.

Germany has a much different take on Holocaust education, and how its youth is taught about the Holocaust. Since the actual event took place within the country, Germany has the advantage of being able to offer a more hands-on form of education. Many scholars will argue that Germany began the proper education of its youths about the Holocaust far later than it should have.

Since the creation of Central European History's in 1968 when it came to specifically German history the focus was not on the Holocaust, it was more focused on Nazism. The only real mention of the Holocaust in the beginning was when the "Final solution" was discussed. It was really only in the 1970s that the Holocaust had received proper attention. Only one essay by Lawrence Stokes was devoted to the Holocaust in the 1970s. In the 1980s there was a review

²⁰ Littell, "Breaking the Silence," 132.

article by Richard Breitman and a seminal piece on the ghettos by Christopher Browning.²¹ It was not truly until the 2000s did actual writing about the Holocaust, not specifically about Nazism, come out. There was some mention, but it was either not very well known about, or was a small section of a larger piece of writing about Nazism.²² The majority of the German historians were unaware of the research that was being conducted by Jewish people about victimhood, local collaboration, and other topics that had initially started during the war.²³ It was the eventual release of writings from the German Jewish population that placed more attention on the Holocaust over Nazism.

One of the writings that began to shine a light on German Jews' life during the war was by Marion Kaplan in 1998. Kaplan wrote *Between Dignity and Despair* and within it, she had used diaries to draw a focus on what life was truly like for a German Jew under Nazi persecution.²⁴ There was also a focus on the lives of non-Jewish Germans and what their reactions to the Nazi regime were. Many different scholars such as Susanne Zur Nieden, Peter Fritzsche, Nicholas Stargardt, and Janosch Steuwer were able to come to find that there were many sympathetic figures who accepted many of the policies of the regime while at the same time not considering themselves to be Nazis.²⁵

There seemed to be an interesting theme within the first works of writing that came out about the Nazis. There seemed to be a lack of interest in researching the army's involvement with the Nazis along with any documents about the treatment of the Jews during the war. A large amount of these documents were taken by the United States and Great Britain, but they were all

²¹ Roseman, "German History Writing and the Holocaust." 96.

²² Roseman, "German History Writing and the Holocaust." 97.

²³ Roseman, "German History Writing and the Holocaust." 98.

²⁴ Roseman, "German History Writings and the Holocaust." 99.

²⁵ Roseman, "German History Writings and the Holocaust." 100.

later returned to Germany. With easy access to the documents, it was not lacking evidence that proved to be the reason German historians did not research more into the Holocaust and the Nazi regime's relationship with the army, but the lack of interest in the topic.²⁶ The lack of interest by German scholars in the Holocaust and the treatment of the Jews during wartime meant there was no real education program until many years later.

While there was plenty of information about the Nazi regime due to the vast amount of records that were kept, little was actually written down about the Holocaust until the 2000s. This made early education in the 1960s through the 1990s on the Holocaust in Germany almost nonexistent. There were a few writings with some notes about the Holocaust, but very few actually written that was completely centered around the events of the Holocaust. The majority of the research about the Holocaust during this time was conducted by Jewish German historians, whose work was not given much thought; due to the lack of interest in the subject by German scholars at the time. There was no real form of proper Holocaust education outside of any discussions about the Nazi regime within the German school system.

In general, before the 2000s into today, in Germany there was more information about the Nazis and their role in World War II; and the policies that were put into place by the Nazis. While plenty was documented about all of the laws and new policies that were put into place by Hitler during his time of power, there seemed to be little public interest in researching any of it further. The mentality was to move on and attempt to forget the past tragedies rather than to face and remember them. For example, two women in their 60s were interviewed about a documentary series about the Holocaust and their responses were not very forthcoming. One woman was

²⁶ Bartov, "German Soldiers and the Holocaust," 3.

quoted saying, “Oh, not yet again, I can't see it, I am not interested in it, why cook up again this old subject?”.²⁷ This interview took place in 2001, even then it was still very hard for Germans to talk about the horrors of the Holocaust, yet there was a common understanding that there was a need to talk and educate future generations about the event. Holocaust education did not truly become common until more recent years.

Germany was the epicenter of the Holocaust so to speak therefore, arguably the aftermath of the Holocaust hit much harder emotionally and in many other ways on the German people. The concentration camps were figuratively in the backyards of many different towns and cities across Germany. The SS established larger camps in Oranienburg, north of Berlin; Esterwegen, near Hamburg; Dachau, northwest of Munich; and Lichtenburg, in Saxony.²⁸ The discovery of these camps leads to many controversies about the people living around the camps being aware of the atrocities occurring in these camps and not doing anything to stop them. This connects very strongly to how these generations would go about teaching the future generations about what had occurred in their home country.

One of the teaching methods that has proven to be the most beneficial for having a greater impact on teaching children about the Holocaust in Germany is taking them to the actual sites of the concentration camps. Bringing high school-age children to the locations of the concentration camps allowed them to further discuss Germany's specific laws regarding the Holocaust. An article about one of these field trips states, “At one point, the student's teacher, Matthias Angelike, interjected to ask their guide about a recent incident involving lawmakers from the far-right populist party Alternative for Germany (AfD) and a group of their constituents.

²⁷ Salamon, “German Witnessess to German Horrors.” 1.

²⁸ “AfD Lawmakers Walk out on Holocaust Survivor's Speech in Bavaria,” Reuters (Thomson Reuters, January 23, 2019), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-afd-idUSKCN1PH2BM>, 1.

While on a tour here last summer, several members of the group interrupted their host to cast doubt on the existence of Sachsenhausen's gas chambers and diminish the crimes committed in Nazi death camps." ²⁹ The casting of doubt on if the Holocaust truly occurred can be linked back to the lack of interest by previous German scholars. This then led to the very well-known law prohibiting the denial of the Holocaust. There also was the use of survivors' testimony when it came to educating the German youth.

With the number of survivors of the Holocaust dwindling down more and more due to passing away from old age, it became increasingly important to document their stories to be able to share them and educate not just the current youth of German but for many more generations to come. While the German youth has the ability to visit the location of the concentration camps far easier than a student in the United States, there can be more survivors found within the United States. This is one of the major differences in how the two different countries are able to educate their youth about the Holocaust.

With all of this information in mind, it is very clear to see some of the similarities and differences between the way the United States and Germany educate their youth on the Holocaust. One of the major differences being that the United States began its Holocaust education on a public scale at a much earlier date. While there can be some writings about the Holocaust found in Germany in the 1970s, it is not as large of a scale in comparison to the United States amount of information on the Holocaust. Another large and rather obvious difference in the education of high school-aged children in the two countries is the much easier access to the locations of the concentration camps Germany has over the United States. While it

²⁹ "AfD Lawmakers Walk out on Holocaust Survivor's Speech in Bavaria," Reuters (Thomson Reuters, January 23, 2019), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-afd-idUSKCN1PH2BM>, 2.

is not impossible for a student to go visit one of these historical locations to further their own education, it is much more difficult. Another notable difference is the location of the survivors, there are more survivors living within the United States that are alive today than that are living in Germany. Finally, the last most important difference is Holocaust education is now mandatory and the denial of the Holocaust is illegal in Germany. Whereas in the United States each individual state can decide if it wishes to teach its youth about the Holocaust, and it is legal due to the first amendment to deny the Holocaust. There are some similarities when it comes to Holocaust education within the two countries as well.

The major similarities can be found within the higher education systems in the United States and the general public education that is provided to German high school students. Since every state in the United States can decide to teach the Holocaust in detail or not, there are more opportunities to learn about the details that are given to German high school children. While they are optional unlike in Germany, the United States higher education programs do have similarly detailed information that is given to high school children in Germany. While it is not exactly Holocaust education specifically, children in the United States are taught the same information about the Nazi regime and Hitler's rise to power as German children. Holocaust education is an ever-evolving field of study.

While the two countries have their differences and similarities in how they educate their youths on the Holocaust it has become clear that those who educate people on the Holocaust wish to continue the study of the Holocaust. That is the primary reason for education on any subject matter, so it will not be forgotten nor will the same mistakes be made that cause such

horrific events like the Holocaust. In today's world, things are very different, people have access to more information much easier than when the Holocaust occurred.

There is a vast amount of information about the Holocaust no matter what country a person may reside in. With the ever-pressing knowledge that there will eventually be no more survivors of the Holocaust that are alive, it is extremely important to educate the youths of today, no matter what country they may reside in, so that future generations will be able to have an even better education on the Holocaust. While there is no exact global curriculum on the Holocaust, there is a large amount of information that is on an international scale; and therefore available internationally to those who wish to find it. Due to the invention of the internet information can be exchanged much easier and faster rather than when Holocaust research began and large conferences needed to be held. While there is a large amount of information that is now known about the Holocaust and the events leading up to the creation of the concentration camps, there is always more to be discovered.

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