Recommendations and ideas for using educational graphic novels in teaching and learning about the Holocaust

1. The Holocaust as a continent-wide genocide

The Holocaust was the state-sponsored, systematic persecution and murder of Jews by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945, a continent-wide genocide that destroyed not only individuals and families but also communities and cultures that had developed over centuries. The height of the Holocaust occurred in the context of the violence during the Second World War and Nazi-led persecution and murder that targeted many other ethnic groups. The Holocaust was a watershed event in world history, spanning geographic boundaries and affecting all segments of the societies it touched.[1]

The image of a train station and groups of Jews with suitcases boarding the trains to death camps is the image of the Holocaust most (Western) Europeans share. While certainly not wrong, it is far from being the only picture of the Holocaust's horrifying end. The way the Holocaust unfolded locally was specific and different in many places around Europe. Murders, too, were carried out in different ways in different areas, under different circumstances and motives. Enabled by Nazi Germany and the violence of war, the Holocaust was often locally executed by other perpetrators: collaborating fascist and nationalist regimes, local military, gendarmerie, police or paramilitary organizations, groups, and individuals that helped, participated in, or instigated the mass violence and murders themselves.

To better understand this unprecedented crime, and preserve the memory of the victims, we have to acknowledge and embrace the plurality of experiences and micro-histories that constitute and shape the local, regional, and national Holocaust histories around Europe.

From Judenlager Semlin where a gas-van took Jewish women and children to their final deadly ride, to Jajinci at the outskirts of Belgrade in Serbia, to the meadow outside Lviv where Erna Petri, a mother of two, cold-bloodedly killed six Jewish children, shooting them each in the back of the neck, from the executions in Falstadskogen forest outside the Falstad concentration camp in Norway, to the trains that left the Westerbork transit camp in the Netherlands, there are thousands and thousands of different singular local experiences, personal stories, local Holocaust events that took place in the meadows and woods, on the streets and squares, in houses and buildings all across Europe. All these microhistories constitute equally essential segments of the Holocaust.

As Dutch historian and Holocaust survivor Abel Herzberg said, "There were not six million Jews murdered; there was one murder, six million times.[2]"

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[1] Recommendations on Teaching and Learning about the Holocaust by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), 2019.

[2] https://www.ushmm.org/online-calendar/event/mchcrltcol1118

To grasp the European character of the Holocaust, we need to learn more about its local microhistories. Equally, to better understand the local events of the Holocaust, we need to look at them as building blocks of a continent-wide genocide.

This is essential for developing knowledge and ensuring accuracy in understanding the Holocaust. It is a precondition for enabling reflection upon the moral, political, and social questions raised by the Holocaust, and their relevance today, including contemporary antisemitism and Holocaust distortion.

(the conclusion, in a separate colored field:)

Learning about the Holocaust micro-histories can help us to better understand:

- The vivid pre-war life of Jewish communities in Europe
- The European character of this genocide, with its vast diversity of experiences and narratives that are all part of a single, shared European historical event
- The scope of the destruction of Jewish life, culture and heritage
- Aid and resistance
- Collaboration and bystandership
- The awareness of shared responsibility to preserve the memory, protect the human and civil rights of all citizens, and prevent a crime such as the Holocaust from ever happening again.

2. Teaching and learning about the Holocaust

Based on the IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance) recommendations about "Teaching and Learning about the Holocaust", educators and learners should be encouraged and empowered to reflect upon the moral, political and social questions raised by the Holocaust and their relevance today. Through Holocaust education, which constitutes a cornerstone of democratic education, students:

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1. Develop knowledge of the Holocaust, ensure accuracy in individual understanding and knowledge, and raise awareness about the possible consequences of antisemitism
2. Create engaging teaching environments for learning about the Holocaust.
3. Promote critical and reflective thinking about the Holocaust including the ability to counter Holocaust denial and distortion.
4. Contribute to Human Rights and genocide prevention education.

In addition to equipping learners with knowledge about an event that fundamentally challenged human values, "Teaching and Learning about the Holocaust" gives learners the opportunity to understand some of the mechanisms and processes that lead to genocide and the choices people made to accelerate, accept or resist the process of persecution and murder, acknowledging that these choices were sometimes made under extreme circumstances.

Above all, educators should be confident that the Holocaust can be taught effectively and successfully with careful preparation and appropriate materials. Educators should be accurate and precise with regard

to historical facts and historical comparisons. The use of appropriate language should also be emphasized. The use of learner-centered approaches that support critical thinking and reflection should be encouraged. Attention should be paid to the importance of carefully selected primary and secondary sources appropriate for the learners which clearly convey the individuality and agency of historical actors. Last but not least, it is important to including a nuanced historical context and avoid historical comparisons when exploring the Holocaust in the context of other fields such as genocide prevention and human rights[3].

3. Education about antisemitism

In its working definition of antisemitism, IHRA defines antisemitism as a "certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities."

UNESCO sees antisemitism as a security issue for Jewish communities and individuals in regions across the world and the driving force of a range of violent extremist ideologies. Like all forms of intolerance and discrimination, antisemitism has a profound impact on the whole of society, undermining democratic values and human rights. We should always remember that antisemitism is not confined to extremist circles and has become increasingly mainstream. Addressing antisemitism through education is therefore both an immediate security imperative and a long-term educational investment to promote human rights and global citizenship.

To support teachers and school directors in preventing and addressing antisemitism in schools, UNESCO and OSCE/ODIHR have published a set of four framework curricula for teacher trainers, entitled "Addressing Anti-Semitism in Schools: Training Curricula".

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It is important to understand that teaching about the Holocaust and teaching about antisemitism are not the same. It is often wrongly assumed that teaching about the history of the most extreme historical event driven by antisemitism would be enough to address contemporary forms of antisemitism, and the danger it represents in our societies today. While these two topics may overlap, and contribute to a better understanding of one and the other, they do not cover, and can not cover all aspects of both.

4. Contemporary challenges for educators

Holocaust denial

In its working definition of Holocaust denial, IHRA defines it as "discourse and propaganda that deny the historical reality and the extent of the extermination of the Jews by the Nazis and their accomplices during World War II, known as the Holocaust or the Shoah. Holocaust denial refers specifically to any

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[3] Recommendations on Teaching and Learning about the Holocaust by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, How to teach about the Holocaust, p 5, (IHRA), 2019.

attempt to claim that the Holocaust/Shoah did not take place. Holocaust denial in its various forms is an expression of antisemitism. The attempt to deny the genocide of the Jews is an effort to exonerate National Socialism and antisemitism from guilt or responsibility in the genocide of the Jewish people. Forms of Holocaust denial also include blaming the Jews for either exaggerating or creating the Shoah for political or financial gain as if the Shoah itself was the result of a conspiracy plotted by the Jews. In this, the goal is to make the Jews culpable and antisemitism once again legitimate. The goals of Holocaust denial often are the rehabilitation of explicit antisemitism and the promotion of political ideologies and conditions suitable for the advent of the very type of event it denies."

Holocaust distortion

According to IHRA, distortion of the Holocaust is rhetoric, written work, or other media that excuse, minimize, or misrepresent the known historical record. This can be intentional or unintentional. However, all distortion, whether intentional or not, feeds into antisemitic narratives and can lead to more violent forms of antisemitism. Although distortion often shares the same antisemitic goals as denial, it can be harder to identify the motives behind it, as there are some forms of distortion that stem from ignorance rather than antisemitism. Regardless of the motivation, however, distortion always reinforces antisemitism and related biases. It opens the door to outright Holocaust denial or other forms of pernicious, dangerous, and violent antisemitism.

IHRA experts have identified ten main forms of Holocaust denial in the publication [“Recognizing and Countering Holocaust Distortion: Recommendations for Policy and Decision Makers.”](#)

Education

As educators in the fields of teaching and learning about the Holocaust and addressing antisemitism, we face a range of difficulties related to the contemporary state of knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust and antisemitism in our societies, as well as to the overall political situation and reality. This, of course, varies in different parts of Europe, and there are many local specificities. Some of the problems educators seek to solve could be:

- How to address contemporary Neo-Nazi ideas and antisemitic conspiracy theories
- How to deal with many "small" or large factual misconceptions that are widely spread among students
- How to teach when there is a lack of overview over a general "state of knowledge" in society
- How to encourage questions and a constructive critical discussion
- How to teach about the Holocaust as a continent-wide genocide when there is a lack of interest to learn about the Holocaust microhistories in other parts of Europe
- How to teach about the role of collaborators in occupied Europe when there might be a lack of political will and courage for an honest examination of the darkest corners of local and national history
- How to deal with comparisons, trivializations, and relativizations such as with the Covid measures, animal rights activism, anti-globalism, ecology, the suffering of German (or other) civilians during the Second World War, communist crimes, colonialism, or other human rights violations (alleged or real)

- How to deal with criticism, demonization, double standards, and delegitimization of Israel
- How to include education about active citizenship, basic ideas about human rights, civil rights, civic duties, citizenship beyond voting – how to take part in society, fostering pluralism, etc.
- How to foster objective discussion about the Israel-Palestine conflict without falling into antisemitic pitfalls
- How to foster critical thinking, source criticism, and media literacy.

5. Educational graphic novels

Although this document is primarily aimed at teachers, it should also serve as a source of inspiration for librarians, archivists, museum and civil society educators, and other multipliers, and encourage them to take an active role in initiating and driving education about the Holocaust and antisemitism.

The foundation that the educational graphic novel is based upon consists of two visual layers, each underpinned by historical and literary record with a clear didactic meaning.

The first visual layer consists of historical data and it provides the foundation for the reconstruction of life stories. This layer includes archival documents, newspapers, and photographs that depict scenes from everyday life before the war, as well as the dramatic events during the war.

The second layer is imagined by the novel's authors and illustrators. It represents an artistic interpretation of the factual visual layer. The purpose of this approach, using parallel visual narratives, is to make the historical sources and their informative content as accessible to young learners as possible.

Historical photographs as documentary records present learners with events, situations and people's moods they may not be able to easily relate to. However, illustrations based on historical photographs, archival records and written material can make it possible to establish historical empathy, create an interest for these sensitive topics, and initiate basic investigative procedure. This then leads to examining the past from a personal angle, which is an important perspective in history education.

Alongside the illustrations, the text tells the story of the main characters and their families, contextualizing the visual narrative and guiding the learner through the sequence of events.

By using two visual layers in parallel with a literary narrative to approach an extremely sensitive topic, the authors enable the development of affective empathy, acknowledging the importance of moral considerations when analyzing both historical and contemporary social phenomena.

Graphic novels have a strong appeal to children and motivate them to read. With their complex plots, narrative structure and rich illustrations, graphic novels appeal to avid readers; however, school librarians and educators have noticed that they are also popular among those who are not keen on reading.

High quality graphic novels available to readers today require the same level of literacy and comprehension as traditional prose. They require the reader to be actively involved in the process of decoding the content, and to understand the narrative structure, as well as the metaphorical and symbolic

meaning of the text. Educational material presented in the form of graphic novels enables students to develop reading skills which are needed in order to comprehend more complex works, including the literary classics.

Educators have at their disposal a wide range of methods for graphic novel usage in teaching:

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- Graphic novel as visual sources (illustrations) – study and analyze visual sources
- Graphic novel as a source of information – a form of acquiring new knowledge
- Graphic novel used to initiate conversations and discussions with students
- Creating a graphic novel – students are tasked with creating their own stories.

When teaching about the past, it is important to present history so that learners understand it but also become genuinely interested. High quality educational material about the Holocaust and other crimes committed during the Second World War enables learners to take the step further; from active information-gathering, investigating the causes and the consequences, drawing conclusions constructing new examples, to solving problems and examining the arguments.

The result is that learners gain functional knowledge they can use during further education and beyond.

Teaching about the Holocaust does not only have to be teaching about death but can also be about life – a life that once was and a life that continues, against all odds. By using the artistic languages of song, dance, images and words, artists have always told stories about the events of the past and the people who took part in them.

Through the written word and the process of dramatization, literary writers have been able to bring to life characters, dialogues and events, and enable us to closely study emotional, moral, psychological, philosophical and other deeply human aspects of historical events in ways that go beyond the analytical and investigative instruments available to historical science. Various narrative forms, including the graphic novel, provide a plethora of possibilities for use in education.

Teaching history through graphic novels opens up an opportunity to engage learners, both emotionally and intellectually, in an entirely new way. Such works provide insights into the society before, during and after the Holocaust, bringing to life the experiences, thoughts and emotions not only of the victims but also of the bystanders, those who tried to help, as well as the perpetrators and their collaborators. By creating an age-appropriate graphic novel, children are not confronted with the scenes of death and atrocities, as it has long been established that they do not lead to better understanding of the Holocaust but, on the contrary, cause aversion and trauma.

Stories and illustrations in an educational graphic novel are multi-layered, created with lots of details which can trigger further investigative work, not only about historical events and life before the Second World War but also about technology, culture, cinematography, sports, fashion and other aspects of everyday life.

Types of assignments for learners

Investigative assignments
The aim is to help learners gain basic investigative methodology skills – in particular the skill of investigating various historical sources such as photographs, testimonies, historical newspapers, archival documents, etc.

Analysis of historical sources
This assignment aims to help learners develop the skill of analyzing historical sources and drawing conclusions based on concrete examples.

Learning at the location
The aim is to help learners develop the skill of investigating historical locations as well as to present their findings.

Compare and analyze – same place, different time
Analyze the illustrations presenting the same location at different periods, for instance before and during the occupation, or before, during and after the war. For instance, one can look at our main characters home, or a schoolyard, public places of every-day life such as streets and squeres in the city, and buildings and locations that had one purpose before the war, but were turned into concentration camps or killing sites during the Holocaust).

Collage
Learners are tasked with creating a collage that depicts the novel, its characters, settings and historical context in the respective country as well as in the larger European context, by using photographs, illustration, maps, and other materials gathered from the Internet or other sources. The collage may be digital, printed or created by cutting and pasting pieces of material.

Parallel timelines
Create three parallel timelines and place them one under another.
The first line includes illustrations from the novel placed in chronological order. The second line includes significant and relevant historical events and developments in the country before the war and during the period of occupation. The third line includes relevant historical events and social and political developments related to the Second World War and the Holocaust in Europe.

Create your own graphic novel

1. **Create a graphic novel about the experiences of your own family (individual or group work)**

Learners investigate experiences related to a significant event from their family's past (not necessarily related to the Second World War) and create a graphic novel based on their findings. One has to make sure that personal story is placed in the broader social and historical context. Students can use photographs, newspaper clippings and other documents. The purpose of this exercise is to focus on personal stories, understanding the investigative process and connecting the personal story to the socio-historical context in which it unfolds. This exercise can serve as part of preparation for creating a graphic novel about the Holocaust.

2. **Create a graphic novel about the Holocaust, based on a local personal story (group work)**

Leaners investigate real persons and events which took place in their own local environment during the Holocaust and create a graphic novel based on their findings. The focus is on a personal story, which must be based on relevant historical sources and placed into the context of broader socio-historical events. This is why it's important that the teacher takes an active role and supports the students in the investigative process. Learners make use of photographs, newspaper clippings and other documents. It is advised that the maximum limited number of pages/illustrations is set at the start to avoid unrealistic ambitions. On completing the graphic novel, learners make a presentation that includes a report about the investigative and creative process, as well as a brief outline of the European and local historical context of their story.

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(in English or/and your national language – just mark the references in your language)

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