

# HOLOCAUST EDUCATION IN QUEBEC: TEACHERS' POSITIONING AND PRACTICES

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**ABSTRACT.** Teaching about the Holocaust is mandatory in many societies. This prescription is justified by authorities with many reasons: educating pupils for a better understanding of human rights, peace, war, genocide, critical thinking, historical thinking, racism, etc. The Holocaust can carry a very strong moral and emotional charge. But why do teachers choose to teach about it when it is not compulsory? And how do they do this? Which resources do they use? What content is their teaching based on? This case study focuses on three high school history teachers in Quebec and explores their educational objectives in teaching the Holocaust and related pedagogical practices, including a field trip to the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre.

## ENSEIGNER L'HOLOCAUSTE AU QUÉBEC : POSTURES ET PRATIQUES D'ENSEIGNANTS

**RÉSUMÉ.** L'enseignement de l'Holocauste est obligatoire dans plusieurs sociétés et cette prescription est justifiée par les autorités de plusieurs manières : permettre aux élèves de développer une compréhension plus approfondie des notions de droits humains, de paix, de guerre, de génocide, de pensée critique, de pensée historique, de racisme, etc. L'Holocauste possède aussi une forte charge émotionnelle et morale. Mais pourquoi des enseignants n'ayant pas le mandat d'enseigner cet événement le font-ils? Comment le font-ils? Avec quel matériel? Quels contenus abordent-ils? Cette étude de cas suit trois enseignants d'histoire du Québec. Elle explore leurs objectifs éducatifs, les pratiques pédagogiques mises en place, incluant une visite au Musée commémoratif de l'Holocauste à Montréal.

**T**he Holocaust is one of those historical events that carry so much symbolic weight that they are sometimes perceived as inherently conducive to moral and civic education. Indeed, many teachers consider that merely speaking about the subject will influence students' attitudes toward racism and discrimination, particularly by making them more open and tolerant (Schweber, 2004).

There is, however, reason to question the bases that underpin the study of a catastrophic event, involving the murder of millions of people based on racist and authoritarian ideology, to truly influence students' antiracist values and attitudes. According to Carrington and Short (1997), "while teaching about the Holocaust should seek to encourage young people to engage critically with their taken-for-granted assumptions about 'race,' ethnicity, culture and nationality, it will not necessarily succeed in this goal" (p. 279). In order to encourage complex thought by students, teaching must clearly and explicitly bear on an analysis of the values involved in the historical events under study (Barton & Levstik, 2008). It seems that to encourage such a change, what is required is not only the study of racism (stereotyping, scapegoating, etc.), but also the establishment of antiracist pedagogy based on an examination of action strategies (Carrington & Short, 1997). In any event, experts agree that the Holocaust should be taught using clear objectives and convincing pedagogical methods (Totten, 2000).

Pedagogical difficulties aside, many teachers find it daunting to teach about the Holocaust (Klein, 1992). The subject comprises numerous challenges, given that it is emotionally charged and fraught with political and ethical questions that are difficult to separate and debate (Bensoussan, 2014; Bokova, 2014). Brown and Davies (1998) suggested that this trepidation may be due, in large part, to the fact that teachers struggle to define objectives for teaching this matter, thereby limiting their ability to choose coherent and "controlled" activities and methods:

If they were more comfortable with this, they might well be able to select teaching methods confidently and to have strategies already in place for a range of responses by children. Teachers do not seem clear if they wish, very generally, to educate pupils for cognitive or affective development. (Brown & Davies, 1998, p. 80)

Consequently, one of the most decisive criteria for teaching the Holocaust in a way that promotes significant and enduring learning is the operational clarity of the educational objectives and aims pursued by the teacher (Totten, Feinberg, & Fernekes, 2001; VanSledright, 2014). Will teachers who have a clear aim in mind have stronger arguments by which to justify their choice to teach the Holocaust, especially when the subject is not mandatory, as is the case in Quebec?

As part of a large-scale research project, our team of interdisciplinary researchers has, among other things, evaluated the impact of a tour of the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre on students' knowledge and understandings relating to Holocaust and Jewish communities in Montreal and Quebec, as well as on their intercultural and antiracist attitudes. We also met with teachers and explored their educational aims in teaching the Holocaust, their preferred

methods in this respect, and the manner in which they integrate a field trip to the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre in their teaching. These last elements are the focal point of this article.

In so doing, our intent has been to address three areas of questioning:

*1. The educational aims of teachers who decide to teach the subject of the Holocaust in class:* Why do Quebec secondary school teachers choose to teach the Holocaust when it is not mandatory in the curriculum? How do they measure student understanding of the phenomenon? What are the main questions or debates that students must tackle?

*2. The contents and methods favoured by these teachers:* Which contents and methods allow teachers to pursue their educational objectives? How do they teach this theme? What is their guiding framework? Which paradigm do they use? Given the interest of studying this history as it relates to national history (Lindquist, 2010; Misco, 2007), do teachers in Quebec emphasize the Holocaust's effects on the course of Canadian and Quebec history?

*3. Teachers' representations of the museum and the way they use it as a place for learning history:* We will attempt to answer the following questions: What are teachers' representations of museums? What are their expectations for a museum tour? Do these expectations correspond to their objectives? How do these teachers incorporate the museum experience into the students' learning?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Studies on the educational aims of history teachers in the US, in Quebec, and in Europe have shown that teachers often favour social and moral education while also wishing to develop autonomy and critical thinking in their students (Boix-Mansilla, 2000; Bouhon, 2009; Moisan, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2012; Patry, Weyringer, & Weinberger 2007; van Hover & Yeager, 2007). Teachers are thought to be influenced by their perception of various issues confronting society, such as the tensions and questions that arise from pluralism (Aspin, 2007). In the areas of integration and social harmony, they prioritize the development of moral and social values. Indeed, as we have shown elsewhere, for many history teachers in Quebec, citizenship entails a sharing of common values that aim to facilitate living together and respect for others (Moisan, 2010, 2011a). History teachers consequently situate their practices within this broader scheme.

Furthermore, these various studies have revealed that teachers' representation of history and their practices remain very traditional, in the sense that they favour vertical transmission of knowledge, from teacher to student. A certain consistency might therefore be observed between teachers' moral intentions, practices, and discourse, all of which are geared toward pointing out to students

the good and bad decisions made by players in the past (van Hover & Yeager, 2007). But what happens when teaching the Holocaust?

### *Why teach the Holocaust?*

Studies have shown that teaching the Holocaust tends to take two main directions: the Holocaust as a “human consequence” of the Second World War and the Holocaust as an illustration of where racism can lead. Rare are the teachers who engage in an in-depth study of the event (Brown & Davies, 1998). Indeed, a study conducted in England and Wales has shown that even teachers who are experienced in teaching the Holocaust maintain superficial perceptions about this subject (Brown & Davies, 1998). Most of these teachers presented the Holocaust as one of the many events that took place in the context of World War II and accordingly devoted relatively little time to it. The Holocaust was not studied in its own right, but as one of the consequences of the war. As a result, it appeared to be covered only at a superficial level. The genocide was not explained by the teachers. There appeared to be a lack of clarity concerning the nature of the knowledge pursued by the pedagogical activities that were implemented.

Another reason given for teaching the Holocaust is to educate students about “good” citizenship (Barton et Levstik, 2008). One of the preferred ways to develop positive moral values is to make links between the Holocaust and current examples of racism and discrimination (such as cyber bullying) that teachers hope students will denounce (Boix-Mansilla, 2000; Eckmann, 2010). Teachers also compare various genocides with the intention of offering students a basis for reflecting upon and understanding this crime. Relationships between events are often simplistic, however, and thus may trivialize the genocide (Bensoussan, 2003; Heimberg, 2005). As we are reminded by Boix-Mansilla (2000), establishing a convincing relationship between the past and the present, or two different events of the past, requires in-depth knowledge of both. Pitfalls are numerous.

Why, then, would history teachers in Quebec want to teach such a difficult subject as the Holocaust, especially when this topic is not mandatory? One may argue that many links exist between this series of events and the national history of Quebec and Canada, including the arrival of thousands of Jewish survivors in Montreal. Surprisingly, these connections have barely been developed in the curricula (Moisan, 2011b). The Holocaust is included superficially and optionally during the study of a chapter on freedom and the struggle for civil rights in a general 20<sup>th</sup> Century History course, and as part of a “Tensions and Conflicts” unit during the senior year of the Contemporary World course in the secondary schools that were chosen for this study.

Official pedagogical material, approved by the Ministry of Education, to support such teaching is similarly not well developed. Quebec history textbooks, based

on curriculum prescriptions, generally provide poor content on the Holocaust (Hirsch & McAndrew, 2014). However, teachers can count on the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre, which offers an in-depth historical explanation of the event that puts particular focus on the historical context, the many causes leading to the genocide of the Jews, and the various actors involved (Moisan & Licop, 2013). The museum's narrative also presents links between this event and Canadian national history. Students are usually accompanied by a guide who narrates this history in a fairly traditional manner. But what use do teachers make of the museum's visit in their class on the Holocaust?

Research has shown that as a learning centre, the museum is perceived according to two dominant but epistemologically opposing viewpoints: the "interpretation-based" museum and the "fact-based" museum. A person who perceives a museum as interpretation-based is more likely to be active in the construction of the meaning they give to facts and objects, by telling their stories or by using them as historical sources (Boxtel, Klein, & Snoep, 2011; Brett, 2014; Dierking, 2002; Hein, 1998; Hooper-Greenhill, 2006). In doing so, they may engage students in historical interpretation and critical discussion (Bedford, 2009; Fritsch, 2011; Gosselin, 2011; Larouche, 2010; Larouche, Meunier, & Lebrun, 2012; Mayo, 2013; Moisan & Licop, 2013). The museum can also be seen as a place of "factual, true history" and objective knowledge. The perception of a museum as fact-based is less likely to lead to questioning or interpreting the content presented by the institution. This perception seems to dominate, at least in the general public, and it also seems that among the producers of historical discourse, the museum is considered to be the most credible source (Conrad, Létourneau, & Northrup, 2009).

## TOWARD A TYPOLOGY OF EDUCATIONAL APPROACHES

In order to analyze the educational aims of the teachers, we drew upon four educational approaches to teaching the Holocaust as set out in the literature: the historical approach, the ethical approach, the human-rights education approach, and the intercultural / antiracist approach.

### *Typology of educational approaches to teaching the Holocaust*

Our typology proposes ideal types of Holocaust education approaches and promotes reflection on the meaning and practices involved in teaching the Holocaust. Of course, these categories are not completely distinct and transitions from one approach to another can be made in practice. Before going into further specifics, it is worth noting that in their theoretical form, each of the approaches contains a core of common knowledge and contributes to the "*devoir d'histoire*" that is required for democratic citizenship. The knowledge shared by all four approaches consists of the study of the historical and ideological context that led to the Holocaust, as well as a consideration of

the various perspectives of all the players involved — that is, the experience of not only the perpetrators (Nazis and collaborators) but also the victims, witnesses, and liberators.

**The historical approach.** Teaching that adopts a historical approach might ask students questions such as “why and how was the Holocaust possible?” The objective of this approach is to have students develop a historical explanation of the event that shows deep understanding and the ability to analyze historical problems (Bensoussan, 2014; Lévesque, 2009). Consequently, the Holocaust must be put into context (before, during, and after the genocide, Bauer, 2012), its causes and consequences must be established, and the voices of the victims and the memory-related issues that continue to resonate today must be studied (Heimberg, 2005). Furthermore, the historical approach must also lead to political education and reflection on power (Bensoussan, 2003, 2014).

Reflecting upon the Holocaust from a historical perspective also encourages students to think historically by allowing them to put the event into critical perspective, to examine relevant documents, to consider the numerous causes that led to the events so that they will understand the circumstances that can lead to such atrocities, etc. (Boix-Mansilla, 2000; Lévesque, 2009).

In terms of content, teaching the Holocaust from the historical perspective should lead to substantive study of the subject (Bensoussan, 2003, 2014; Eckmann, 2010; Eckmann & Heimberg, 2011; Heimberg, 2005) and include historical context as well as reflection on democracy and totalitarianism, on Nazi ideology and propaganda, on social conformity, on international relations, on opposition groups and their actions, and on the victims as actors. Given that the perpetrators justified the Final Solution using arguments based on science and reason, this approach acknowledges the failure of “the Enlightenment” (Bensoussan, 2003; Misco, 2007).

**The ethical approach.** Teaching from an ethical perspective leads students to answer questions such as “what were the moral and ethical dilemmas of the different players in this context?” This kind of teaching is intended to prompt reflection on values and issues such as tolerance, freedom, social order and conformity, justice, the ambivalence of humankind, etc.

In terms of content, teachers who choose this approach will concentrate on the ethical dilemmas experienced by actors involved in the Holocaust such as civil servants, judges, ordinary citizens, victims, and leaders of the *Judenrat*. This standpoint also requires studying the context in which decisions were made (Brown & Davies, 1998) to facilitate historical empathy and avoid the trap of anachronism or presentism (Lévesque, 2009; Seixas & Morton, 2013). Reflections on contemporary justice and the responsibility to protect could also take root in this approach.

*The human rights education approach.* Teaching the Holocaust from a human rights education perspective helps to answer questions such as “in what ways was the Holocaust a violation of human rights?” The event is seen from the standpoint of power, rights and legislation, as well as human dignity. Relationships between the state and its citizens are central to this angle of study, as is the role of citizens and organizations in safeguarding the rights and the full citizenship of all individuals (Eckmann, 2010).

From a human rights perspective, the Holocaust is viewed as a genocide. This concept serves as an analytical framework and enables comparisons with other genocides and cases of human rights violations from the past and present. The concept of genocide can be developed through a study of the stages of genocide as identified by Gregory Stanton, e.g., classification, symbolization, dehumanization, organization, polarization, preparation, extermination, and denial. These stages allow a characterization of genocide and therefore invite comparisons while avoiding oversimplification (for example, by implying to students that stereotyping alone eventually leads to genocide, Brown & Davies, 1998; Eckmann, 2010). The objective is to foster a better understanding of the phenomenon rather than to measure the level of horror of events. Therefore, rather than reduce victims’ experiences to mere statistics, as appalling as they might be, the actual experiences of victims can be introduced through their testimony (Ben-Peretz, 2003; Brown & Davies, 1998; Carrington & Short, 1997; Davies, 2000, 2005, 2012; Eckmann, 2010; Hector, 2000; Schweber, 2004; Short, Supple, & Klinger, 1998; Totten, 2000).

As well, an approach centred on the question of human rights presupposes the inclusion of the study of genocide prevention; the responsibility to protect and the conditions needed to prevent this crime must be the subject of formal study (Bensoussan, 2014). Students must understand the political dimension:

Prevention of genocide and of similar events is a matter of practical politics, although without a deep moral conviction that the preservation of human lives must be at the basis of all such action, no prevention is likely to succeed. (Bensoussan, 2014, p. 180)

Among these means of prevention, the question of international legislation is inescapable; indeed,

Holocaust education is about the denial of the basic human right, the right to life, to a group targeted for annihilation.... Holocaust education should lead students to realize that the strengthening of international law is a basic requirement for her/his own life and survival, (Bensoussan, 2014, p. 181)

In particular, the curriculum must include the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and the International Criminal Court as tools used to prevent and curb the crime of genocide.

*The intercultural / antiracist approach.* Intercultural or antiracist teaching of the Holocaust proposes questions such as “what role did racism and discrimination

play in the genocide which was the Holocaust?” Accordingly, the concept of genocide becomes a tool for analysis. Teachers adopting this approach strive to make their students understand what racism is and in what forms and by which mechanisms it is expressed. Thus equipped, students are able to recognize its manifestations and also, ideally, to avoid repeating them. Moreover, teaching that adopts this perspective aims for an ideal of equality through social transformation (Potvin & Carr, 2008).

In this context, the Holocaust is presented as a radical example of state racism and discrimination, as genocide. The content favoured by the teacher will relate to the stereotyping process (the stereotyping of Jews by Nazis), to the phenomenon of scapegoating, and to institutional, state, and structural racism (Cowan & Maitles, 2007; Maitles & Cowan, 1999; Short & Carrington, 1991). Accordingly, the course will put a greater emphasis on the antisemitism of Nazis. Students will be led to understand that this form of racism, dating to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and borrowing from biology, made it easier to dehumanize or de-sacralize the lives of certain human beings (Bensoussan, 2014), which partly explains the extent of the genocide. Moreover, the historical discrimination suffered by the Jews will be the subject of specific study.

Additionally, students will analyze the event in terms of the cohabitation of multiple identities within the same society and will be led to reflect on issues of pluralism, identity, and democratic citizenship: “If taught properly, [the Holocaust] can make an invaluable contribution to the general development of the skills, attitudes, and dispositions usually associated with ‘maximalist’ notions of citizenship in a participatory democracy” (Carrington & Short, 1997, p. 271).

It is with this typology in mind that the following case study was conducted.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology chosen for the broader research project combines a quantitative and a qualitative approach, with special focus on the viewpoints of students and teachers. Only the qualitative data regarding the teachers will be presented here. Individual interviews were held with the teachers before participating in the museum tour (pre planning), one week after the tour, and once more a few months later (retrospective). Many questions were asked during these interviews, among them are “How do you teach the Holocaust?” “Why did you decide to bring your students to the museum?” “What are your expectations regarding this visit?” These interviews were paired with two class observation sessions, one during preparatory activities and one during the follow-up activity after the tour. In the classroom observation sessions, we observed pedagogical approaches, historical content, pedagogical material, and activities. The teachers agreed to share with us the pedagogical materials they used to teach the Holocaust.



Our convenience sample was composed of three cases, which were analyzed in depth in order to fully explore the logic linking together the teacher's aims, foundational thinking, methods, and chosen content. Content analysis of the interviews was conducted (Bardin, 2013). Researchers' notes from the classroom observations also served to consolidate the findings of the analysis of the interviews.

The first case was that of a 48-year-old history teacher in Montreal with 15 years' teaching experience. He had an educational background in history and had been interested in the Holocaust for more than ten years. He had also visited historical memorial sites in Europe and had participated in professional development on the subject. This was his eighth year bringing students to the Holocaust Memorial Centre. He worked in a multiethnic school, where he taught the 20<sup>th</sup> Century History course.

The second case was that of a history teacher from the Lanaudière region. She was 38 years old and held a bachelor's degree in education with a concentration in history and geography. This teacher, too, had 15 years' teaching experience. Her school was very homogenous from a cultural standpoint. This was her first time teaching the 20<sup>th</sup> Century History course and her first time teaching the history of the Holocaust and visiting the Museum.

The third case was that of a history teacher with 23 years' teaching experience. His age and educational background were not recorded during the interview. The school at which he taught was culturally homogenous and located in the Eastern Townships of Quebec. He was visiting the Holocaust Memorial Centre for the first time.

## RESULTS

Our focus was on the teachers' educational aims regarding the teaching of the Holocaust, as well as their observed practices. We will present each of the three cases individually and in relation to the three areas of questioning set out in the introduction, namely a description of the pedagogical aims that guided the teachers' practice, a portrait of the nature of activities taught to students and of the pedagogical methods that were chosen, and representations of the museum and of the integration of a museum tour in teaching as well as in the student learning process. We will then cross-reference the findings between the teachers before drawing general observations in the discussion.

### *Case no. 1. Montreal, 20<sup>th</sup> Century History teacher, Secondary 5*

This experienced teacher had made the choice to teach the Holocaust some years ago, as he considered the event to be an essential part of 20<sup>th</sup> century history. In his view, the genocide's educational potential was immense in terms of educating young people to be respectful of differences, particularly in the highly multiethnic school where he was teaching.

**Educational aim.** The teacher's educational aim was to teach the moral lessons of Holocaust history with a view to fighting discrimination and stereotyping of individuals at school and in everyday life. In terms of our typology, this teacher leans toward an intercultural / antiracist approach.

**Contents and methods.** To carry out his project, this teacher used material that he had put together himself and adapted over the years. In class, he conducted a lecture and fostered dialogue using a very graphic PowerPoint presentation. The students followed along in class using course notes prepared by the teacher, which included sections that they were to fill in themselves.

In his introduction, the teacher had students define the terms "prejudice," "stereotype," and "Holocaust." He then presented the students with a very elaborate grid showing the different stages of racism<sup>1</sup> ("ordinary" racism, the legitimization of racism, and institutional and state racism) but did not seem to use this material subsequently when studying the Holocaust. In any event, he did not refer to the grid during our in-class observation and its content did not appear in later course notes.

The teacher then moved on to the distant origins of antisemitism, giving examples from antiquity to the modern age up to the writing of *Mein Kampf*. He then asked the students whether they had witnessed antisemitic acts in today's world. The students analyzed excerpts from *Mein Kampf* and answered questions geared toward summarizing the ideology of Adolf Hitler.

The teacher then addressed the Holocaust by retracing the rise of Nazi ideology. He spent a great deal of time presenting the historical context leading up to the election of the Nazis and enabling Adolf Hitler to rise to dictatorship. He also mentioned multiple causes to explain the popularity of the Nazis' racist and radical ideology and gave the example of the German defeat in World War I and the imposed Versailles Treaty, which restricted Germany's territory and population, in addition to forcing it to pay for war damages. He then moved on to the Weimar Republic, the instability of the imposed democracy, and inflation. The next subjects presented were German culture, art, and architecture. The teacher then presented the 1929 crisis, the growing radicalism of political speeches and the accusations leveled at the Versailles Treaty, capitalism, and the Jews. The teacher stressed that such a context of economic, identity-related, political, and social crisis can radicalize a society, even today. As such, he gave examples of Neo-Nazi parties being integrated into European governments.

The following portion of the class presented the ideology, national-socialist agenda, organization, and main players of the Nazi party. The teacher then analyzed caricatures of Jews published in German newspapers. The students observed the images and attempted to understand their message. The teacher then described Hitler's election and the way he seized complete control. This was followed by a chronological list of Nuremberg Laws, pogroms against the

Jews, and the Night of Broken Glass (*Kristallnacht*). The class ended with the invasion of Poland and the outbreak of the Second World War.

The teacher also briefly addressed the Canadian context during the same historical period by introducing Adrien Arcand, “our own Führer.” In the subsequent interview, he stated that he would also discuss Canada’s response to the major genocides that have taken place in history, but this content was not in the course notes given to the students.

**Representations and uses of the museum.** The class described above was the teacher’s preparation for the museum tour. His idea was to offer the students basic contextual knowledge. The teacher was very familiar with the museum’s content – as he was preparing to visit it for the eighth time – and he stated that he made his teaching complementary to, rather than a repetition of, the museum’s contents. However, the museum tour also covered longstanding antisemitism, the interwar period and the many causes leading to the Nazi takeover of Germany. The only portion of the class that was not covered by the museum had to do with the stages of racism.

As for the museum tour, the teacher’s intent was to give students the opportunity to see artifacts, concrete objects, and images attesting to the event. His wish was for the guides to present the essentials (“to give key references”) and to keep the tour relatively brief. In his view, the testimony and objects were the museum’s strengths and helped to make this history “real.” It is probably in this aspect that he saw his lessons as being complementary to the exhibit. He was very satisfied with his experience and had no changes to suggest in terms of the type of activity offered by the museum (i.e., the guided tour).

For this teacher, the museum presented real history; the objects and testimony of survivors contributed to this reality by adding the emotion needed to understand the magnitude of the event. In fact, he felt that the study of the Holocaust could end there, and he did not intend to discuss the tour any further in class or to do any debriefing after the visit.

The teacher’s representation of the museum was therefore that of a truth-based museum, one that supplied essential historical and emotional information. The museum’s offerings were in perfect harmony with the teacher’s vision of history and his lecture-based style of education.

**Conclusions.** The students were given a class on the historical context leading up to the election of the Nazis, on German ideology during this period, on the effects on German Jews, and on the causes that paved the way for World War II. The practices and contents that were taught therefore appear to be closer to a traditional historical approach than to an intercultural / antiracist approach.

The class enabled an understanding of racism, but only from the standpoint of the perpetrators. The experience of the victims of racism, that is, the concrete

impact of state racism on individuals, was barely touched upon by this teacher. Moreover, the teacher did not present any content in class about the genocide after 1939. These aspects, it would appear, were left to the museum. The historical explanation was therefore incomplete. In addition, the concepts of racism, which were used as an introduction to the subject, were not reinvested, and the “moral lessons” to be learned were not made explicit. Nor were any means by which to avoid a genocide in the future mentioned.

**Case no. 2. Lanaudière, 20<sup>th</sup> Century History teacher, Secondary 5 (with a few students from secondary 4)**

This history teacher presented the Holocaust as part of broader teaching on World War II for secondary 5 students taking the optional 20<sup>th</sup> Century History course. This was her first time teaching the course and the subject.

**Educational aim.** Her aim was for the students to understand the human consequences of World War II. These “human consequences,” in her view, were the Holocaust. She also wished to transform her students and perhaps to convert them to pacifist values, although she did not say so in so many words. Her objective was in line with the intercultural / antiracist education perspective.

**Contents and methods.** In practice, this teacher did not use a textbook. She did her own research and created a PowerPoint presentation and student booklet. She lectured for most of the material, but also had the students work in teams to answer questions intended to prompt prior knowledge and, later, in order to do online research on a different genocide.

Before beginning to study the Holocaust per se, the class watched the documentary, *The Heart of Auschwitz*, which tells the story of women prisoners in the labour camps of Auschwitz. Some of the women risked their lives to make a heart-shaped greeting card for a fellow prisoner’s birthday. The card takes on different meanings that touch upon friendship and resilience as well as resistance, the struggle against dehumanization, the simple desire to be able to say that one is still alive, and to leave a trace behind. The teacher did not develop these various aspects.

The class continued with an assignment on Hitler using documents drawn notably from *Mein Kampf*, from videos, and from other texts. The goal was to answer the questions: “Who was the Führer?” “How did he think?” “What were his defining actions during the war?” “Whom did he love?” “Whom did he hate?” “What was his military and political path between 1914 and 1945?” “What type of army leader was he?” These questions on the Nazi leader all shed light on the figure and his main actions during the war. At this stage, the questions were not linked to the Holocaust.

The teacher then proceeded to a study of European geography using an interactive map. Once certain locations were identified, she had the students fill out

worksheets<sup>2</sup> on the main leaders involved in World War II (Hitler, Mussolini, Hirohito, Roosevelt, Stalin, and Churchill).

In another activity, she announced to the students that to better understand the consequences of the war, they would now focus on two points, namely concentration camps and two important battles. War-related facts and the mechanism of genocide were thus addressed indiscriminately, as different facets of the war.

To prepare the students for their museum tour, she had them work in teams to answer questions about the Holocaust, namely, who, what, when, where, how, and why. She also dealt with these questions in a PowerPoint presentation: In response to the question of “who?” she said, “it was the European Jews who were concerned. Six million Jews, without counting civilians.” In response to the question of “what?” she said, “the Holocaust: massive extermination – genocide.” She asked them, “did they [the Nazis] succeed?” In response to this question, she gave percentages that undoubtedly gave the answer. In response to the question of “when?” she suggested a list of various anti-Jewish laws, up to the Night of Broken Glass and the creation of ghettos and concentration camps where, she specified, homosexuals and Jehovah’s witnesses were sent. She concluded with the “final solution to the Jewish question” by presenting an interactive map from *The Map as History*. Her answer to the question of “why?” was not dealt with separately, but was implicitly contained in this last explanation.

She also mentioned in passing that the predominant atmosphere was hardly any better in Quebec, in speaking about Adrien Arcand, but she did not make any other links with the history of Canada and Quebec.

**Representation and use of the museum.** Before entering the museum, the students had acquired a number of chronological and geographical references. They were also relatively familiar with the Führer’s actions and thoughts and with some of the steps that led to the genocide of the Jews. The teacher wanted the museum to help the students better understand the Holocaust as a human consequence of the war. Additionally, she hoped that the tour would allow the students to understand what the Jews and other minorities lived through.

At the end of the guided tour, she said that she appreciated the parallels that the guide made between the Holocaust and intimidation on Facebook. If she could suggest one change, it would have been that the artifacts be a more integrated part of the tour, since this is what generates the most student interest:

You also realize that objects have a lot to say and can have major historical significance, in connection with the *Heart of Auschwitz* project they did. It pushed them further than just what they see, to try to be sensitive to the complexity of reality.

The in-class review of the museum tour consisted of answering observation questions and questions verifying students' factual knowledge (for example, "Name two objects you saw at the museum," "In what city of Quebec were Jews not welcome?" "What were the names of the neighborhoods where Jews were crowded together?" etc.). A second section entitled, "Questions for Reflection" had students list the differences between a concentration camp and a death camp, comment on the expression, "Hitler destroyed democracy by his election," and answer other questions on the meaning of the Memorial Room or on the exhibit title, "To learn. To feel. To remember."

Students were given an opportunity to reinvest their learning during a group activity on a different genocide. The teams did online research and filled out a technical worksheet on their chosen genocide. They were asked questions on the period when the genocide took place, the motivations that guided the perpetrators, the number of deaths, the targeted group, the locations involved, and the actions committed to carry out the crime. This information was to be compared to the Holocaust, but no comparative activity was held. The students had no similar worksheet on the Holocaust.

The contribution of the museum therefore consisted in developing students' knowledge and allowing them to come into contact with objects and testimony. This teacher's vision corresponds to the fact-based museum, as reflected in her own pedagogical approach, which was a combination of lecture and information research geared toward elaborating technical worksheets, rather than debating issues or undertaking a critical interpretation of various viewpoints, etc.

**Conclusions.** This teacher's class focused on Hitler as the main player in the genocide. The victims' point of view was absent. Likewise, Nazi ideology was not developed and nothing was said about the context of the inter-war period that fuelled the growing popularity of the Nazis.

In short, at the end of this unit on World War II and the Holocaust, the students were led to believe that the war was set off practically by one man, Adolf Hitler, an authoritarian megalomaniac. There also appeared to be some confusion surrounding the events of the war and the genocide. The two were mixed together. Hence, the exercise of comparing genocides did not seem very useful, since it did not include an understanding of the ideologies in place, of the steps of a genocide, of the victims' experience (limited to a number), of the actions and inactions of witnesses, etc. It did not shed light on the process leading up to the crime, hence depriving students of the knowledge needed to recognize and analyze manifestations of racism and discrimination.

**Case no. 3. Estrie (Eastern Townships), Contemporary World teacher, Secondary 5**

This teacher taught the Contemporary World class to Secondary 5 students and incorporated the Holocaust into a unit entitled, "Tensions and Conflicts."

**Educational aim.** The teacher addressed the Holocaust in order for the students to understand the event and to be moved by this history, so that they would be transformed by such knowledge. According to our typology, this aim is closest to the historical perspective, albeit while giving greater prominence to the emotional dimension of the event, which he referred to as “the human consequences.”

**Contents and methods.** As in the first two cases presented, this teacher did not use a textbook but preferred to write his own course notes. He also provided students with a sheet containing the essential points in the study of the Holocaust. His teaching was primarily lecture-based, with the help of a PowerPoint presentation including many images and documents.

The students in this group watched several fiction films and documentaries on the subject of the Holocaust in their English, French, and history classes. The history teacher presented the historical context in which the Holocaust took shape. He started off the class by giving a definition of the Holocaust as the massacre of the Jews during World War II, rather than as a genocide. He stressed that the Holocaust was part of World War II. He presented the inter-war period, mainly focusing on the Versailles Treaty that disadvantaged Germany and the economic crisis that profoundly affected German society. He then focused on the various steps taken by Hitler and the National-Socialist party in order to gain complete control. He emphasized the racist and hegemonic goals of Nazi ideology, and demonstrated that in this line of thinking, Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and religious groups were “enemies to be destroyed.” To explain the Nazis’ success, he provided a few characteristics of the society at the time: the cult of the leader, the single party, the all-powerful police, rearmament, and economic self-sufficiency.

Using video excerpts, the teacher presented in part the mechanisms that allowed the assassination of millions of individuals, namely concentration camps and cremation ovens. He then pointed out that the Nazis used the legislative system to implement their ideology. They knowingly withdrew the rights of certain citizens.

At the end of the class, the teacher said, “you look like you feel guilty! But you’re not the ones who did this!” He took advantage of the opportunity to call for political awakening by telling the students that their task was to make sure that such a thing would never happen again. However, he did not go so far as to discuss the means by which to prevent another crime of this nature.

**Representation and use of the museum.** In preparation for their tour of the Holocaust Memorial Centre, the students thus developed a good understanding of the historical context and prevailing atmosphere in Germany during the inter- and post-war periods. In particular, they learned about Nazi ideology and about the hegemonic goals of the German government in terms of territory and “race.”

The students participated in a non-guided tour of the museum.<sup>3</sup> For the teacher, this tour was intended to associate names and images with the people who survived the Holocaust, so that it “would not just be theoretical.” He also wished for students to “understand the suffering of the Jewish people.”

After the tour, the students met with a survivor. In relation to his objective to move the students, the teacher at first stated that he was disappointed with the testimony, as the survivor had not experienced concentration camps and did not seem to be very emotional. In hindsight, he observed that the account was in fact complementary to his class, since he had not discussed the story of hidden children. In the interview conducted a few weeks later, he ultimately concluded that the testimony was very good, since the students were still moved by the story.

All things considered, this teacher, as in the two other cases we have analyzed, offered the transmission of contextual historical information needed to understand the rise of Nazism and expected the tour to add a touch of emotion that he considered essential for understanding the full magnitude of the events. His representation was that of a fact-based museum, since he did not express the wish that students reflect on ethical or historical questions related to the events. He was also highly satisfied with the non-guided tour, in which students acquired more factual knowledge. To review the visit in class, he considered it appropriate to hold a somewhat informal group discussion on the key moments the students had experienced, such as the elements that piqued their interest and the questions that arose.

**Conclusions.** At the end of this educational sequence on the Holocaust, the students had a good understanding of the context of the inter-war period and of Nazi ideology. The causes that led to the breakout of the war were thus clarified. However, as in the two previous cases, the class concentrated on Nazis and neglected the experience of the victims. Embedding the event into the context of World War II reinforced the idea that the Holocaust was a result of the war rather than a genocide conceived and organized as such.

## DISCUSSION

The three history teachers in this study demonstrated strong interest in the subject of the Holocaust. All three considered the subject as a critical part of 20<sup>th</sup> century history and all three saw it as a catalyst for bringing about the positive moral values in regards to pluralism and diversity. Their educational aims are largely associated with the historical and intercultural / antiracist theoretical approaches, but their practices appeared to be considerably discordant.

The main observation that emerges from this research is the discrepancy between the aims announced by the teachers with regard to teaching the Holocaust, on one hand, and their practices, on the other. In each case, the aim was not



evidenced by the pedagogical methods implemented by the teacher. The only subjects addressed to understand the Holocaust were the context in which Nazism took root, about Nazi ideology, and about the cult of leadership through the presentation of factual information. According to our understanding of the recommendations presented in the theoretical framework, this content was not sufficient to yield a deep historical understanding. Analytical concepts were not developed, and in fact no teacher really worked with a definition of the Holocaust or of the concept of genocide. Moreover, no operational definition of racism was provided for the students, with the exception of the first case. The content that was covered therefore did not enable a systematic development of antiracist attitudes. These teachers did not directly address the phenomena of scapegoating, stereotyping, etc., that would make it possible to generalize the Nazi context and to compare it with another context. Nor did the teachers discuss actions by which to impede the Nazi rise to power or to prevent the death of innocent people. As a result, the students were not taught about concrete ways to fight against discrimination and prevent genocide.

The students were not required to engage in a reflective and critical approach, or in an assignment on intercultural issues. The teachers opted for a traditional approach. In contrast with what studies generally suggest (Lenoir et al., 2007), the teachers in our study did not use a textbook. It should be mentioned, however, that textbooks in Quebec offer very limited content on the Holocaust (Hirsch & McAndrew, 2014). That being said, the material produced by the teachers, both in terms of form and approach, strongly resembled the textbooks, insofar as they were essentially made up of a lesson plan, central elements to be demonstrated, and were interspersed with a few activities meant to foster either student reflection or note-taking. Hence, lecture and discussion were predominant approaches and the research assignments given to students focused on declarative objects of knowledge, even when comparing genocides. Moreover, while the teachers used a great number of historical documents in class, they did not use them to develop the historical thinking of their students. No analytical or interpretive activities were recorded during our study. The documents were mainly used to make it easier to evoke the past, to find information, and to confirm the statements of the teacher. Likewise, the museum was integrated into the sequence as a place of objective knowledge. The teachers all demonstrated strong interest in the artifacts presented, to which they attributed great significance and which they perceived as testaments to truth. As a result, their expectations for the tour were related to the transmission of knowledge, rather than interactive activities for constructing meaning. Their traditional practices were therefore fully consistent with the representation of a fact-based museum.

It is also worth noting the presence of moral discourse among our three teachers, who considered that the purpose of history was to teach lessons, as the teacher in the first case clearly stated. However, none of the three teachers

made these lessons an object of study per se. Other research on history teachers in Switzerland and the USA has reached the same conclusion of “too much morality, not enough history!” (Eckmann, 2010; van Hover & Yeager, 2007).

Along similar lines, the teachers considered the emotion, which they referred to as “the human consequences” provoked by the Holocaust, to be important. However, none of the three approached the subject from the standpoint of the victims, thereby impeding an understanding of the scope of antisemitism in history. The teachers in cases two and three addressed the Holocaust in the context of World War II and presented it as a consequence of the war rather than as a result of racism. Emotion was prompted by shocking images of crematory ovens, concentration camps, and the unfathomable number of millions of deaths. The risk of falling into the trap of *pathos* was present (Heimberg, 2005; Lecomte, 2001). Perhaps if the experience of the victims was absent, it is because the teachers considered that the museum visit would sufficiently fill in this gap. However, only one of them knew what would be covered during their visit to the museum. This situation tends to support the idea that many teachers consider merely speaking about the event to be enough to move students and to make them into better human beings (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Short, 2003).

Finally, all of these observations lead us to question the clarity and tangibility of the objectives pursued, as well as the way these aims guide teachers in their choice of content to address, methods to use, and learning to be imparted. The end and the means clearly are not in harmony. How can this gap be explained? Although this result is not surprising to the researcher, those who train teachers must respond and seek to understand why teachers do not follow a better-defined course of action when it comes to their educational aims. Is it due to a lack of knowledge on the subject and its educational potential? Everything seems to indicate that Schweber’s (2004) observation still holds true: the mere fact of learning about certain subjects is perceived as being intrinsically conducive to meaningful learning.

Nonetheless, to be fair to the teachers, it must be added that learning lessons and changing attitudes or values are long-term transformations. One must take the time to reflect, learn, internalize “lessons” and values, and take a stance. Hence, the teachers’ educational goals may be reached over a longer term, over numerous sequences on different subjects. The Holocaust sequence may be just one step in a larger process, since teachers do not have the luxury of spending weeks studying the Holocaust, and there is no doubt in our view that they do the best they can in limited circumstances. Further research will be necessary to shed light on all of these questions.

NOTES

1. The grid was adapted from works by Potvin & Tremblay (2008). *Crise des accommodements raisonnables: une fiction médiatique?* Outremont, QC : Athena.
2. The worksheets contained the following points: birth, death, political position, ideology, country represented, victory or defeat, and circumstances of death. The students had only one line on which to write their answers.
3. Our team followed the students during this activity and observed the great rigor with which they performed their tours, taking the time to read information panels, observe objects, discuss among themselves, etc. The post-tour interview showed that the students retained a great deal of information and were able to discuss the subject based on their observations at the museum.

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