

## Challenges and Responses

Yaryna Martyniuk and Borbála Klacsmann\*

# Holocaust Education in Times of Russia's War on Ukraine

<https://doi.org/10.1515/eehs-2023-0051>

Published online November 24, 2023

**Andrea Löw:** Good evening everybody. It is my pleasure to welcome you on behalf of the Center for Holocaust Studies at the Leibniz Institute for Contemporary History in Munich to tonight's roundtable discussion: "Holocaust Education in Times of Russia's War in Ukraine." My colleague, Marta will moderate the event later on, who suggested to have a discussion and think together about the difficult question on what exactly the impact of Russia's brutal war on Ukraine has on both education and research of the Holocaust, and how we can deal with this impact.

We, as the editorial board of the *Eastern European Holocaust Studies* were more than happy to organize this important event, and we at the Center for Holocaust Studies are happy to host it. The questions we are going to discuss tonight are right in the center of our activities as well, and we are struggling to answer these questions, too. I think we cannot go on with our research and educational work about the Holocaust as if this war was not going on in Ukraine, where the Holocaust took place, where large number of the Holocaust victims came from, and where some Holocaust survivors still live. They are threatened again, this time by Russia's aggression, and important places of memory are threatened as well, or have already been destroyed. Tonight's event is organized by the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center, the *Eastern European Holocaust Studies* journal in cooperation with our Center for Holocaust Studies in Munich, and it is supported and co-organized by the Federal Agency for Civic Education. I would really like to thank my colleagues, Anna Ullrich and Katarina Kezeric from the Center, and Florian Zabransky from the Federal

---

Roundtable discussion "Holocaust Education in Times of Russia's War on Ukraine" organized by Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center, *Eastern European Holocaust Studies* journal in cooperation with Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Center for Holocaust Studies, München and supported by the Federal Agency for Civic Education. The discussion took place on the 26th of September 2023. The transcript was edited by Yaryna Martyniuk and Borbála Klacsmann.

---

**\*Corresponding author: Borbála Klacsmann**, Postdoctoral Researcher, University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland, E-mail: [eehs@degruyter.com](mailto:eehs@degruyter.com). <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2913-3264>

**Yaryna Martyniuk**, Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center, Kyiv, Ukraine

Agency for their enormous support in organizing this event. A German translation of the transcript of this event will be available on the website of the Federal Agency, and the Ukrainian version will be published in *Ukraina Moderna*. And, to not steal any more time from our discussions, I will now hand over to Oleksii Makhukhin from the Memorial Center in Ukraine. Thank you.

**Oleksii Makhukhin:** Good evening from Kyiv. We are very excited that this event is going on, so I am very grateful to all organizers of this event. Our foundation, of course, is having difficult times now, as we are in Ukraine, and in these difficult times we are sure that education becomes ever more important. As an organization we are now focused on digitizing our archives, on working with archives, and on our educational initiatives. I will be very brief because we have much more interesting and prominent speakers ahead of me. So I would like to give the floor to the director of one of our research institutes and prominent researcher and scholar, Marta Havryshko. Please, Marta.

**Marta Havryshko:** Thank you so much. Welcome. I am very thrilled to be here today and to talk about such a very difficult topic for me, as a Holocaust educator, for me as a Holocaust scholar from Ukraine, who was forced to flee Ukraine due to the war: the Russian aggression in Ukraine.

This war impacted Holocaust education and research in so many ways. Many Holocaust survivors were forced to flee Ukraine to save their lives. Many Holocaust survivors are heavily impacted. They are suffering, like Vanda Obiedkova did, who lost her life during the siege of Mariupol. War triggered their traumatic memories about the past. At the same time, we see that Russia's aggression destroys and harms not only the living memory about the Holocaust, but also memorial sites like Babyn Yar in Kyiv, Drobytsky Yar in Kharkiv, various Jewish cemeteries and synagogues. Holocaust educators witness the instrumentalization of the history of the Second World War and the Holocaust by Putin's regime to justify his brutal aggression against Ukraine trying to create a narrative of victimhood. At the same time, the Ukrainian government, the Ukrainian authorities are trying to use history and memory about the Second World War for national mobilization in times of existential threat. Our roundtable today will focus on the challenges for Holocaust educators and scholars in Ukraine, in Europe, in North America and worldwide; and we will discuss strategies for dealing with the distortion of history and analyze the terminology applied to justify this aggression.

Today, we have wonderful speakers, I will introduce all of them:

Our first guest is Anja Ballis, professor and chair of German Language Studies at the Ludwig Maximilians University Munich. Since 2018, she has been responsible for the project "Learning with Digital Testimonies," exploring how interactive presentations of Holocaust survivors' testimonies have learning effects on students. She

is also known as the editor of *Holocaust Education, Historical Learning, and Human Rights Education*.

Thomas Chopard is our second speaker. He is an associate professor at the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences in Paris. His research deals with anti-Jewish violence in Ukraine, and in Eastern Europe during the Holocaust, the civil war, and more recently, he has been focusing on Jewish migration from Central and Eastern Europe in the 20th century, collaborating with the *Memorial de la Shoah* in Paris for several years on different occasions.

The next speaker is Gabriella Komoly. She is a sociologist who specializes in Holocaust studies and she has been collecting multiple testimonies from survivors and bystanders of the Holocaust. She currently serves as the head of international and research programs at the Zachor Foundation for Social Remembrance, focusing on testimony-based education.

And our final speaker is Patrick Siegele. From 2014 to 2021, he was the director of the Anne Frank Center in Berlin. Also, he was a coordinator of the independent expert group on antisemitism commissioned by the German *Bundestag*. Since June 2021, Patrick has been a head of the department of Holocaust Education at Austria's Agency for Education and Internationalization.

Let us start our conversation with very general questions. *How has teaching the Holocaust changed as a result of the war of aggression, waged on Ukraine under the pretext of denazification? What are the challenges and what are the resources?*

**Anja Ballis:** It is an honor to talk about this very important topic and it is also an honor to start here right away. I have to stress that my remarks are influenced by my perspective of teaching at university, and students becoming teachers in Germany. I refer specifically to the German context of formal education. It is also important to me that institutions are not just where we communicate academic content, but universities and schools are also the places where we raise children.

I would like to approach the topic focusing briefly on three questions. *First, what do we know about the current situation in German schools?* Students are enrolled predominantly in specialized bridge classes to learn German, but increasingly also in regular classes, with some of them still learning online in Ukrainian schools. These students have experienced flight, they live in-between roles, are connected by media, and they worry about their family back home and miss their friends. While the limited interaction between Ukrainian refugees and local students may suggest a gap in shared experiences, it underscores the importance of education as a tool for fostering understanding and empathy. This is particularly crucial addressing topics like the Holocaust, especially in the time of this conflict, where the realities of war can feel close to home for some, while remaining abstract for others.

This leads me to reflect upon the students' interest, in general, on the topic of the Holocaust. Studies reveal that young people in Germany are still interested in this

period of history. However, they perceive the Holocaust and the Nazi era through a contemporary lens. Their questions about these topics often relate to their present, and students also draw comparisons to other cases of mass violence which they, or their family members experienced. Thus, war and trauma are present in our societal fabric.

We recognize that Holocaust education faces challenges within the context of a migration society, challenges that have not been sufficiently addressed so far.

And this leads me to my second question. *To what extent can teacher training impact the teaching and learning process in schools in these complicated times?* Addressing this question is essential as the classroom is often the first place where diverse narratives converge. Teachers, therefore, must be supported as they navigate these complexities bridging past and present, local and global challenges.

Looking at the situation in Germany, there is an ambivalent picture regarding the training of teachers focusing on the Holocaust and Nazi crimes. On the one hand, students are free to take courses on this topic during their university studies. But, unfortunately, not all universities in Germany are generally satisfied with the rich Holocaust-related educational material and media offered. They are, however, aware that time is limited, leading many to advocate for introducing Holocaust education into the curriculum earlier. In Germany, the topic is generally covered in the 8th and 9th grades, when students are aged between 14 and 15. Caught between unsystematic training on the one side and a lack of time on the other, a complex problem emerges.

This is further complicated by teachers often feeling insecure about tackling the subject matter of addressing current affairs connected to the Holocaust and anti-semitism. This is a challenging situation for teachers, one that cannot be easily addressed through curriculum changes alone.

And so, this leads me to my last question: *Which methodological approach is best suited for teaching during times of war?* I am really curious what the others think about that. I think we need a holistic approach combining historical political education with linguistic and media analysis and a self-reflection on prejudices and stereotypes.

This complex approach is particularly evident in an era dominated by digital communication, when historical narratives can easily become distorted, misunderstood or corrupted for propaganda. In light of these factors, the concept of “digital textual sovereignty,” coined by Jörg Brueggemann and Volker Frederking, offers a model for addressing current conflicts in classroom education.

I will structure my final thoughts along the three elements: the digital, the textual, and sovereignty. The concept of digital is highly attuned to the issues and interests of Gen Z. This common ground helps to find a unifying denominator for all

students taught at schools, independent from their cultural and migration background.

Adding the textual element we encounter in the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, emotionally and historically charged terms like “war of aggression”, “genocide,” and comparisons to National Socialism, often in a combination with images. These text-media combinations are used for propaganda, but also to capture the urgency of the situation. Reflecting on these issues is particularly relevant for educators and students seeking to understand the current conflict within its broader historical and media context. This leads me to sovereignty, the third element of the model.

Engaging students in this comprehensive way, educators promote a two-fold skill set. First, the ability to understand historical context and the resonance in today's world, which comes close to the interest of today's youth accessing the topic of the Holocaust. Second, the media literacy skills to discern between well-supported information and sensational or misleading narratives. In a sense, students learn to question, verify information and hopefully responsibly contribute to the discourse. This prepares them for the responsible digital citizenship that our world demands. So concluding, I think the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine adds a layer of complexity to Holocaust education in German classrooms, forcing us to reconcile historical atrocities with the contemporary crisis in a classroom grappling with diversity and migration, and connected to many places of trauma and violence. Thank you.

**Marta Havryshko:** Thank you so much, Anja, for your reflections and insights. Please, Thomas.

**Thomas Chopard:** Thank you very much, Marta. Thank you, everyone, for this opportunity to reflect collectively on this important issue. First, let me start by mentioning the fact that in France, a large part of Holocaust research and Holocaust teaching focus on France itself. Since 2014, but definitely since 2022, there has been a genuine interest of Ukrainian history, in general, and in the history of the Holocaust in Ukraine, in particular.

So this was already an ongoing process, but February 24th certainly participated in refocusing teaching of the Holocaust as a European project, and Ukraine as a key place of the extermination of the Jews. The public debate focused especially on specific features of the Holocaust in Ukraine, in particular the so-called “Holocaust by bullets,” or on the specific context of Western Ukraine as a consequence of the German-Soviet pact. So, in other words, Holocaust teaching was one of the ways to put Ukraine on the map and to attempt to weave a European history, something that is actually quite difficult in French classrooms, to be honest.

Regarding Holocaust research, the fact is that this shift has been done at least 30 years ago, but the French context remains the main focus of interest in Holocaust

teaching for memorialization and political reasons. An important concern in this shift is also that now we have to spend more time debunking the misinterpretations and false allegations about Ukraine. The fight against Holocaust denial, distortions or sometimes genuine error, has always been a key element in Holocaust teaching at the *Memorial de la Shoah* in particular, and in classrooms in general. Now we have to dedicate time to debunking the Russian allegations about Ukraine. Teaching the Holocaust has always been in dialogue with our immediate context, trying to echo current concerns, to draw parallels, and the recent pictures of mass atrocities in Ukraine, the allegations of genocide committed by the Russian authorities, clearly echo what we know of the Holocaust. There have been many questions in classrooms, in high schools, but in universities as well. One of the current activities of the *Memorial de la Shoah*, and my own current activity at the School for Advanced Studies, as well as other education institutions in France, is to offer proper tools to analyze mass atrocities in the 20th century and the modern era in general. And the current war in Ukraine probably pushed forward the “genocide studies” approach in France which does not really exist in an institutionalized manner at this moment.

I would like to mention what could be considered a negative aspect, especially due to the Russian propaganda: it is the fact that the Russian propaganda, the Russian allegations, the Russian distortions about Holocaust history, in many ways, nationalized our approach of the Holocaust. Let me just mention one example that I am slightly familiar with: the 1941 pogroms and the antisemitism of the local population in general, the key aspect of the Russian propaganda. Even though, the implication of Ukrainian nationalists and the local patterns of violence are a topic of great interest, at least for me, before the full-scale invasion, we collectively started to have a comparative approach on anti-Jewish violence in territories annexed by the Soviet Union between 1939 and 1941.

Now, I feel like we are coming back to a national focus on these issues. A national focus that cannot, in my opinion, deal with the issue of local antisemitism and of the consequences of the Soviet-German pact. And in many ways, the same thing could be said about local collaborators during the Holocaust as well, and probably other topics.

To sum up, my point here is that despite the recent attempts to nationalize the history of the Holocaust and the history of antisemitism in Eastern Europe, one other reaction was to push forward a comparative approach to the Holocaust. To tackle hot topics regarding the Holocaust in Ukraine and the Holocaust in general; and at the same time to offer a nuanced and thorough way to analyze current violence in the world, and in Ukraine in particular.

One last point that I wanted to mention, hearing my colleagues previously, is the fact that Ukrainian refugees in general, and Ukrainian students in particular, are less numerous in France than in Germany, Austria and many countries in Europe. We did

not face any specific issues with students, nor did we face large groups that we needed to collaborate with. Therefore, our approach in France in Holocaust education was an answer mainly aimed at the French public and not an approach that comprehended an answer specifically for Ukrainian students as well. We have to deal with this new issue in the public debate in France, but not necessarily by hearing the voices of Ukrainian colleagues and of the Ukrainians in general. That is also an issue that we are trying to resolve at the moment, to bring to the table a discussion with the voices of Ukrainians in general. Thank you.

**Marta Havryshko:** Thank you so much, Thomas. Please, Gabriella, share your insights with us.

**Gabriella Komoly:** Thank you very much and thank you for having me here. Just to say before I start, I am coming from the field of education. I work at Zachor Foundation, an educational NGO based in Budapest, Hungary. We work with testimony-based learning activities using the testimonies of the USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive, which consists of 55,000 interviews mainly conducted with survivors and rescuers of the Holocaust, but also other genocides of the 20th century.

I am going to reflect on this and we will talk about the role of testimonies in education. Our question, I think, is really complex. How teaching the Holocaust has been changed as a result of the war of Russia, which is waged under the false pretext of denazification. I think that this question in itself contains three different questions, and I am going to address them one by one.

The first question to address is how teaching has been changed as a result of the war. I think this is really very important. Coming from the practical field of education and an educational organization, this was the first issue that we had to face and take into consideration. I guess it is quite obvious that in Ukraine, education changed fundamentally because of the physical destruction of schools, because homes were destroyed, access to anything related to teaching and learning was completely unavailable for students and teachers alike. But we also need to talk about and take into consideration the fact that the whole region was affected and as Anja mentioned, there are thousands of Ukrainian students learning in Germany today, but also in Poland, in Hungary, in the Czech Republic, and elsewhere in Europe.

Hence, it is not only about those who were refugees and entered these countries, but we have to talk about the students who received the refugees, and they are facing a completely new situation. There was a demand for a quick reaction, and then intensifying requests from teachers and educators to give them supporting material to be able to address the question of war and its impact. Our target audiences are the students and teachers who are in Ukraine, those who receive the refugees in other countries, and of course the refugees themselves. As a response, we created an educational page on the educational platform of the USC Shoah Foundation which is

called iWitness (<https://iwitness.usc.edu/sites/warinukraine>). This is one of the responses that we gave.

In this situation, we thought that the first purpose was not to teach about the political or the ideological background of the events, but rather to create activities and testimony-based learning modules with which students can learn about resilience and how to deal with difficult situations in general. This page and all the available activities are localized in Czech, Polish, Hungarian, and Ukrainian. They are tailored to meet the specific local needs, and we also incorporate testimonies that are relevant to the local context.

These activities reflect on questions such as: *What are the things that can help you when facing challenges and difficulties in life? Who can you turn to for support? Who can you support? What is the role of the community in coping with challenges?* Using the stories of survivors and witnesses of the Holocaust creates a relatable and empathetic thinking environment in which we can build with these stories, especially in difficult situations.

Going to the second part of our big question, which is how teaching about the Holocaust has changed because of the war. I would say that how we teach about the Holocaust is still a very difficult question, especially when we put it into context. The broader question is to what extent we can adapt Holocaust education to contemporary issues, and if we are teaching with testimonies, it is important to consider the purpose of these interviews in that context.

This relates to what Thomas mentioned regarding the significance of incorporating Holocaust education into discussions of current issues, like the war in Ukraine, and how it changes our approach to these topics and the way we discuss them. I would just like to tell you a really short story. The previous summer, we organized a charity concert in Poland for Ukrainian refugee children. We have a Ukrainian colleague who was there and shared her experiences. She had been teaching with testimonies for years, and when the war broke out, many of the stories just popped up in her head and became immediately relevant to her in terms of coping, building resilience by relying on stories of those who had previously survived war.

At this point, I would like to stress the importance that she had been teaching with testimonies for a long time and we need to bring in the IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance) recommendations that we should avoid simplifying and making ahistorical comparison. I am not sharing this example to bring in a very simplistic comparison, but rather to illustrate that the stories of survivors have a really strong impact and we can use them in education thoughtfully.

To address the final and third question, which actually embodies the whole question: How teaching the Holocaust has been changed as a result of the war of Russia waged under the false pretext of “denazification”? I hope now you can see the importance of deconstructing the whole question in order to understand that we



must address all of the above to give an informed answer, to be able to engage in critical thinking, because teaching about the Holocaust is a good way to improve critical thinking skills and understanding the nuanced way to approach such a complex question. Thank you.

**Marta Havryshko:** Thank you so much, Gabriella. Please, Patrick.

**Patrick Siegle:** Thank you also from me and a warm welcome to everyone. I feel very honored to be part of this important roundtable today. Maybe I also say a little bit about my speaking position first. The program, “*ERRINNERN:AT*” Holocaust education is part of Austria’s Agency for Education and Internationalisation OeAD. We are a state-owned agency commissioned by the Ministry of Education. Our main task is to try to make teaching about the Holocaust and National Socialism more professional, better in Austria and therefore our main task is training teachers in collaboration with universities and teacher training institutions, combined with study visits to Israel, Poland, Germany, and other places, as well as developing teaching materials, for example with one of our partners in cooperation, the USC Shoah Foundation.

This is the perspective I am bringing in. When I prepared my statement for today, I thought, “how am I going to do this?” as I am not actually working as a teacher at the moment in schools. So, I made quite a few phone calls within our huge network of teachers in Austria and I asked them the questions you were posing me.

A few general information about history teaching in Austria: like in Germany, teaching about the Holocaust and National Socialism is mandatory in Austria. It is part of the curriculum; and unless you have not heard about the Holocaust in religion classes, ethics, or German literature, you will deal with the history of the Holocaust usually in 8th grade in middle school, and when you attend high school afterwards, then, usually again in 11th or 12th grade. A special feature in Austria is that we have many vocational high schools and more than one third of our students go to these schools. Here, less time is dedicated to history than in grammar schools, for example. Another specialty in Austria is that history is never taught as a subject on its own. It is mostly combined with *politische Bildung* (political education), citizenship education, sometimes in combination with sociology or geography, which has advantages and disadvantages, but for the topic we are talking about today, it might have more advantages.

Second, I would like to give you a few insights, a few theoretical thoughts about history learning, history dialectics in general in Austria. As you might know, history teaching these days is much more than teaching about factual knowledge. If you look into the Austrian curricula, they are all based on this principle of competences, skills the students should learn, like media literacy, narrative skills, the skills to distinguish between facts and fiction, just to give you a few examples. Teaching about history always follows certain principles, for instance it should be multi-perspective, it

should relate to the present days, to the students and their life work, it should solve problems of today, it should work with examples, personal stories, and it should always be as close as possible to current scientific knowledge. Peter Gautschi, a history didactic professor in Switzerland, who is at the same time the head of our scientific board, puts it in a nutshell and says, history learning should enable students, first, to deal skillfully, competently with history, second, to reflect with present day issues, and third, to do it responsibly for the future.

Why am I elaborating on this a little bit longer? Because I think it is important to think of and to know when it comes to the topic of this roundtable. I would say, a good history teacher would always start a history lesson with questions from the present. Indeed, all the teachers I spoke with, always said, “of course we dealt with the war,” there was a lot of insecurity and there were also history-related questions like, “Is Putin really the new Hitler”? And “why are the Ukrainians Nazis”? Good history teachers took these questions to deal with. But very often the teachers told me that they had done this in general and not relating to the history of National Socialism and the Holocaust. Fortunately, the Austrian Ministry of Education and the school system reacted quite quickly at the beginning of the war and we are lucky that we can always also rely on materials from the German-speaking world like the Federal Agency for Civic Education which also provided a lot of materials that teachers could use in Austria.

When we now come to the concrete question of what impact the war in Ukraine has on history education, I would put it on two different levels. The first is a personal level. When I interviewed the teachers, there was not a single one that had no Ukrainian student. They all had Ukrainian students in their schools and in their classes. The teachers told me that the challenges they had to face were much more general. It was about the situation the students were facing.

There are about 13,000 Ukrainian students in Austrian schools, one third in primary, one third in middle, and one third in high schools. Learning in general was very difficult for them due to fears, sorrows about the families, about their relatives, and it took some time until these students could be integrated into the school system but many teachers also told me that they had very good experiences and many of them are now part of the school community, many of them are good students and the older teachers also told me that it reminded them a little bit of the situation in the early 90s when a lot of Bosnian students came to the Austrian school systems. Secondly, and we should not forget this, it also has an impact on a personal level on the Russian students in Austrian classrooms. Many teachers told me that the conflict between Ukraine and Russia also came on a very personal level into the schools.

We have a wide range: we have students that come from families that are not critical about the war or even Putin-friendly. And then on the other side we have students who got attacked or were addressed by other students for being Russian,

they did not speak Russian anymore at school because they were afraid of the reactions of others, and some teachers told me that they had to deal with practical issues such as visa restrictions for their Russian students who could not go on language travels and so on. So there are many layers, and of course it has also an impact on the Austrian students, and as Gabriella said, there was a lot of solidarity, a lot of charity in the schools to show that the students wanted to make a difference and they wanted to show support as much as they could.

It is interesting that most of the teachers told me, and this might be a bit surprising for you, that the war did not really have an impact on the way they taught about the Holocaust and National Socialism. I had a teacher who told me that he was speaking about forced labor camps and he used personal stories of Ukrainian forced laborers to deal with the topic and to relate it to Ukraine today, but all in all, the teacher said that the Holocaust in Ukraine and the Holocaust in general is still taught in Austria in a very country-specific or national manner. In the curriculum it says that we should have a European perspective on National Socialism and Holocaust, but in the practical field it happens only seldom.

The teachers said that even before the war, the Holocaust in Ukraine was not really a topic they had dealt with and that has not changed due to the war. They are facing the challenges of Holocaust distortion, for example, what is happening in social media, on TikTok and other channels. But those were challenges they were dealing with anyway for many years, and it did not change at least according to those teachers I have been speaking with. This does not mean that Holocaust denial and distortion as a general political and societal problem is not important for teaching about the Holocaust, but how to deal with this and what answers we could give to this threat, this challenge, maybe this is something we can go into deeper now in the discussion.

**Marta Havryshko:** Thank you so much, Patrick. Now we will turn to the second round of questions. Patrick raised a very important question about the marginalization of Ukrainian history. Those who have poor knowledge of the history of Ukraine, easily buy Russian propaganda, Putin's propaganda. That is why we are thinking about how to make Ukraine visible, how to bring to light the complexity of Ukraine's history, and what aspects of Ukrainian history should be present in our curricula in Holocaust studies. Anja, please, could you elaborate more on this question?

**Anja Ballis:** Marta, that is really a very hard question you raised here.

Starting with the German curriculum – this is the point I want to emphasize – I can confirm the results of Patrick that I experienced the same, and I obtained similar results. Educators face challenges when they need to relate the subject of the Holocaust to current politics, especially when integrating these discussions in a classroom within a migrant society.

I think we should listen to the students who are in the classrooms. And, connecting with Gabriella, some of the students want to talk about their trauma, they want to reflect upon that, while some of the students just want to be treated on an everyday basis. So in this particular situation where this war is still going on, it feels very complicated for teachers to “do the right thing.” To me, autobiographies and testimonies could pave the way. For example, I read the book of Donia Rosen, “The Forest, My Friend,” it is also available in German translation. She lived in an area that fell to Ukraine during the Second World War. There, she experienced diverse forms of persecution by German troops, police forces, and the local population. Her only refuge was the forest, where she hid for four long years. This story reveals the intricacies of persecution outside the camps and, as further literature review may show, the impact of those trauma on her life. Reflecting on texts about persecution through the lens of individual life stories is possible. It is a sad story filled with a lot of violence, which clearly demonstrates how entangled history is. Coming back to teaching at schools, the different subjects should work well together showing not only the persecution during the Nazi era, but also reflect on the long lasting impacts of history intertwined with cultural heritage. So I would like to open up the topic. It is less a question of the curriculum, and more a question of content and the willingness to engage with this content. Therefore, content should be prepared in a way that makes the connection between history and present-day life clear. In addition to this content, teachers need skills to feel confident in their teaching, to respond to the needs of students who have experienced trauma or have different types of migration backgrounds. This would be my focus. And in teaching literature and language, I would like to incorporate dealing with the arts, which might help to focus on difficult history as well, besides visiting memorial sites and other places of remembrance. And finally, we have meaningful opportunities like using digitized materials, virtual reality, to bring different places together and reflect on the cultural heritage and the role for remembrance.

**Marta Havryshko:** Thank you so much, Anja, for your reflection. My next question is to Thomas: I had a great experience of cooperation with the *Memorial de la Shoah* and I am grateful for this institution for organizing trainings for Ukrainian teachers. What I witnessed during these seminars was that some of the Ukrainian teachers are still struggling with national loyalty, and a universal human rights-based approach to the Ukrainian history. Could you please share your knowledge and how this changed due to the war in Ukraine? Has the center changed its curriculum and methods of dealing, for example, with Ukrainian teachers who are now, as you know, using terminologies from the Second World War and the Holocaust while explaining the current events to their students, and how basically the approaches in your work and in general in the work of *Memorial de la Shoah* changed due to the war in Ukraine.

**Thomas Chopard:** Thank you very much for this important question. You are right, the *Memorial de la Shoah* is offering this partnership in Ukraine, but also in the rest of Europe, and even in Northern Africa. At the same time, we are offering a general curriculum that is the same for everyone, about the comparative history of mass atrocities in Europe, mostly reflecting on the concepts of genocide, war crime, crime against humanity, and so forth, and we try to adapt this approach to the local context.

Last week I was in Kyiv with students at the Shevchenko University and we tried to adapt to the local context by offering specific sequences on collaboration in Ukraine, the Holocaust in Ukraine, and a comparative approach with the Holodomor, for example, and other sequences on the current war, and other mass atrocities in Ukraine. Here Holocaust teaching and Holocaust knowledge in general can be used to compare, to offer a proper understanding of other contexts in general.

This is the agenda that the *Memorial de la Shoah* is pushing forward. When we offer this kind of comparison high school teachers or students react better, in my opinion, because they are not only facing foreign specialists teaching them something with a top down approach, but a dialogue is started within the local context, with specific tools, with specific notions, which we are all trying to use across the world to understand mass atrocities in general.

Sometimes the national context, national or even nationalist reflex can be an issue. But by offering comparisons, we reach a better result. Just to conclude, I want to mention a session we had about collaboration. Sure, collaboration during the Holocaust in Ukraine is a major issue. It was a major issue before 2014, and since February 24th it had been an even bigger issue. But by comparing collaboration in Ukraine with collaboration in France – collaboration is actually a French word, – and collaboration in other countries in Europe, we managed to start a fruitful discussion with the students.

What I think is important to understand is, that it takes two to tango. You have to bring something to the table, but you have to take the students with you into the ongoing discussion. That is the most important thing, in my opinion, to not have definitive knowledge that you offer, but to start a discussion that is going to continue when you are gone.

**Marta Havryshko:** Thank you so much Thomas. Now I will turn to Gabriella: could you please share with us your knowledge about how to debunk the propaganda slogan of “denazification”? We know that some Russian soldiers, for example, really believe that they are participants in a “holy war” against these Nazis. All these patriotic feelings now are on the rise among the soldiers in Russia, because they really believe that they should erase this evil from Europe and from their borders. How shall we deal with this distortion and the unjustified claims that are used to justify human rights violations and war crimes in Ukraine perpetrated by Russia?

**Gabriella Komoly:** I prepared for this question by putting it into ChatGPT, since AI is something that is currently playing a very significant role in creating distorted content and students are faced with that.

I believe we need to use it as a tool and turn it not into a weapon but a tool that we can use to support us. ChatGPT gave quite interesting answers on how to break propagandistic slogan down; it gave me 10 points from which I will highlight five because they are the most relevant. The first is to define the term “denazification.” The second is to provide context, and then challenge generalization. The fourth point is to counter misinformation, meaning to fact check claims, and to provide credible sources, and five, to encourage critical thinking. These are the five that I highlighted, but the others are also relevant. These points might be obvious because we are coming from the research and academic perspective, but bringing it to the educational and practical perspective, we really need to deconstruct the approach on how to address and answer such questions.

The same technique applies when in education it comes to analyzing a picture, or also when we are consuming social media content; then we need to address these questions and try to define, contextualize what we see there; probably ask the questions of who, what, where, when, and why. *Who did the picture? Why did they say “denazification”? Who said that?* We should try to find everything that is behind it, and with that, to enhance critical thinking. In this sense, ChatGPT gave quite a good answer for us to set the tone for understanding the notion of the nature of distortion and relativization of the Holocaust, because using this term: “denazification,” is a clear case of Holocaust distortion.

Now, I would like to go back to the other IHRA recommendations that I have already mentioned about how to counter distortion. We need to develop knowledge of the Holocaust and ensure the accuracy of the historical facts and the accuracy of individual understanding and knowledge. We need to create an engaging environment when we learn about the Holocaust and the distortion of the Holocaust. We need to promote critical and reflective thinking skills about the Holocaust, including the ability to counter distortion. What we can do is to contextualize the understanding of responsibility: who the actors are, why they did what they did, what complicity means, the agency of the victims as well, and also the relevance of the Holocaust for contemporary questions and how we can address that.

This is a question which was raised by most of us in the case of Ukraine and also how to include Ukrainian history itself into the curriculum. The question of relevance and the way to address the topic are also important. I brought us a short testimony clip which was given by a Croatian survivor, Ruzica Breyer,<sup>1</sup> who was

---

<sup>1</sup> Breyer, Ruzica. Interview 4952. Interview by Jasminka Domas. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, October 15, 1995. Accessed November 04, 2023. <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/4952>.

simply asked, what was her motivation to give her testimony? She said, “what motivated me the most is that unfortunately today you can see again so many of those things that we lived through. Today again so many people actually go through the same things, they are expelled, they are killed, they are tortured and so on.” This is a relevant connection and approach to address the Holocaust and connect it to contemporary issues because she tells the story based on her own experience. We ourselves should not make simplified comparisons, but since she reflects on her own experience, students and we can reflect on that too. I believe the way we can deal with this notion of “denazification” and how we can counter this distorted narrative is through a comprehensive understanding of the deeper layers of meaning, thus allowing us to nuance our understanding.

**Marta Havryshko:** Thank you so much, Gabriella. Now I want to ask Patrick: you mentioned that good historians will always make a link with the present. We will try to bring current events to the table and discuss how the past influences the present time. We understand that in the context of the current war we have new challenges. Our Holocaust educators, Holocaust teachers have new challenges. They should fight distortion, misuse and the instrumentalization of Holocaust history and memory. We know from teachers, from the personal experiences of students that they are faced with hostility while students in different European countries call them Nazis as well. The students do not understand the meaning of those words. What is the role of educators and teachers with regard to this, what should they do today to combat this hostility, and to deepen the knowledge of our youth about the Holocaust in time of mass atrocities?

**Patrick Siegele:** I want to clarify that there is a certain aspect to linking history with the present. History always starts with the present; we should make students aware that no matter how we look at history, history is not a given. History is always dealt with through a certain point of view that has to do with political and other circumstances in the present. So when we teach about National Socialism and the Holocaust, we always have to make choices. We will never manage to deal with the whole complexity of the history.

As a teacher, I always face the challenge of what I can or cannot do. That is why textbooks are so important, because often those make this decision for me, and only professional history teachers are able to step aside from what the textbooks give them, and make other choices.

Heidemarie Uhl, who died far too early one month ago, was one of the leading historians in Austria when it comes to cultural remembrance. She said about one year ago, that sometimes we think that the past helps us to understand the present better but she thinks that sometimes the present can also help us to understand history better. I found this a very interesting thought, because what is happening today gives us a different perspective on what was happening in the 20s or the 30s.



We look at history from a different angle and through a different lens due to the things that are happening today.

We asked Anja Ballis about what should be changed in the curricula. I believe the curricula are not the problem, at least not the school curricula. If you look at them in Austria, there are so many things students should learn. It even prescribes that they should learn what impact the Second World War had on Africa and Asia. There are so many topics teachers should deal with, but I think what is more important is to look into the curriculum of teacher education because very often, as Anja Ballis said, the teachers are not prepared enough to deal with the topics at school.

But as I said, we also have to be realistic. *What is possible in those few hours when teachers have to deal with the Holocaust? What should they do especially when it comes to Ukraine?* Here, we face a dilemma. There are more and more trends in history education that you should localize history, because you should make it meaningful for the students. To make it meaningful for them is to look at their school: *What do they know about Jewish pupils who have been expelled from the school? Who have been victims of the Holocaust? What do they know about concentration camps, which have been in the surrounding areas or in the same village?*

The teachers must look at the surroundings and then the challenge is to still teach the Holocaust with a European perspective. I give you an example: there was an interview with a Ukrainian forced laborer in the Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive. He was forced to work in a very remote area of Austria and decided to stay there after the war. This is a very local history, but at the same time it has a link to Europe, to the Ukraine. Stories like this are a chance to deal with the challenge to "act local, think global" on a history teaching level.

We need to support teachers and programs like the one from the Shoah Foundation and the *Memorial de la Shoah*. We were also part of an international program entitled "The Holocaust as the starting point." It is good to have such international exchange programs for teachers to learn new perspectives. It is a complicated and hard task to fulfill. Finally, we are also facing the dilemma of dealing with digital needs. In Austria, we have now Digital Literacy as a mandatory subject in schools. It started in autumn this year. I believe it is an important new development because using digital media for history teaching is crucial, but at the same time you have to give the students the media literacy so that they can critically reflect on the media they use. If you do so, you can also work with TikTok and Instagram, and with other channels. But you should be aware, and teach students so that they know what they are dealing with and what the circumstance is when they use it.

**Anja Ballis:** It is important that when it comes to teaching history, the teachers are always focused, especially in Germany, on content and how the content is brought to the students. I want to emphasize that what Patrick Siegele said, it is crucial to participate and engage in different programs with teachers and students,



and to find ways to address the needs of students sitting in the classrooms. This is quite challenging for teachers and they need a lot of support.

**Marta Havryshko:** Thank you so much, Anja, for this comment. Now let us continue with our Q&A session because we have several important questions. The first one is about the Yahad In-Unum website and materials: *do your students or yourself use those materials, and how do students react to this local dimension, what happened in their home regions? Do they investigate this question?*

**Thomas Chopard:** I will start because this is a French project. The answer would be quick, actually: very few people use Patrick Desbois's materials in the classroom. The only ones who use these testimonies are historians. Marie Moutier-Bitan, for example, who once worked with Patrick Desbois on this project is such a historian. She holds a PhD from the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences in Paris and she has recently published a book about the Holocaust in Western Ukraine based on these testimonies, but not only these. Unfortunately, they are difficult to use in the classrooms, in my opinion. We rather use materials provided by the *Memorial de la Shoah* which are more "typical" Holocaust testimonies by survivors who were children during the Holocaust. Bystanders are usually not the main point of focus during the presentations.

**Marta Havryshko:** We have another question regarding the comparative perspective which many of you mentioned. *How should we highlight the structural similarities and differences between, for instance, the Holocaust and the Holodomor? Is it even possible to compare these two cases of mass atrocities and extreme violence?*

**Gabriella Komoly:** I would like to add that I do not think we can compare them. Going back to the testimonies, the Shoah Foundation's testimonies are life history interviews, which were conducted in the 1990s. The interviewees are talking about their pre-war life. They also talk about atrocities during the war and about the post-war life. This means that the same person experienced many atrocities because in Eastern Europe, after the Holocaust, strict communist regimes came to power under the Soviet Union.

From the testimonies we can gain insight into these aspects since the survivors compare their own experiences on how their lives changed before the war and after the war. I believe this can be up to comparison. But otherwise, I would say it cannot.

**Marta Havryshko:** Thank you so much, Gabriella. We have the rise of far-right groups in Europe and we have advocating, nationalistic views of history, thus we face the problem of an ethnocentric treatment and narrating of history.

Our specific question is related to Germany and the influence of *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) on the minds of youth in Germany. But I will broaden this question because we have the same problem in many countries where far-right groups want to whitewash inconvenient history, to marginalize or silence certain issues, so this is a more universal problem.

How shall we deal with this? How shall we deal with the distortion from politically motivated and ideologically charged groups?

**Anja Ballis:** This question goes right to teacher education: students becoming teachers and going to the classes; and we have to find ways to, I can say that from my perspective as a language teacher, engage and get to know our students better.

This is not always possible. What I think is missing in many of the debates is that we are in contact and in a dialogue with the students who study history, language or other topics.

Sometimes they bring their ideas and ideologies to the classes which is quite harmful, and we do not have a way to correct it or start to talk about it.

We have to reflect a lot on what teacher education is like nowadays. We are focusing on the content and how this content comes to the students. But we are missing self-reflection; furthermore, we must incorporate the relevance of democracy into teacher training in Germany to a much greater extent. For my subject, this means especially learning and teaching how we talk about difficult topics and how we deal with misinformation and conspiracy theories. We should stress these topics and approaches so that we can talk in groups and work together in groups in order to critically discuss and reflect on these issues.

**Marta Havryshko:** Thank you, Anja. One of the key aims of Holocaust education is to motivate people to take decisive action, not to turn your eyes when you see injustice, when people are suffering. But we know that many people still act like the so-called bystanders or onlookers due to different motivations. *How shall we motivate people to act? How should we motivate them to defend human rights and be active citizens in this world? What do you think?*

**Patrick Siegele:** For me, this is one of the core issues of dealing with National Socialism and the Holocaust. Coming back to the curricula, even there one of the main issues students shall deal with is the question: *How could it happen?*

This is also one of the main questions students frequently ask. This is why it is so important to bring it down to a personal level, to deal with the stories of the victims, but also of the helpers, bystanders, perpetrators, to make it clear that even in a dictatorship like the Nazi regime, you had a certain scope of action and you could make a difference.

It was always my impression when working with students, that once they realize this, they can easily build a bridge to present days.

Of course, the situation is very different today compared to those times, they need to understand that. In relation to human rights violations and human rights values, in a democracy it is easier to take this scope of action and not to be a bystander.

We know it from history, especially the history of National Socialism that in a dictatorship the scope of action of the victims, but also of the bystanders, becomes smaller and smaller, until it is too late.

At “*ERRINNERN:AT*,” one of our most successful teaching materials which we developed together with teachers, is called “*Who is Guilty for the Death of Edith Winkler*”? Edith Winkler was an eight-year-old Jewish girl from Vienna. Her sister could flee to Palestine where she survived. Edith stayed with her parents and got deported and was killed in Kulmhof. We compiled a biographical material in which we showed who was involved in this process which finally led to the fact that an eight-year-old girl from Vienna had to die.

The students realize that there was a person who drove the train, a person who was sitting in the municipality to register the Jews of Vienna, a person who took away everything from the Jews, and so on.

You can bring it down to a very personal level and that is where then we can try to do our best so that the students make a conclusion for today.

**Marta Havryshko:** How will the upcoming climate crisis leading to increasing migration and mixed populations affect the education?

As a consequence of the war, we have approximately six million Ukrainian refugees. As we mentioned, there are refugees in countries all over the Europe. How does their presence impact Holocaust education, and how can various threats like the climate crisis change our Holocaust education today?

**Patrick Siegele:** That is a really big question which I try to answer through Jonathan Safran Foer, who said that from his point of view the most important thing to be prepared for the future climate crisis is to have good democracies where human rights are protected.

Because of the climate crisis, we will face more and more challenges, migration, and refugees.

Sometimes I believe that education prepares us, gives us the skills to be prepared for a future world we do not know yet. I believe Holocaust education, dealing with atrocities in the past, will help us to protect our democratic values and our democracies. People in Ukraine know how challenging this all is.

**Marta Havryshko:** Thank you so much. My final remark is about ethical concerns and the re-traumatization or traumatization of our students. Exposing them to traumatic facts about traumatic events, facts about deaths, betrayal, and presenting them disturbing visual materials, we bear responsibility. This responsibility is connected to trauma which we could potentially inflict on them. *How do we deal with this question? How shall we keep in mind that we can impact heavily our students, and in a negative way, by exposing them to these traumatic information and visual resources? Should we avoid these disturbing images? Or should we use them? How should we use them properly?*

**Gabriella Komoly:** It is included in the IHRA educational guidelines that we should not show students corpses, dead bodies of the Holocaust, because this will distance them from the topic, and will completely disengage them, besides, it could potentially trigger trauma that we do not know they have experienced. We can use personal stories, but we do need to avoid too graphic explanations of the events because this will not enhance their learning, rather it will completely shut them down.

**Patrick Siegle:** I completely agree, and I would add, that there are also limits to education and educators. It is okay for teachers to not always know how to deal with certain areas. The Ministry of Education in Austria, for example, provides psychological help for traumatized Ukrainian students and parents. They can rely on that, and teachers can also rely on that, because the challenges are too big. We cannot ask teachers to deal with these traumas. They need help from outside of school.

**Marta Havryshko:** This professional support is very important. I am grateful for your insights and expertise, and for sharing your knowledge. I am grateful to all our participants who made the room for our conversation.

**Andrea Pető:** Thank you very much, Marta, and thank you very much for the participants of this roundtable. I also want to thank the organizers.

At *Eastern European Holocaust Studies*, this is the second round table; the first one was unpacking the concept of “Never Again” (<https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/eehs-2023-2001/html>). The reason why this roundtable is so important is because we are living in a new Cold War, which is not between two different blocks of state, but sometimes these blocks within one state. The question is: *What can education do when a civil war is happening in the field of education and in the fields of cultural, political fronts?* We do not have anything else apart from education and we do not have anything else as a resource other than history.

*Eastern European Holocaust Studies* has the important mission to host such debates between historians and practitioners and I am grateful to our participants who accepted the invitation. We were discussing the different mnemonic templates we have about the Second World War, which was a major war in Europe, and again we live through a major war in Europe. We have already discussed “Never Again”, but there are other mnemonic templates related to the concept of genocide. *What is genocide? How can we use genocide as a concept?* We could also tackle the issue of the Nuremberg trials, and what will happen when this war will be over. *What are the consequences? What do we learn from this?* These templates are all connected to the way how we understand our present situation. I want to quote Dr. Gautschi, according to whom the past is always connected and read through the present, and it offers responsibility and teaches us responsibility and how to act.

Thank you very much to everyone, and keep on doing the work which makes a difference.