

Informed Principles of Holocaust Education: Why and How Holocaust Denial Should Be Taught

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Abstract

The education system, especially in United States history classes, has been used to prevent repeated violence by teaching youth on historical events with the use of Critical Race Theory and Trauma-Informed teaching. These pedagogies have been applied to various disciplines, but especially Holocaust Education. Although many believe that educators should teach the Holocaust as a historical event with no opposing perspectives, some believe Holocaust denial should also be included in the curriculum. By now, the “both sides” argument is familiar to anyone following US politics. In my paper, I propose a third option: I want to suggest that teaching students the history of Holocaust denial and book banning as well as encouraging students to see these histories in relationship to Nazi aesthetics and the extension of Nazi logic better equip students to become effective critical thinkers. By teaching the history and arguments around these ideologies, this will allow students to be better informed critics of Holocaust denial.

Keywords: *Holocaust denial, Education, Critical Race Theory, Trauma-informed pedagogy, Book banning, Censorship*

A two-sided argument circulating the United States about Holocaust education, that I will touch back on later, raises the question, should Holocaust denial be taught? I believe that both sides are wrong and rather think that a third option should be considered. This third option would not question the Holocaust’s authenticity or propose that there are opposing viewpoints, but it would teach Holocaust denial and its history with the goal of better informing students so they can become critics of Holocaust denialism and distortion. I believe that Holocaust denial should be taught with many of the same guidelines that are already applied to Holocaust education where at the center of this curriculum educators maintain awareness for emotional vulnerability of their students and utmost respect for victims and their families.

To propose and argue for my third option, that students should be taught the *history* of Holocaust denial and book banning to become effective critical thinkers of said denial, we must define exactly what Holocaust denial is and how this distortion has manifested throughout history in many forms still seen today. Holocaust denial depicts the attempt to question the authenticity of the established facts of the Holocaust specifically with the Nazi

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genocide of European Jews. More specifically, deniers argue that the murder of six million Jews never happened; the Nazi party had no official plan or intention to murder Jews; and that the gas chambers, specifically in Auschwitz-Birkenau, never existed (IHRA 2021).

More recently, Holocaust denial has shifted more towards Holocaust distortion. Holocaust distortion is rather written works or other forms of media that minimize or misrepresent the historical records of the Holocaust. These forms of media include but are not limited to statements by politicians, misleading exhibits at museums, and social media posts. For example, common distortions of the Holocaust are the minimization of the number of victims, blaming Jews for the Holocaust, accusing Jews of using the matter of the Holocaust for their own benefit, that deaths in the concentration camps were rather a result of disease than policy, and even that the *Diary of Anne Frank* is a forgery (USHMM 2020).

Both Holocaust denial and distortion are clear representations of antisemitism and hatred of Jews. The difference between Holocaust denial and distortion is that deniers are trying to make antisemitism acceptable by legitimizing Nazism and fascism and are actively trying to erase the Holocaust from history (SPLC). Deniers argue that no events of the Holocaust happened and that it was made up by the Jewish people, perhaps for their own benefit. They question if gas chambers existed, what victims died of, and more (IHRA 2022). On the other hand, Holocaust distortion, does not deny the Holocaust but rather misrepresents it or minimizes it in various ways such as making inappropriate comparisons to modern day events or questioning if six million Jews were murdered or if there were actually fewer. But if denial and distortion are rooted in hatred and antisemitism and are extensions of Nazi ideology and aesthetics, should their ideologies be taught in school? What will students gain by understanding denial and distortion logic?

Holocaust denial and distortion have manifested in many ways throughout history especially seen with book burnings and more recently book banning. Although the book banning and burnings done by the Nazi party are arguably the most well-known, they were not the first. The history of book banning begins as early as 210 B.C. where a Chinese emperor buried “460 Confucian scholars” alive. Later in 212 B.C. he also burned all copies of the books, except for single copies of each to remain in a royal library, because he wanted history to “begin with him.” Book banning and burning carried on throughout history into the years of 1744 when *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was condemned as immoral because the final chapter led to readers committing suicide just as Werther did, 1885 where Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* was deemed a “bad example for impressionable young readers” (FTR 2021), and even as recent as 2022.

In 2022 Spiegelman’s *Maus* was banned in Tennessee schools because of its “profanity” and “nudity.” At a board meeting on January 10th, 2022, a Tennessee school board member, Tony Allman, supports this decision to ban “Maus” and believes that educators don’t need to “enable” or “promote” this “stuff.” He went on to describe this “stuff” as “people hanging” and “them killing kids.” Allman also says it is not “wise” or “healthy” for the educational system to be promoting these ideas. As Palmer and Horn put it in their article, “This stuff – violence – is a part of history. It would be very hard to discuss the Holocaust without raising the specter of violence. And perhaps that’s the point.” A parent of six children in this school board is against this decision and says that they are sure these eighth graders, or anyone anywhere with access to technology, has seen “much more graphic nudity than a sketch of a naked mouse” and has heard worse language than “God damn” printed in *Maus*. As this parent notes, “language” and “nudity” are not this issue. Rather it is an effort to exclude histories and

perspectives from minority viewpoints, especially when this curriculum cut is not being replaced with any other movies, books, or other forms of art that the board would deem acceptable to use to educate on the Holocaust (Palmer and Horn 2022).

Tennessee school boards were most certainly not the first to manipulate what books students were allowed to read. On May 10th, 1933, Nazi-dominated student groups participated in public book burnings of almost 25,000 books that were deemed “un-German.” Minority voices that were burned include works of Jewish, liberal, and leftist writers such as Bertolt Brecht and Ernest Hemingway. After the book burnings, the Nazi regime raided several bookstores and publishers to confiscate any works that were “dangerous” or “un-German.” This was done to “synchronize professional organizations with Nazi ideology and policy” (USHMM 2022).

By filtering what students and the citizens were reading, this allowed the Nazis to further spread and extend their idea of reality. This same idea of censoring what students learn is seen today with the recent book banning as well as with the debate on whether Critical Race Theory should be taught. The American Civil Liberties Union of Texas, ACLU, has been tracking book banning and censorship since 2001. Findings show that in recent years the rate of book censorship has increased with attacks on public education by Texas Republicans. Most of the book challenges statewide have dealt with racism and sexuality. Governor Abbott decided that sex-positive LGBTQ characters were “pornographic” and should not be shown to minors under the age of eighteen as well as that new hires at Texas public universities should not be tenured to “combat the teaching of critical race theory.” The banning of these books show how censorship is being used to pass on Republican ideologies on works pertaining to the LGBTQ community and Critical Race Theory (Cadena 2022).

We can apply this same idea of censorship and ideology seen with these works to the banned books pertaining to the Holocaust. Both relate to and are extensions of Nazi ideology and Nazi aesthetics. If books that are meant to educate on the events of the Holocaust are banned and unable to be used in classrooms, where will students receive reliable information? By removing these books from the curriculum, students are faced with literary alienation from reliable sources and minority voices. This exclusion from these aesthetic works further extends Nazi ideology because students will not be taught from scholarly sources on the facts of this historical event and are more susceptible to learning the distortions in a non-critical way. Rather, students may be faced with Holocaust denial and distortion. Students that face this will be unable to critique and handle these real-life problems of racial conflict and antisemitism because of their cherry-picked education.

The argument on Holocaust education in public schools is two sided where some believe only factual events of the Holocaust should be taught with books and films including but not limited to *Maus*, *Nacht und Nebel*, and *The Book Thief* and that no Holocaust denial should be taught. People who are of this opinion believe that teaching Holocaust denial is showing opposing viewpoints of the Holocaust and causes students to question whether it happened and to what extent. On the other side of the argument, there are people who believe that there should be opposing viewpoints of the Holocaust taught in schools where students are allowed to choose what they believe and raise question to what they are taught on this event.

But I propose a third option: why can't both the Holocaust and Holocaust denial and distortion be taught? Of course, I do not think that Holocaust denial and distortion should be taught as an opposing viewpoint because the Holocaust is a factual event of history and there

is no questioning that. Rather, Holocaust denial and distortion should be taught in a way that informs students on this other mentality of the Holocaust and allows them to be educated critics. By being educated on these topics from both sides, with the use of texts on the Holocaust as well as texts that have themes of denial and distortion, students will be able to challenge and critique Holocaust deniers and distortion when it appears not only with the Holocaust, but also current events that pertain to Critical Race Theory and racial conflict.

Moreover, Holocaust denial and distortion must be taught with the use of various pedagogies and guidelines that ensures a level of sensitivity and awareness for the topics that are to be discussed and what traumas are associated with them, just as the Holocaust is. Guidelines and pedagogies that I found were most helpful when thinking about how to teach the Holocaust and Holocaust denial were given by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum provides a detailed list of ten guidelines they recommend for Holocaust educators. These ten guidelines are phenomenal resources to apply to Holocaust education and could also be used when educators are teaching Holocaust denial and distortion to ensure a high level of sensitivity and awareness to the complexity of this subject matter. These ten guidelines include defining the term, explaining that it was not inevitable, avoiding simple answers, striving for precision of language, balancing perspectives, avoiding comparisons of pain, avoiding romanticizing history, contextualizing history, translating statistics, and making responsible methodological choices.

By defining the term “Holocaust” at the beginning of a Holocaust education course or lesson, educators are laying the foundation that will allow students to do their own research on the history, who was involved, and its geographical and temporal context. This also allows students the ability to confront the question “What was the Holocaust?” This same idea of term defining can be applied to Holocaust denial. Educators should define and lay the foundation to what Holocaust denial is, who holds these opinions, and its impacts. This will allow students to address the question “What is Holocaust denial?” in a way that will alert them to the way some antisemites and distorters of history confront the Holocaust.

An idea of Holocaust distorters is that the Holocaust happened at the fault of the Jews for their own benefit. Students should be taught this harmful idea by explaining their ideology and then refuting it by teaching that the Holocaust was not inevitable. It took place because of individuals, groups, and nations choosing to act or not to act. Educators should focus on these decisions and insights of history and human nature that led to this. By focusing on these insights, educators are fostering a classroom environment where critical thinking is encouraged. Educators are then modeling and encouraging a critique of Holocaust distortion ideology that the Jews caused the Holocaust as well as that just because this historical event happened, that does not mean it had to or should have.

Teaching the Holocaust as well as denial and distortion raise many difficult questions about individuals, human behavior, and history. When educators are asked these difficult questions, it is important to not give simplified answers. Educators must encourage students to critically think about the many factors and events that contributed to the Holocaust. Students must also think about the ideology of Holocaust denial and further question how people could deny this and why. By encouraging students to ask such difficult questions and wrap their brains around these hard topics, students will be engaged learners and learn to think deeply about the Holocaust as well as critique those that deny or distort it.

While answering these difficult questions posed by students, it is also vital to strive for precision of language. The Holocaust and denial are incredibly complex, and it is easy to accidentally give generalized answers which then distorts facts. An example of this is if an educator were to say, “all concentration camps were killing centers” or that “all Germans were collaborators.” This should be avoided and rather students should be encouraged to clarify the information presented and should aim to distinguish differences between various ideas. These ideas include prejudice and discrimination, resistance, concentration camps and killing centers as well as guilt and responsibility.

An example of encouraging students to distinguish the different meanings of these ideas can be seen with resistance. Resistance usually refers to an act of an armed revolt. During the Holocaust, it could also include partisan activity such as smuggling messages and food. It could also be thought of as willful disobedience such as continuing to practice your religion and cultural traditions. Resistance is more than just physical, there is also spiritual resistance where many kept their will to live in the face of this hatred. Many Holocaust deniers and distorters use the depiction of harmful stereotypical descriptions of Jews. It is important to dismantle these with students and remind them that not all Jews are the same nor did they have the same experience. Generalizations and stereotypes about both Jews and Germans stereotype group behavior and distort historical reality. Educators must ensure that students are aware of how harmful stereotypes are for all parties.

As educators teach on both the Holocaust and denial, it is important to balance the perspectives that you are using to inform your students. Students should be encouraged to be critical thinkers of all sources. They should consider why a source was created, who was the intended audience, who created it, are there any inherent biases in the information, and does this information allow multiple interpretations. A lot of the documentation about the Holocaust comes from the perspective of the perpetrators. There are also survivor testimonies, books, and films about Holocaust denial. It is important to include works from all perspectives and encourage students to analyze all these works. By allowing students to learn how to analyze these works, you are preparing them to analyze and critique other sources they come across, not just in Holocaust studies but in other disciplines.

It is important to not compare pain or romanticize history when teaching on these complex topics. While teaching these topics it is important to discuss the various policies used by the Nazi regime and the different ideologies Holocaust deniers may have. But these ideas and policies should not be presented in a way where students feel the need to compare the level of suffering between groups during and after the Holocaust. It is important to educate students that we cannot assume the horror and trauma that these people and families felt, and we cannot make the comparison that Holocaust victims suffered more than victims of other genocides. Victims and perpetrators should be portrayed as human beings that are capable of moral judgment and are able to make their own decisions. People who decided to risk their lives for victims should not be given an overemphasis on their heroic actions because this can cause an inaccurate and often unbalanced account of history. If you only focus on the horrific nature of the Holocaust, you may cause cynicism in your students, but if you only focus on the heroic actions, they will have a distorted view of history. It is vital to have a balance of these perspectives.

When teaching on the Holocaust and denial it is important to contextualize both. Educators must place these events and ideologies in their respective historical contexts to allow students a perspective on the circumstances that may have contributed to these events. By allowing students to see the multiple factors that lead to the Holocaust or to denial ideologies, students can further their understanding as to why these ideas and events took place. Another important note to make in the classroom is to not encourage students to categorize groups of people based on their experiences in the Holocaust. Students should also be taught the history of Jewish life and their cultural contributions and achievements to balance their perceptions of Jews as victims. This will also allow students to understand the traumatic disruption in Jewish history caused by the Holocaust. Holocaust deniers must also be put in context. Of course, there were no Holocaust deniers before the Holocaust took place, but we can analyze outspoken deniers and see how they view other historical events. Are they denying other genocides and other events? What are common ideologies they have with other deniers, antisemites, and even the Nazis?

Understanding the Holocaust and its complexity is quite difficult, especially understanding the number of victims. When students are taught about the six million murdered Jews, it is hard to empathize with such a large number. It is important to show individual people with their own stories. Show them as parents, children, teachers—there are humans behind these statistics that are just like us today. These victims should be portrayed in a way not only as victims, but where the fullness of their lives is shown. They are more than just a number and are more than a Holocaust victim. We can apply this same idea with Holocaust deniers. Not so that we can empathize with them, but so students realize they are people just like us and that we need to be alert that these people are more common than we hope, such as their teachers and maybe even their family members. Rather than giving students just statistics of deniers, show them as humans. Explain who they are and what their careers are. An example of this is with David Irving. He is one of many outspoken deniers of the Holocaust but is also an author and a father. Any of the authors students read could be closet deniers, and students should be encouraged to realize that deniers and distorters are all around them, hiding in plain sight, and that they must think critically about who they talk to and what they read.

A comprehensive guideline that educators should follow is making responsible methodological choices. When educating about denial and the Holocaust it is important to select images and texts that do not exploit the students' emotional vulnerability or that may be disrespectful to victims themselves or their families. Many educators use simulation exercises to help students understand the Holocaust (USHMM). An example of one of these activities that I experienced was my teacher taped off a section in the room to mimic the size of a cattle cart that was used to transport Jews. We were then told to stand in this area and to feel what it would have felt like to be in a cattle car with so many other people. What this lesson failed to show was the way Jews were stacked on one another with a small hole that allowed fresh air, with an overflowing pot in the middle of the cart as a toilet, and people fighting and killing one another over any food that may have been smuggled in. Although this does allow for student engagement, many students leave the lesson feeling like they know what was like to be a victim. It is better to draw upon primary sources and survivor testimonies rather than simulations or games. Overall, maintaining a keen awareness for the emotional vulnerability of students as well as respect for the victims is vital to Holocaust education, including lessons on denial.

In conclusion, by opting for my third option where students learn the *history* of Holocaust denial and book banning as well as ideologies of such, they will ultimately become effective critical thinkers of said denial rather than falling prey to denier and distorter ideology. Informing students on Holocaust denial ideology will better equip them to handle racial conflict in the future with various disciplines. By creating effective critical thinkers, students will learn how to not extend racist ideologies and can learn to combat against systemic racism in their own lives. Students will not only be able to critique Holocaust denial and distortion logic but will also then be able to apply this same criticism to other forms of distortion such as with the Black Lives Matter movement, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as well as other genocides and events throughout history.

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