

Holocaust education

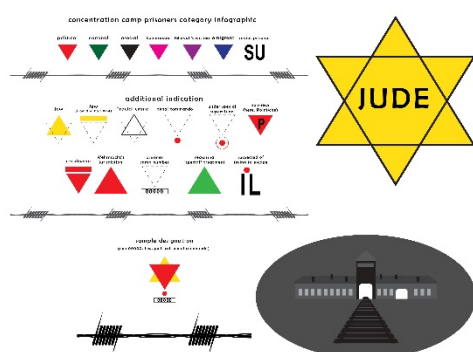
'Never, never be a bystander'

SUMMARY

This year, 27 January, International Holocaust Remembrance Day, marks the 76th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and extermination camp. One focus of this annual day of commemoration is the responsibility borne by those who remain indifferent in the face of intolerance and discrimination. This places the Holocaust in the context of human rights, broadening Holocaust education to issues of tolerance, respect for human dignity, and democracy.

Holocaust education, which traditionally centres on the human and historical dimension, is also a vehicle for reflection on ethical and legal issues, and promotes critical thinking and open-mindedness. In contrast with ethical aspects and critical thinking, the legal dimension adds a new perspective to school education that can put additional pressure on the teachers responsible for Holocaust education, extending beyond their usual subject areas. Moreover, many European countries host immigrant populations whose collective history does not include this particular experience. Pupils and students meanwhile use social media, a potential source of conspiracy theories, Holocaust denial, antisemitism and xenophobia. In this context, teachers need to be ready to deal with this subject in a difficult social environment. They also need adequate resources and tools to address inconvenient truths of the period.

International institutions, and the European Union and its bodies, encourage dialogue and research on these issues, recognising the importance of Holocaust education and its human rights aspects for democracy and tolerant societies. The European Union provides funds, expert bodies and agencies to address the history, education, pedagogy and rights aspects of Holocaust education in all its dimensions of discrimination, persecution and extermination of Jewish, Roma and Sinti populations, as well as other minorities.



IN THIS BRIEFING

- Background – Holocaust survivors' messages
- Unesco and the United Nations on Holocaust education
- Antisemitism, intolerance and Holocaust denial on the rise
- Holocaust education in the EU
- European Parliament

Background – Holocaust survivors' messages

At last year's memorial ceremony, on 27 January 2020 in Auschwitz, [Marian Turski](#), a Holocaust survivor and, at 94, still an active journalist, chose not to share his camp memories, but rather to trace the history back to the early thirties. The path that led to Auschwitz and the Holocaust began in the centre of Berlin, with park benches being forbidden to Jews. This seemingly minor step was just the first in a long and quickly expanding list of discriminatory acts, accompanied by hatred and violence, and Kristallnacht. Turski's words 'Never be a bystander ... whenever any kind of minority is discriminated against' echoes the 'eleventh commandment': 'You should never, never be a bystander', added by [Roman Kent](#) to the Ten Commandments in 2015. Five years earlier, in the same place, Kent's words as a camp survivor served as a reminder that the Holocaust did not happen accidentally, did not appear from nowhere, but was a process that developed with almost total indifference from the bystanders enjoying the benefits of freshly introduced social policies.

Unesco and the United Nations on Holocaust education

These words pronounced by Holocaust survivors have particular meaning and support the idea that Holocaust education is not only about remembering the atrocities perpetrated by a totalitarian regime on defenceless minorities. On 10 November 2020, participants in a joint [Unesco/United Nations conference on Holocaust education](#), speaking about the results of a study on knowledge of the Holocaust, worried that vast numbers of young people single out the Nazi leadership as solely responsible for what happened in Auschwitz and other extermination camps. Still another study showed that 56 % of students in secondary schools in England believed that Hitler was solely responsible for the Holocaust. The eminent specialists taking part in the conference stressed that societies in the places where the Holocaust happened and beyond need to address this painful history, since it brings a general reflection on minorities, tolerance, violence, and hate speech. Historical truth needs to be sought out, however unpalatable it is to the grandchildren of those whose indifference led to the extermination of an important minority in Europe, its almost total disappearance from these regions, and the destruction of its culture, language, and faith.

Setting Holocaust education in its broader context, a [review](#) of the Unesco publication 'International Status of Education about the Holocaust – A Global Mapping of Textbooks and Curricula' recognises that Holocaust education about the genocide 'exemplifies clear and global moral standards for good and evil'. It offers opportunities to set moral and legal standards to prevent and sanction injustices. However, its author warns that it may be complicated by nationalistic (and sometimes even biased) heroic narratives. This claim is supported by evidence of tensions regarding nationalist bias, since Holocaust education is put to diverse uses in various nations. However, Holocaust education can also promote communication about human rights, civic education and positive national and international transformation, when the painful past is addressed courageously.

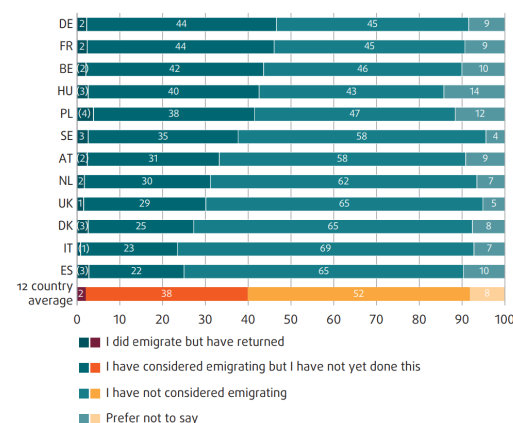
Holocaust education therefore relates to a broader question about both the responsibility of society as a whole and that of individuals. It can point to the responsibility of those who closed their eyes to discrimination against minorities and those who turned their heads when atrocities were perpetrated: the indifferent silence of bystanders who witnessed violence and cruelty directed towards minorities such as Jewish, Roma, Sinti, homosexual and disabled people and others.

For [Unesco](#), education about the Holocaust and genocide is part of its efforts to promote [global citizenship education](#) (GCED), a priority of the [Education 2030 agenda](#), to help people to become critical thinkers, responsible and active global citizens, who value human dignity and respect for all, and reject all forms of prejudice that can lead to violence and genocide. A 2018 [CNN poll](#) in Austria, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Hungary, Poland and Sweden indicated an urgent need for such education. Its data showed that 10 % of respondents declared an unfavourable opinion towards Jews, 16 % towards [LGBT+](#) people, 36 % towards immigrants, 37 % towards Muslims, and 39 % towards Romani people.

Antisemitism, intolerance and Holocaust denial on the rise

The eleventh commandment has gained in importance in recent years, as fewer Holocaust survivors are present for commemorations at the Auschwitz extermination camp to bear witness to their unspeakable experiences. More importantly, while these vivid memories fade, according to the [European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights \(FRA\)](#), antisemitism is on the rise in the EU where hate speech, conspiracy theories and Holocaust denial find accommodating space in social media. A 2018 [FRA survey](#) on discrimination and hate crime against Jews in the EU pointed to a disturbing reality: in the five years preceding the survey, across EU Member States where Jews have been living for centuries, more than one third of them say that they are considering emigrating because they no longer feel safe as Jews. The survey was conducted in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom, where over 96 % of the European Union's estimated Jewish population live (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Number of EU citizens who have considered emigrating because of not feeling safe as a Jew in the past five years, by Member State (%)

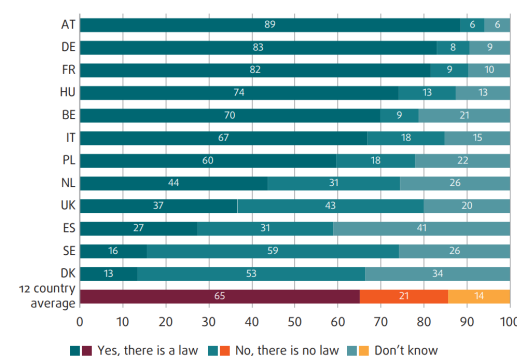


Source: [Experiences and perceptions](#) of antisemitism. Second survey. FRA, 2018.

The [Holocaust Memorial Museum](#) in Washington DC qualifies Holocaust denial as a perpetuation of antisemitism and stereotypes of Jewry, and of conspiracy theories. It is the denial of historically established facts and testimonies preventing the perpetrators and indifferent bystanders from any deeper reflection on discrimination mechanisms, prejudice and intolerance and their consequences. Social media are vectors in propagating conspiracy theories, among them Holocaust denial. [Social media](#) platforms continue to feature, recommend and lead users to banned antisemitic content. The situation raises questions about both the platforms' human moderators' knowledge of the Holocaust and their awareness of Holocaust denial, and whether they are able to identify it effectively, and whether platforms' auto-detection algorithms have ever been trained to detect Holocaust denial accurately.

It is important to note that Holocaust denial is legally punishable in the EU, which is not the case in the United States. However, awareness of legal safeguards against incitement to hatred, and against Holocaust denial and trivialisation, covered by Article 1 of the [Framework Decision on Racism and Xenophobia](#) of 2008, differs across the EU, with one third of people on average not knowing they are forbidden or thinking they are not (see Figure 2). This data shows that Holocaust education is not sufficient to raise awareness of history or the legal consequences of denying inconvenient facts.

Figure 2 – Awareness of a law that forbids denial or trivialisation of the Holocaust, by EU Member State (%)



Source: [Experiences and perceptions](#) of antisemitism. Second survey. FRA, 2018.

Holocaust education in the EU

In 2018, the Fundamental Rights Agency conducted a survey pointing to Holocaust education as a factor in preventing antisemitism. In 2010, it published '[Excursion to the past – teaching for the future: Handbook for teachers](#)', a result of its project on holocaust education and human rights education. It addressed three essential questions: why to teach about the Holocaust, what to teach about the Holocaust, and how to teach about the Holocaust. It focused on issues such as pedagogical concepts, methodology, practices at memorial sites and in museums, and the needs of teachers when developing classes on Holocaust and human rights education. A recent Unesco/United Nations panel discussion '[Holocaust education in crisis?](#)' pointed to the role of teachers in conducting such classes properly, covering both difficult aspects of history and legal (and moral) issues, and the need to make sure that teachers are at ease with these questions. It

stated that teachers teach material that they feel comfortable with, and what they learned at university. In this complex domain, what they need is education and not just training.

A [European Commission working group on combating antisemitism](#), set up in December 2018, met in December 2019 to discuss education on Jewish life, antisemitism and the Holocaust. A new EU antisemitism strategy is planned for 2021.

There is also a forthcoming proposal to make hate speech, including hate speech based on religion, a European crime.

Table 1, based on a [2020 OSCE](#) study, shows the availability of teacher training in some EU Member States on the Holocaust in general, on the Roma and Sinti genocide and on Nazi crimes against other groups. It also specifies the level at which education on these issues is provided for pupils and students. All Member States provide education on the Holocaust to students at least at secondary school level. Some Member States also provide it already in primary schools, others also at universities. Greece, Romania and Finland provide only Holocaust education (Greece at all levels, Romania at secondary and university levels and Finland solely at secondary level. Latvia and Slovenia do not include curriculum on the Roma and Sinti genocide at any level.

Teachers in all Member States included in the study, except for Malta, have an opportunity to follow a training course on Holocaust education. The lack of teacher training on the Sinti and Roma genocide and crimes against other groups (minorities) is of concern, despite the fact that curricula do cover these topics, particularly given the importance of minority rights education in an era of conspiracy theories and intolerance on social media platforms that are not monitoring the situation properly.

Table 1 – Teaching about the Holocaust, the Sinti and Roma genocide and crimes against other groups in some EU Member States

Countries	Teaching about the Holocaust	Teaching about the Roma and Sinti genocide	Teaching about crimes against other groups	Teacher training on
Belgium	● ●	● ●	● ●	●
Bulgaria	● ●	● ●	● ●	●
Denmark	● ● ●	● ● ●	● ● ●	● ●
Germany	● ●	● ●	● ●	● ●
Greece	● ● ●			●
France	● ● ● ●	● ● ● ●	● ● ● ●	●
Croatia	● ● ● ●	● ● ● ●	● ● ● ●	● ●
Italy	● ● ● ●	● ● ● ●	● ● ● ●	● ●
Latvia	● ● ●		● ● ●	● ●
Lithuania	●	●	●	● ●
Luxembourg	● ● ● ●	● ● ● ●	● ● ● ●	●
Hungary	● ● ● ●	● ● ● ●	● ● ● ●	●
Malta	● ●	● ●	● ●	
Austria	● ●	● ●	● ●	● ●
Poland	● ● ● ●	● ● ● ●	● ● ● ●	● ●
Portugal	● ● ● ●	● ● ● ●	● ● ● ●	● ●
Romania	● ●			● ●
Slovenia	● ● ● ●		● ● ● ●	● ●
Slovakia	● ● ● ●	● ● ● ●	● ● ● ●	● ●
Finland	●			●
Sweden	●	●	●	● ●

Blank	No answer	● Primary schools
●	Holocaust	● Secondary and upper-secondary
●	Roma and Sinti genocide	● Colleges and universities
●	Crimes against minorities	

Data source: [Holocaust Memorial Days](#): An overview of remembrance and education in the OSCE region, OSCE, 2020. Infographic by Samy Chahri.

This concern is shared by the [European Trade Union Committee on Education](#), which in January 2020 stated that: 'Teachers and education personnel have a particular responsibility to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive, especially in these worrying times where antisemitism, racism, nationalism and attacks on fundamental democratic values seem to be on the rise across Europe'.

EU programmes supporting Holocaust education

On an annual basis and with a budget of approximately €3.5 million, the European Commission's [Europe for Citizens programme](#) supports initiatives that raise awareness of the memory of the Holocaust. [EuroClio](#) – the European Association of History Educators, established in 1992 at the request of the Council of Europe – is one such project, and is co-funded by the Europe for Citizens programme. It addresses controversial and difficult issues such as the Holocaust, bringing the University College London [Centre for Holocaust Education](#) and [Yad Vashem](#) together to produce and share a [massive open online course](#), offering educators innovative approaches to the challenges of teaching about the Holocaust.

The EU student programme, Erasmus+, has co-funded a webinar series based on the RETHINK (Remembrance Education for THINKing critically) [Teachers' Guide to Remembrance Education](#), to help teachers encourage critical thinking and cope with controversy in classrooms. This is an important issue in Europe, where more and more students come from immigrant families and regions that did not experience the Holocaust and the subject perceived from a European perspective is totally new for them.

Research is also needed to further Holocaust education. The EU-funded [European Holocaust Research Infrastructure](#) (EHRI) is one such research initiative, and has been designed to strengthen the network of European research on the Holocaust. The largest ever EU project in this domain connects the research community with its partners in Israel and the United States to make available across Europe and beyond dispersed sources relating to the Holocaust. Its online course in Holocaust studies provides teachers, lecturers and students with source material and background information and gives them an overview of recent trends in historiography. EHRI opted for a course that uses [selected six overarching topics](#), using representative examples. Each topic focuses on a critical analysis of sources within the context of the current state and methods of Holocaust research.

In an effort to broaden the scope of Holocaust education, in November 2018 the EU established a permanent international partnership with the [International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance](#) (IHRA) founded as a result of the 2000 [Stockholm Declaration](#). The participation of the EU in this international body allows for closer cooperation on combating Holocaust denial and preventing racism, xenophobia and antisemitism. Recognising the [importance](#) of Holocaust education for preserving democracy, and countering the influence of historical distortion, hate speech and incitement to violence and hatred, the IHRA [Recommendations for Teaching and Learning](#) about the Holocaust were adopted in 2019. They are now available in eight languages (Bulgarian, Croatian, English, Estonian, German, Macedonian, Norwegian, and Polish) and fourteen more language versions are in progress. This is an important step in promoting Holocaust education, since most documents are published in English and thus their implementation and use in individual countries is limited.

European Parliament

The European Parliament marks International Holocaust Remembrance Day every year and has adopted many resolutions on antisemitism, racism, xenophobia and other forms of intolerance, hate crime and hate speech.

Parliament's resolution of October 2018 pointed to the [rise of neo-fascist violence](#) in Europe, and political and media discourse trivialising the truth about the Holocaust. Calling on Member States to condemn and counteract all forms of Holocaust denial, including the trivialisation of the crimes

of the Nazis and their collaborators, it also pointed to the need to promote education on the diversity of our society and our common history, including on the Holocaust.

In 2017, Parliament adopted two resolutions: one on the fundamental rights aspects of [Roma integration](#) in the EU, and another on combating [antisemitism](#). The latter encouraged Member States to promote teaching about the Holocaust (also referred to as the Shoah) in schools and to ensure that teachers are adequately trained and equipped to address diversity in the classroom. It also suggested reviewing school textbooks to ensure that Jewish history and contemporary Jewish life are presented in a comprehensive and balanced way, so that all forms of antisemitism are avoided. The resolution on the Roma called on the Member States to commemorate the victims of the Roma Holocaust, and to conduct an awareness-raising campaign. Suggesting 2 August as Roma Holocaust memorial day, the European Parliament also called on the European Commission and the Member States to include Roma victims in their commemorations held on 27 January each year to mark International Holocaust Remembrance Day. Parliament highlighted voluntary training courses for civil servants on the Roma Holocaust as well as clear condemnation and sanctions for denial of the Roma Holocaust, hate speech and scapegoating by politicians and public officials at all levels and in all types of media, directly reinforcing anti-Gypsyism in society, as important steps in fighting stereotypes.

In its 2019 resolution on the importance of [European remembrance](#) for the future of Europe, Parliament called for education to promote the diversity of our societies and our common history, including that of the Holocaust and of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes that inflicted human suffering and violence, and split Europe for half a century.

MAIN REFERENCES

[The European Union and Holocaust remembrance](#), Magdalena Pasikowska-Schnass and Philippe Perchoc, EPRS, February 2020.

[Jewish communities in the European Union](#), Magdalena Pasikowska-Schnass, EPRS, January 2020.

[Roma and Sinti Holocaust](#), Magdalena Pasikowska-Schnass, EPRS, January 2020.

[Supporting Holocaust survivors](#), Magdalena Pasikowska-Schnass and Philippe Perchoc, EPRS, January 2019.

European Commission [webpage](#) on combating antisemitism.

European Commission, [Special Eurobarometer: Discrimination in the EU \(2019\)](#).

DISCLAIMER AND COPYRIGHT

This document is prepared for, and addressed to, the Members and staff of the European Parliament as background material to assist them in their parliamentary work. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of the Parliament.

Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged and the European Parliament is given prior notice and sent a copy.

© European Union, 2021.

Photo credits: © paveu / Adobe Stock.

eprs@ep.europa.eu (contact)

www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu (intranet)

www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank (internet)

<http://epthinktank.eu> (blog)

