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Holocaust Education in America: Eichmann Trial to *Schindler's List*

In the decades following World War Two, the Holocaust was not taught in American schools. Textbooks during the late 1940s and the 1950s scarcely included the atrocities committed against the Jews if there was any mention. The Holocaust, a term that was not yet used, came into American culture following the trial of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann in 1960. Following his kidnapping, televised trial, and later execution, American media brought the German atrocities to life. As more Americans learned about the Holocaust through survivor testimonies, popular culture, and scholarly research, education curriculum on the Holocaust developed. Holocaust education entered American schools as a response to growing public interest in the genocide of Europe's Jews in correlation with the Eichmann trial, an increase in popular media and scholarly debate, and changing political relations with Israel.

The Holocaust has been covered in-depth by historians and psychologists alike. The history of the Holocaust in America follows two main arguments; the first being why there was not more talk from Holocaust survivors after 1945, and what brought the Holocaust into American culture? The former is split between Holocaust victims suffering from extreme shock due to the atrocities they experienced and thus refused to talk about said experiences and the more popular argument among historians, that instead Holocaust survivors were quickly turned away. When this occurred has to do with Adolf Eichmann's trial, the televised trial brought considerable public attention to the Holocaust. Hannah Arendt's book *Adolf Eichmann: Banality of Evil* written on the trial spurred widespread scholarly debate and criticism which launched scholarly research by American historians. Peter Novick, Lawrence Langer, Alan Mintz, Rachel Auberach, Ian Davies and Deborah Lipstadt are all prominent historians who wrote about

Eichmann's trial in conjunction with Arendt's book. Almost all books available on the history of the Holocaust in America reference Arendt's book in a paragraph or a whole chapter.¹

American education was slow to include the Holocaust in its curriculum. It took decades for survivor's stories to come to light in the American public and there are a few of different views on why this was. Some scholars such as Marcia Sachs Littell, believe the lack of awareness was due to the trauma endured shocked survivors into silence, thus causing the delay for Holocaust acknowledgment in education. Other historians such as Peter Novick, Alan Mintz, Norman Finkelstein, Deborah Lipstadt and Holocaust survivors such as Elie Wiesel disagree. They instead argue that the American public was apathetic to the European Jews and larger political motives stifled survivors' stories from coming to light. Thomas Fallace analyzes both historical and education realms in the *Emergence of Holocaust in American Schools*. Fallace criticizes the various types of curriculum that developed and by whom.² He argues that education took roots in the Jewish community and individual teachers which lead to the expansion of statewide curricula.

The Holocaust education realm debates not the why or when the Holocaust developed in classrooms, but the how it should be taught. Historians and educators Samuel Totten, Simone Schweber, Ian Davies, Lawrence Langer, and countless others have dedicated several educational articles and books to Holocaust pedagogy. Almost all researchers take a brief look at how America has taught the Holocaust in the past, some such as Samuel Totten, even acknowledge the reluctance to teach it in the classroom. All scholars focus on how the Holocaust should be taught in schools today; with what books or what strategies, what moves to watch, how to interpret traumatic events if they are taught, and how to teach the portrayal the genocide of

¹ Lipstadt, "The Eichmann Trial and The Ardent Debate"; Novick "Self Hating Jewess Writes Pro-Eichmann Series".

² T. Fallace, *The Emergence of Holocaust Education in American Schools* (Springer, 2008).

Europe's Jews.³ Educational interpretations vary to best fit the political climate that controls the era such as in the 1980s.

The accusation that the atrocities committed against Europe's Jews was not known about is false, not only during the war but directly following the war in 1945. In 1942 as the war was going on, news articles posted about the killings being committed against Jews in Poland and Germany.⁴ After the war, the footage of American troops liberating concentration camps was screened in movie theaters. The Nuremberg trials of the late 1940s were covered in the newspapers.⁵ They brought awareness to the murders committed by the Nazi's, making it clearly understood of what the Nazi's had done against the Jews of Europe. A newspaper article published by *The New York Times* published an article in 1946 declaring that, "because the record is clear and complete, not one can question the true nature of Nazism."⁶ Shortly after the trials ended the true nature of Nazism went unacknowledged in America. In 1945 to 1947 there was a public outcry for survivors who immigrated to the United States, mourning family members met them crying. Elie Wiesel describes this short lived phenomenon, "People welcomed us with tears and sobs and then turned away."⁷ American attitude shifted and the Holocaust became a footnote in textbooks.⁸ Textbooks expanded to include World War Two but consistently failed to include atrocities committed against European Jews.⁹

³ John K. Roth, ed., *Holocaust Literature*, Magill's Choice (Pasadena, Calif: Salem Press, 2008); R. CLIFTON Spargo and ROBERT M. Ehrenreich, *After Representation?: The Holocaust, Literature, and Culture* (Rutgers University Press, 2010).

⁴ Fallace, *The Emergence of Holocaust Education in American Schools*, 11-12.

⁵ Homer Bigart, "Ruling on Eichmann Completed; He Is Found Guilty on All Counts," *The New York Times*, December 13, 1961, *The New York Times*.

⁶ "The Lasting Effects of the Nuremberg Trial; Because the Record Is Clear and Complete, No One Can Question the Real Nature of Nazism." October 20, 1946.

⁷ Lipstadt, *Holocaust*, 27.

⁸ Samuel Totten and Stephen Feinberg, eds., *Teaching and Studying the Holocaust* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2001), xv.

⁹ Christopher Witschonke, "A 'Curtain of Ignorance': An Analysis of Holocaust Portrayal in Textbooks from 1943 through 1959," *The Social Studies* 104 (July 1, 2013): 146-54.

As America split Germany with the Soviet Union, America's foreign policies prevented attention towards German atrocities. The global recognition of genocide was halted as western powers, especially America, dropped an iron curtain on relations with eastern communist states.¹⁰ Israel was formed in 1948 and the decade following Israel's establishment was tenuous. America was cautious of Israel joining the communist bloc. Movements to memorialize the tragedies of the Holocaust were stifled politically in order to prevent attention to a possible communist nation. There was full awareness of what had been done to the Jews, but going about acknowledging it, let alone teaching it, was far from the public eye.

American Jews were at last gaining a form of assimilation in the late 1940s as anti-Semitism was finally lessening.¹¹ With assimilation, new opportunities were available to Jews that allowed them to work on their own advancements. A new Jewish middle class developed allowing Jewish students better educational and economic opportunities. Jewish Americans focused on becoming Americans with Jewish affiliation, often putting Nazi's crimes against the Jewish community to the wayside to assure their advancement. Writings on the Holocaust were difficult to get published. Elie Wiesel's award-winning testimony, *Night* struggled to find a publisher. The translated *Night* barely sold over a thousand copies in America in 1960.¹² The book eventually became one of the most widely used literatures in Holocaust education.

Holocaust acknowledgment started to change in May 1960 when Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi war criminal, was kidnapped in Argentina by Israeli officials and put on trial in Israel. Eichmann facilitated the murder of millions of Jews and was pivotal in executing the "Final Solution" during the Holocaust. Newspapers articles spoke of the capture of, "The killer of six million

¹⁰ Witschonke, "A 'Curtain of Ignorance.'"

¹¹ Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000), 113.

¹² Fallace, *The Emergence of Holocaust Education in American Schools*, 26.

Jews,” and “Greatest living enemy of the Jews caught and brought to Israel.”¹³ In 1961, the first ever televised trial captivated millions around the globe.¹⁴ Millions analyzed Eichmann as he sat in a soundproof, bullet proof room while over a hundred survivors testified against him.

Eichmann’s trial gave the atrocities a name, the Holocaust, and forced the atrocities to be seen in vivid detail.¹⁵ The trial motivated Holocaust survivors to tell their stories and get them published. One witnesses, G. L. Glueck, had previously written a book of her survival, but could not get it published until publicity of the Eichmann trial.¹⁶ For survivors this felt like a turning point where they felt confident enough to share their stories.¹⁷ The trial would be covered by a Holocaust survivor then a reporter for the *New York Times*, Hannah Ardent, who would soon become synonymous with Eichmann’s trial.

Eichmann was hanged in June of 1962, one year later Hannah Ardent took her *New York Times* articles on the trial and published them into a book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.¹⁸ Ardent stated that Holocaust perpetrators were not evil masterminds predisposed to be sadistic murderers like previously thought. Eichmann was not unique, his banality was what made him excel at his job. Her book, published in 1963, caused a “Civil war among intellectuals who were bitterly divided.”¹⁹

The theory of Eichmann being a rule-following normal German man and not an evil mass murderer was contentious, to say the least. The notion that the responsibility of the Holocaust was not on a few, but instead countless ordinary people shocked viewers. “No banality of a man

¹³ “Killer of 6,000,000; Adolf Eichmann,” *The New York Times*, May 26, 1960, sec. Archives.

¹⁴ Auerbach, *Aftermath*, 187.

¹⁵ Norman G. Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering*, Pbk. ed (London ; New York: VERSO, 2001), 5.

¹⁶ Kennett Love, “MEMOIR RECOUNTS NAZI ATROCITIES; MS by La Guardia’s Sister to Be Used as Evidence in Eichmann Trial,” *The New York Times*, February 5, 1961, The New York Times.

¹⁷ Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America*, 13.

¹⁸ Hannah Ardent, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Rev. and enl. ed (New York: Viking Press, 1964).

¹⁹ Ardent, viii.

could have done such a hugely evil job so well; to believe otherwise is to learn nothing about the nature of evil.”²⁰ Previously it had been accepted that the Holocaust was black and white, good versus evil, Ardent blurred the lines. This notion, “violates everything we know about the nature of man.”²¹ Historians and scholars alike went to research to disprove or prove Ardent. Eichmann’s trial and *Banality of Evil* provoked scholars into research.

Politically, acknowledgment of the Holocaust had been delayed. This changed following the Six-Day War in Israel.²² As Israel established their state boundaries against Arab nations, there was a considerable amount of concern for fellow Jews in the newly founded Jewish state. American Jews mobilized quickly with considerable amounts of financial and political assistance.²³ American Jews were determined to prevent another sector of Jews from being destroyed, they were not going to fail like before.²⁴ The short war brought the Holocaust into the center of American Jewish culture. The US’s foreign policy towards Israel had softened after the state did not align with the Soviet Union and would now be a strategic ally in the Middle East.²⁵ The relationship strengthened following the 1973 Arab-Israel war, Yom-Kippur War, when Israel became a key ally of the US.²⁶

The attention from the Israel-Arab Wars and the Eichmann trial had caused a significant stir in the American Jewish community. The community developed a concern that their assimilation into American society had prevented a second generation from fully understanding the Holocaust. Jewish educators in the 1950s focused on Jewish resistance, rescue, and escape

²⁰ Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, 136.

²¹ Novick, 136.

²² Lipstadt, *Holocaust*, 3.

²³ Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America*, 15.

²⁴ Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, 148.

²⁵ Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry*, 21.

²⁶ Abigail Massell, “Narrating a Relationship: Holocaust Education in the United States and Early U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel,” *International Studies Honors Projects*, April 25, 2018, 53.

during the “Jewish catastrophe” to elicit Jewish pride.²⁷ Older Jews were frustrated at the lack of knowledge and concern from the younger generation.²⁸ Young Jews had limited knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust due to poor education. In response to this concern, the National Conference for Jewish Education held a symposium in 1964 called the “Shoah and the Jewish School.” There were three speakers; Judah Pilch, Sara Feinstein, and Rabbi Zalman F. Ury, each discussed the dilemma and how the Holocaust should be taught to Jewish students.²⁹

Holocaust education in colleges and universities alike advanced at this time. During the 1960s the civil rights movement brought reform to education. The 1960s shifted a deeper social desires to study the margins of history. The school system had emitted too much history for too long and students wanted relevant courses and curriculum.³⁰ “Researchers produced dozens of instructional pamphlets on historic and civic issues including Nazi Germany.”³¹ The demand for relevant curriculum in colleges led to a growth in Holocaust and genocide classes. Jewish college students led the demand starting in the 1960s trailed by non-Jewish students in the 1970s.

Holocaust education did not improve because of a growth in scholarly work, although it helped develop courses, it advanced by a demand from students. College students wanted to learn about the Holocaust, it became popular and “exciting” to learn about.³² This popularity is indebted to the growth of Holocaust in newspapers, scholarly journals, and most importantly film.

The most notable film was the T-V mini-series *Holocaust* depicting two families’ lives through the Holocaust. This mini-series was watched by 120 million, half of America’s

²⁷ Jon E. Pedersen and Samuel Totten, *Teaching and Studying Social Issues : Major Programs and Approaches* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2010), 140.

²⁸ Lipstadt, *Holocaust*, 39.

²⁹ Fallace, *The Emergence of Holocaust Education in American Schools*, 20-21.

³⁰ Pedersen and Totten, *Teaching and Studying Social Issues*, 142.

³¹ Fallace, *The Emergence of Holocaust Education in American Schools*, 45.

³² Auerbach, *Aftermath*, 193.

population, bringing a great amount of attention to the Holocaust and fully cementing it into the center of American culture.³³

Without a doubt, the most important moment in the entry of the Holocaust into general American consciousness was NBC's presentation, in April 1978, of the miniseries *Holocaust*. As was often observed at the time, more information about the Holocaust was imparted to Americans over those four nights than over the preceding thirty years.³⁴

The miniseries was produced with educational materials on the Holocaust. After each movie, there was a follow-up show of a panel of historians who would receive phone calls from viewers in disbelief. *Holocaust* created a graphic depiction the horrors committed during the Holocaust to the masses.

"The miniseries represented the first time thousands of teachers were confronted with the event."³⁵ In anticipation of this NBC, in cooperation with the American Jewish Committee, designed an education guide to go along with the miniseries. Other groups followed suit; the National Jewish Interagency Project developed a five-part study aid and distributed it to schools, The ADL and NCSS (National Council for the Social Sciences) designed a guide called *The Record* which spread ten million copies through local newspapers.³⁶ Two weeks after the show aired President Jimmy Carter created the Presidential Commission on the Holocaust to establish in America an appropriate memorial for those who perished in the Holocaust.³⁷ Part of the Commission's goal was to establish an educational foundation for Holocaust education in America. This latter became the National United States Holocaust Museum.

The call for Holocaust education was not just from the top and college students, but continued from parents demanding their child to learn more about the Holocaust. Holocaust

³³ Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America*, 10, 23; Pedersen and Totten, *Teaching and Studying Social Issues*, 140.

³⁴ Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, 209.

³⁵ Fallace, *The Emergence of Holocaust Education in American Schools*, 68.

³⁶ Fallace, 69.

³⁷ Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America*, 23, 26.

education in public schools had been emerging gradually in Jewish American Schools and secondary facilities. The movement into public schools was started by individual teachers who were inspired to teach their students about the atrocities committed. Teachers were sometimes inspired from personal connections to Holocaust survivors such as Leatrice Rabinsky. Other teachers saw the importance of students understanding the Holocaust and taught it like Carol Danks. The two Ohio teachers would take it upon themselves to develop curriculum on the Holocaust, *The Holocaust: Prejudice Unleashed* based on other curriculums, available texts, and films.³⁸

Textbooks in the early 1970s were still lacking proper representation of the Holocaust.³⁹ When a textbook omits apart of history or partial covers it, teachers neglect it or are forced to find alternative texts. The Anti-Defamatory League developed in 1974 Jewish textbook *The Holocaust: A History of Courage and Resistance*.⁴⁰ This Jewish textbook was written to emphasize the rebellion in camps and the perseverance of those heroes. Textbooks of 1979 and 1980s still had inaccuracies and poor representations of the Holocaust.⁴¹ Holocaust curriculum started at a local level moving into other schools, districts, and eventually it was endorsed by the state. This originated in New York and New Jersey until they moved to seventeen different states by 2001.⁴² One such curriculum was Albert Post's *The Holocaust: A Case Study of Genocide. A Case Study*, the became New York's Holocaust curriculum and was important for future curricula's in America.⁴³

During the 1970s curriculum was aimed at building relevant content to students. If taught correctly students would be able to understand their world around them and possibly feel a

³⁸ Fallace, *The Emergence of Holocaust Education in American Schools*, 108.

³⁹ Witschonke, "A 'Curtain of Ignorance.'"

⁴⁰ Fallace, *The Emergence of Holocaust Education in American Schools*, 25; Massell, "Narrating a Relationship."

⁴¹ Witschonke, "A 'Curtain of Ignorance.'"

⁴² Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America*, 34.

⁴³ Fallace, *The Emergence of Holocaust Education in American Schools*, 32.

greater sense of activism to prevent future injustices. This was heavily referenced in three main Holocaust curriculums at the time; *Society on Trial* by both Roselle Chartock and Jack Spencer in 1978, *The Holocaust and Genocide: A Search for Conscience* written by both Richard Flaim and Edwin Reynold's in 1983, and the most influential *Facing History and Ourselves* in 1976. *Facing History and Ourselves*, published in 1982. *FHAO* or *Facing History*, was developed in Massachusetts by history teachers William Parson and Margot Strom.⁴⁴ The Holocaust curriculum worked to cover facts while relating them to concerns over nuclear warfare through engaging resources.⁴⁵ The program spread worldwide and was praised by the Department of Education.⁴⁶ *FHAO* became the most widely used curriculum in America.

While Holocaust education and memorialization were embraced by President Carter in the 1970s, in the 1980s President Ronald Regan instead pushed for education to return “back-to-the-basics.”⁴⁷ This meant education to focus on the basics that every student needs versus shaping students to become social justice warriors. Despite this criticism and movement in education, the Holocaust curriculum continued to grow even becoming mandatory in some states.⁴⁸ When the Holocaust became mandatory it became politicized through departments of education. “The larger the Holocaust became in American culture the more half-truths that developed.”⁴⁹

Through the 1980s Holocaust education developed into its own category. By 1993 the Holocaust had fully entered into American society. Schools became increasingly aware of its inclusion in the classroom and the debate shifted to what students should know about the

⁴⁴ Fallace, *The Emergence of Holocaust Education in American Schools*, 52-66.

⁴⁵ Ian Davies, *Teaching the Holocaust : Educational Dimensions, Principles and Practice* (London: Continuum, 2000), 94

⁴⁶ Pedersen and Totten, *Teaching and Studying Social Issues*, 143.

⁴⁷ Fallace, *The Emergence of Holocaust Education in American Schools*, 80.

⁴⁸ Karen L. Riley and Samuel Totten, “Understanding Matters: Holocaust Curricula and the Social Studies Classroom,” *Theory & Research in Social Education* 30, no. 4 (Fall 2002): 541–62.

⁴⁹ Totten and Feinberg, *Teaching and Studying the Holocaust*, 153.

Holocaust. “How should it be interpreted and for what goals; purely historical, the psychology of a human, social awareness of today, all of the above.”⁵⁰ Textbooks were written to reflect the politics of the state curricula rather than historical truths. In the year 1993 the United States Holocaust Museum and the production of *Schindler’s List* by legendary director Steven Spielberg were shown to the public. Together the two represent the interest that Americans had in the memorialization and education of the Holocaust.

They represent the interest that Americans have in memorialization and education of the Holocaust.⁵¹ The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum functions as a tool for educators. Part of the museum's motto is to help instruct students and educators about the Holocaust.⁵² In 1993, Holocaust education had grown to the point where USHMM did not see a need to add their own curriculum. Instead they created a guide to current Holocaust curriculums and resources. The museum did not help spread Holocaust education whereas it capitalized on the growth of Holocaust curricula in America.

The Holocaust in American schools has vastly changed from its nominal start in the 1940s to Americans fixation by 1993. This has come about as a result of Adolf Eichmann’s trial and Hanna Arendt’s controversial book, *Banality of Evil*. As American relations with Israel improved the American Jewish population started to call for Holocaust education in Jewish schools. Similar reactions were seen in colleges and universities across America as a desire for the relevant curriculum was demanded from students. Post airing of NBC’s *Holocaust*, curriculums of FHAO and others spread into other schools and across states. Holocaust education became increasingly political during the 1980s which changed interpretations of the event in public classrooms. With the production of *Schindler’s List* and the development of

⁵⁰ Samuel Totten and Karen L. Riley, “Authentic Pedagogy and the Holocaust: A Critical Review of State Sponsored Holocaust Curricula,” *Theory & Research in Social Education* 33, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 120–41, 185.

⁵¹ Massell, “Narrating a Relationship.”

⁵² USHMM, “Guidelines for Teaching about the Holocaust.”

USHMM in 1993 the Holocaust had fixed itself into American society and schools. The Holocaust in America was slow to reach the classroom, but between the 1970s and 1993, the Holocaust had established itself into American life and schools. Because of the efforts of Hanna Arendt's book, the labors of a few educators, and students who demanded relevant curriculum, along with the lasting impacts from media, the Holocaust is an imperative lesson taught to children throughout America.

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