

## Holocaust and Genocide Studies: Identity and Education for Democratic Citizenship

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Democracy is a fragile experiment. The death knell for the fledgling democracy of the German Weimar Republic (1919-1933) was the rejection of constitutional order and the contemporary political system in favor of extremism. Powerful elites manipulated the poisonous political climate (in which perhaps a quarter of the politicians were hostile to democracy) and sought to unite the country and destroy the German republic by embracing an expansionistic, militant nationalism, rooted in antisemitism. Hitler became the self-proclaimed prophet and savior who promised to unify a fragmented society. He offered vague clichés (rescue the German family, work for everyone, Germany will be great again) but no coherent policies. Hitler and the Nazis effectively articulated an ideology of social identity and exclusion that “made sense” to the vast majority of Germans.

Policy was driven by leaders with an exclusionary ideology that defined the social identities of those who count and those who did not. Social identity can become dangerous when it draws evaluative or emotional boundaries between “in groups” and the “other.” Targets are identified and then socially destroyed not for anything they have done, but simply for who they are. The importance of group identity escalates in times of perceived threat or survival. Genocide emerges as a result of cascading radicalization of policy. It is rarely a premeditated plan designed and pursued from the outset. Crimes of mass atrocity incrementally evolve and adapt over time in the complex face of changing political, military, and social circumstances and the initiative of individuals attempting to “solve” a self-perceived “problem.”

What do we want our schools to teach? How do these lessons inform our democratic citizenship? To gain insight we compare and contrast. Those comparisons must be grounded in a solid understanding of the history. We do this not to equate, but to differentiate, to illuminate, and to learn. We do this to become better people and better citizens in order to make a difference and pragmatically avoid future replications. Holocaust and genocide education allows us to contribute to civics education and develop cultures of consistent engagement within a broad framework of democratic values that include justice, fairness, equality and the rule of law.

Like the 1930s our society is facing confusion, fear and the politics of identity. Once again we vilify immigrants and refugees; recognize social injustices marked by racism and bigotry; isolationists tap into “America First”; and some are attracted to the appeal of quick, totalitarian solutions for complex problems. How do we promote human dignity and civic responsibility with a concern and respect for others in a world growing in xenophobia and isolationism? How do we protect ourselves while embracing our democratic values?

Today, 1 in 122 people are either refugees or internally displaced persons. Millions are denied basic human rights and respect. How do we respond to the crisis of refugees fleeing for their lives? How do nations perceive their “universe of obligation”? Should this circle expand in times of crisis? If so, what are the consequences? How can the past help inform us today? How do we integrate newcomers into our communities? Susan Warsinger, a Holocaust survivor, points out that:

Holocaust history reminds us of our moral and legal responsibility to individuals fleeing persecution and violence and the horrible consequences that can occur if we do not take action.

An April 1938 poll revealed that 60% of Americans agreed that persecution of European Jews (a phenomenon that predated the rise of Hitler and the Nazis in 1933) was entirely or partly the fault of [the victims], the Jews. 67% believed that all refugees, not just Jews, should be kept out of the United States.

Today, we hear similar echoes. A November 2015 poll revealed that 53% of Americans are opposed to accepting any Syrian refugees, 11% said they would only accept Christians (note the isolating social identity), while more than two dozen governors opposed settling any refugees in their state. This was true of states that currently accept and assimilate refugees. In NH, for example, where refugees have been successfully integrated, two teachers on separate occasions told me how they were so grateful for their doctor who had found a cure when none had been found before. Both were two Syrian refugee doctors.

In the 1930s, opponents of “give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free” claimed and believed that the U.S. would be flooded and overwhelmed with immigrants and refugees. And yet, more people left the U.S. from 1933 to 1937 (47,172) than entered.

Who were these refugees? Konrad Bloch and Ernst Boris Chain were kept out. Bloch shared the 1964 Nobel prize for his work on cholesterol and heart disease and Chain was the co-recipient of the 1945 Nobel prize for his work as a biochemist with penicillin. Stephan Lewy, from Manchester, NH, was a Jewish refugee from Berlin, Germany who did find safe haven in the United States in 1942. What did he contribute? In September 1942, 18 year-old Stephan was drafted into the U.S. Army. He became a “Ritchie Boy” (refugees and ex-pats identified and trained to become U.S. Army intelligence officers due to their experience.) The “Ritchie Boys” were able to provide substantial battlefield information (estimated by some at 67%) that directly led to victory over Nazi Germany. As U.S. citizens they successfully interrogated Nazi soldiers (including the ideologically driven SS), they kept their moral core, and they never used torture.

Holocaust and genocide education can be transformative and touches upon the core of democratic citizenship. It allows us to explore the psychological spectrum of human capacities in situations of extremity. We learn resilience from studying the victims and survivors. We enhance our capacity for empathy and compassionate action by studying those who resisted and rescued. We learn that refugees contribute in a variety of ways to the society that saved them. We recognize that evil is a very human action easily justified and that the indifference and silence of bystanders and away-lookers have consequences.

When we learn to listen to individuals whose human dignity has been attacked and whose social identities have been marginalized we begin to hear the warning signs that threaten our democratic experiment. Holocaust and genocide education is civics education in a global setting. It allows us to teach competencies for democratic citizenship. It allows us to counterbalance the darkest impulses of human nature.

We invite you to join us throughout the year in utilizing your skills and talents to actualize the mission of the Cohen Center to “inspire students and other citizens to take responsibility for promoting human dignity and civic responsibility while confronting the escalating violence that leads to atrocity and genocide.”



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