

**TEACHING ABOUT GENOCIDE: APPLYING LESSONS FROM THE
HOLOCAUST TO PROMOTE EQUALITY IN GENOCIDE EDUCATION**

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Teaching about genocide: Applying lessons from the Holocaust to promote equality in genocide education

Background: The legacy of the Holocaust in teaching about genocide

Over the past 20 years, elementary and high schools around the world have introduced learning about human rights into their social studies curricula. A prominent sociological study of 465 textbooks across 69 countries has found that narratives of history are moving away from descriptions of national events and towards an emphasis on their practical relevance for strengthening human rights (Meyer et al., 2010). This includes discussions of international documents like the UN Declaration of Human Rights, international organizations, and human rights disasters. Within this new approach, the Holocaust is often singled out as the best tool for teaching students about human rights abuses.

In its many initiatives for peace-building through education, UNESCO has emphasized the Holocaust as the most significant case for fostering genocide education and prevention. This began with a 2012 Regional Consultation in Sub-Saharan Africa with 13 African countries, titled “Why Teach about Genocide? The Example of the Holocaust”, and has culminated in a 200-page report mapping Holocaust education around the world in 2015. Similar patterns can be found at the national level; in Canadian textbooks, the Holocaust is often the focal point in teaching about human rights abuses, and the province of Nova Scotia even holds an annual Holocaust Education Week.

The Holocaust is now seen as a necessary anchor for teaching about genocide. However, this emphasis may overshadow the variation and complexity of political violence across historical and cultural contexts. How do we account for different lessons from other genocides that can also help in preventing future atrocities? Is the focus on the Holocaust translating to better representations of other genocides?

The Canadian case: Inequality in representations of genocide

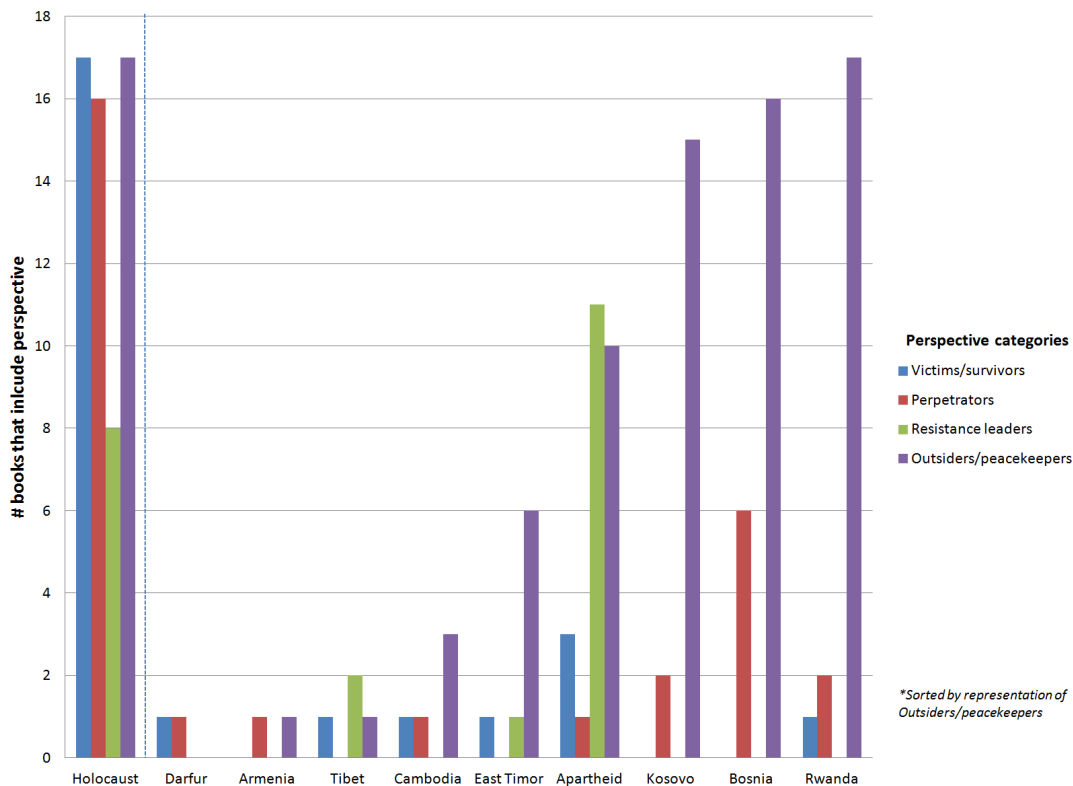
To answer this question, I conducted a study of Canadian high school history textbooks in circulation across the country in 2015.¹ I focused on ten of the

¹ This was based on an exhaustive sample of 35 textbooks in circulation for grades 11 and 12 across six Canadian provinces (British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Ontario, Prince Edward Island,

most widely acknowledged genocides – almost all cases where parties were tried for genocidal crimes or crimes against humanity in an international court. I compared how often the perspectives of different individuals involved were shown in the textbooks. These actors included victims and survivors (those directly affected), perpetrators (state officials, soldiers), resistance leaders, and outsiders/peacekeepers (such as UN forces or external armies). Creating an analytical framework that looks at multiple dimensions of each genocide on equal ground allows us to suspend our normative understanding of each conflict and engage in important comparative work. Table 1 shows the breakdown of perspectives shown for each of the ten genocides.²

TABLE 1. REPRESENTATION OF PERSPECTIVES, BY GENOCIDE

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It is immediately apparent that in the case of the Holocaust, care is taken to represent the perspectives of all actors involved. This includes the experiences of survivors of concentration camps and the famous journal of Anne Frank; excerpts from Adolf Hitler’s speeches and testimonies of Nazi perpetrators at the Nuremberg trials; the resistance efforts of Oskar Schindler,

Saskatchewan), for four disciplines (social studies, Canadian and World history, civics and international politics, and globalization-themed classes). Textbooks ranged in publication dates from 1986 to 2013.

² A perspective was considered to be present in the text if there were features, quotations, or descriptions of the positions of members of the particular group.

Raoul Wallenberg, and ordinary concentration camp inmates; and some inclusion of testimonies from Allied politicians and soldiers. These diverse representations combine to create a more well-rounded account of genocide. This is, however, not the case for all genocides.

While some genocides received little coverage in the textbooks (Darfur, Armenia, Tibet and Cambodia), others were covered just as often as the Holocaust (Kosovo, Bosnia, Rwanda), but present a less nuanced account. For these three genocides, almost every textbook focused on the perspectives of outside forces, to the exclusion of resistance, perpetrator and victim/survivor perspectives. For example, in Canadian textbooks, the Rwandan genocide is a heroic narrative about one man, Canadian Lieutenant-General Roméo Dallaire, and his experiences as Force Commander for UNAMIR (United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda).

This echoes researcher Ken Montgomery's (2006) more troubling findings that in one Canadian textbook, "Dallaire and the anguish he experienced become the focal points in an account [...] that fails even to mention Hutus or Tutsis" (p. 33). In cases like Apartheid and Tibet, the only genocides where perspectives of resistance were significantly represented, the focus remains one-dimensional in a different way: the majority of cases revolve around motivational portraits of Nelson Mandela and the Dalai Lama.

The role of framing: Genocide as a political and moral question

Further qualitative analysis shows that while representations of the Holocaust and other genocides include the role of political, legal and bureaucratic structures, the Holocaust again differs in one important respect – it is framed as a moral question. For the Holocaust, the actions of perpetrators, bystanders and resistance leaders are used to speak to broader questions of morality that hold across history and societies. In contrast, other genocides remain at the level of political questions, where solutions are to be found through bureaucratic and legal means.

Representations of actors comparing the Holocaust with other genocides can be summarized accordingly:

- Perspectives of those targeted focused on their humanity, experiences of suffering and drew on immersive pedagogical strategies, compared with historical strategies emphasizing the "facts" of events, including dates, places and death tolls, or depicting victims as skulls or dead bodies.
- Commentaries on perpetrators were likely to frame their behaviour and beliefs in moral language, including judgements of "evil" and "injustice",

and even in terms of human nature, compared with defining and restricting their actions to political and legal realms.

- Perspectives of outsiders were included as additional testimony to negotiate the role of bearing witness, rather than as the main lens through which the genocide is understood. The question of moral responsibility was posed at the individual level, rather than the national and international.
- Resistance leaders were represented at the community level and framed as “ordinary people”, rather than at top levels as “world leaders” where their morality becomes inaccessible.

Moving forward: Historical consciousness in genocide education

Over the past five years, there has been a movement amongst Canadian educators towards teaching “historical consciousness”, a concept made famous in Canadian education by scholars Peter Seixas and Tom Morton (2006; 2012). Every year, the Historical Thinking Summer Institute at the University of British Columbia invites and trains various educators in the elements of historical thinking, including considering historical significance, perspective, and ethical dimensions of history.

Of the two Canadian textbooks in my sample published after 2010, both not only acknowledged Seixas, but framed the textbooks in terms of his concept of historical thinking. However, for their theoretically progressive ambitions, when compared side by side with earlier textbooks from the 2000s, these texts replicated the same traditional divide between representations of the Holocaust and other genocides. This speaks to the difficulty of breaking with normative narratives about historical events. While ideas of perspective taking and ethical implications are acknowledged as central elements in teaching about history, the matter of creating educational material in line with these principles requires a conscious effort of comparing how different events are treated.

This brief offers the method of analyzing actor perspectives as one way to break away from patterns of representing genocides unequally. As we can see, telling a multi-dimensional story about the Holocaust which emphasizes moral responsibility does not substitute for representing other genocides in this empirically detailed and ethically compelling way. While this may not be the case, applying principles from Holocaust education to flesh out representations of other genocides is one useful model we can follow for bringing them into the moral sphere.

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