

## Learning the Lessons of the Holocaust: A Case Study of the USA Coast Guard Academy

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Rec date: May 23, 2016; Acc date: Jul 18, 2016; Pub date: Jul 25, 2016

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### Abstract

Holocaust education is a responsibility of all academic institutions; we are obligated to teach students about the reality of crimes perpetrated during WW2, to commemorate the victims, and to sustain a meaningful dialogue between history and memory. The Holocaust was not the first or the last genocide in the history of humanity, but it was unprecedented in many ways and is still the most radical attempt to destroy every member of a group without exception. This paper presents the Holocaust education strategies of the USA Coast Guard Academy. The paper argues that Holocaust education must provide future political and military leaders with an understanding not only of the human rights violations that happened under the Nazis, but also with modern examples of prejudice, discrimination and persecution that motivate genocide, and that this is best accomplished through active learning methods that include discussions with survivors and with peers who have visited historic Holocaust sites.

**Keywords:** Military; Coast Guard; Political; Holocaust

### Introduction

The Holocaust continues to be one of the most horrifying, disturbing, and powerful illustrations of genocide in human history. Scholars have labelled it as one of the defining actions of the twentieth century. The Holocaust crimes committed by the German government and military leaders during WW2 devastated European Jewish communities and eliminated hundreds of Jewish communities in occupied Eastern Europe. Political and military leaders have pledged never to allow mass murder based on race, ethnicity, or religion to occur again. Academic scholars agree that when political and military leaders lack the knowledge of their own role in preventing and causing past tragedies, there can be serious consequences [1].

Teaching about the Holocaust provides an opportunity to teach students about the truth of our history. When students are educated about it, they understand and care about the consequences of human action. It is important to study the Holocaust in the context of today's sociopolitical discourse, and to ask the question: How did a civilized, western democracy in the 20th century come to be governed by a barbaric totalitarian regime? In responding to that question, the students are faced with a multiplicity of socio-political factors: the importance of economics in a society, the influence of literature, art and propaganda, the power of scientific knowledge and language, and the importance of personal involvement in civic matters. By studying and analyzing Germany's national humiliation, economic depression and political instability in the 20's and 30s, students begin to understand and appreciate the real nature of social choices and social action.

Teaching about the Holocaust allows students to comprehend how a society can very subtly and slowly lose sight of ethical values. It demonstrates how a nation can be easily moved to the margins of a society, and then slowly removed from that society all together. The

Nazis were masters of advertising, scapegoating and duplicitous language, all of which are quite pervasive in our own society. In studying the Holocaust, students are expected to see the power of language, of labels, of insulting, pejorative, and derogatory speeches, and of nuanced political statements. Students must apprehend the cumulative effect of the daily occurrences of humiliation, intimidation, and violence, and their impact on the social fabric of communities and nations of today's world. From this awareness flows an appreciation of an inherent need for national and international vigilance in protecting all groups of society that have been, are or will become marginalized.

Historical analysis of the Holocaust must provide young generations, and in particular future military leaders, with a solid understanding of the complexities of a world in which such choices were made. The occurrence of the Holocaust must be studied in the context of European and global history as a whole to give future military and political leaders a perspective on the precedents and circumstances that contributed to it. Students should have opportunities to critically analyze and understand the interpretation of the Holocaust in order to develop an effective judgement of the genocides, atrocities, and tragedies that have occurred through the centuries [2]. The history of the Holocaust provides one of the most effective, and most extensively documented, subjects for a pedagogical examination of basic moral issues.

Today, with an increasing terrorism and genocide crisis, it is critical to educate young generations about the Holocaust. Genocide has continued after WW2 in the context of warfare or terrorism, and as a result it is imperative for the USA coast guard academy (USCGA) cadets, future military leaders, to hold a deep understanding of the contexts in which genocide or any form of terrorism occur and the roles that both civilians and militaries have played in causing and preventing them. The paper describes education strategies that allow USCGA cadets to gain insight into historical, social, religious, political, and economic factors that cumulatively resulted in the Holocaust. The goal of Holocaust education at USCGA is to create awareness of the

complexity of the historical process and of the ways certain economic, political, cultural, and societal factors can contribute to the disintegration of democratic values. A thorough study of the Holocaust should enable cadets to think about the use and abuse of power, and the roles and responsibilities of individuals, organizations, and nations when confronted with human rights violations. Holocaust education must develop awareness of the potential for genocide in the contemporary world.

### **Holocaust Education: Goals**

In 1966, German philosopher Theodor Adorno acknowledged his disappointment with the state of Holocaust awareness. He claimed that ignorance of the Holocaust is "...a symptom of the continuing potential for its recurrence as far as people's conscious and unconscious is concerned..." [3]. He envisioned education as the method which would be most responsible for instilling values in the future generations in order to prevent the Holocaust from recurring Fifty years later, Holocaust education is more important than ever not only to combat other genocides but also to provide a consciousness of human rights in a world where violations of human rights are becoming common.

Interest in Holocaust education has increased in recent years not only in those countries where the genocide of the Jewish people occurred but also in other parts of the world. The academic world has already recognized the history of the Holocaust as an effective means to teach about mass violence and to promote human rights and civic duty. To help students comprehend the magnitude and the unprecedented nature of the Holocaust is in itself an exceptional challenge for educators [4]. The fact that the Holocaust is now being taught in countries with no direct connection to this historical event opens a new direction for research and reflection about the practices, methods and objectives of educating about the Holocaust. Confronting the history of the Holocaust is an emotional challenge, and it requires knowledge and historical analysis [5].

Holocaust education is a responsibility of all academic institutions; we have an obligation to teach students about the reality of crimes perpetrated during WW2, to commemorate the victims, and to sustain a meaningful dialogue between history and memory. The Holocaust was not the first or the last genocide in the history of humanity, but it was unprecedented in many ways and is still the most radical attempt to destroy every member of a group without exception. Confronting the history of the Holocaust is an emotional challenge, and it requires knowledge and historical analysis. Students should study the experiences of Jews under Nazi rule. By reading letters, stories and diaries of Jews and listening to survivor testimonies, students will be able to comprehend the suffering and feel empathy with the victims, which can reinforce their readiness to explore the roots of the genocide [2].

Claudia Lohrenscheit, the director of Human Rights education at the German Institute of Human Rights, notes that the goal of Holocaust education is "to instruct the public to never forget" and to develop competencies so that it never happens again. She believes that Holocaust education provides a platform from which to demonstrate the necessity for individual decision-making, and to teach citizenship and democracy. While there are several programs dedicated to Holocaust education, teachers face distinct obstacles in the classroom concerning specific topics related to Holocaust. Students profit most if

they are not taught about the Holocaust with only one focus. The Holocaust and human rights should be part of all lessons.

Students need to study the structural changes in German legislation, politics and society that allowed perpetrators to act the way they did. Before Nazi dictatorship was established, Germany was a state under the rule of law. The power of the police was strictly limited and, according to the constitution, all citizens had equal rights regardless of their religious affiliation, ethnicity, political opinion or social status. But after Hitler had come to power, all checks and balances, fundamental individual rights and equality before the law were suspended or abolished within a few months [6]. The Nazis promoted WW2 as a way to overcome the economic and political crisis and re-establish a powerful German state. Injustice and cruelties were accepted as inevitable side-effects or tolerated as transitional provisions. By working to promote an understanding of the Holocaust, whether related to genocide prevention or the preservation of democratic ideals, Holocaust education strives to honor the victims of the Holocaust by examining the context that allowed the events to occur. Personalizing the history via case studies that illustrate human involvement provides points of entry to engage students, who can imagine themselves in similar situations [7].

The racial principles that motivated the German government endorsed actions that were inhumane, wrong, unethical, and immoral and destroyed the lives of millions of Jews, Gypsies, Poles, Russians, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other victims of ethnic and racial hatred. Students must learn about this systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of millions of innocent people by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. It is our responsibility to teach young generations that the Nazis, who came to power in Germany in January 1933, were inhumane [6]. Their immoral actions were based on the belief that Germans were "racially superior" and that the Jews, deemed "inferior," were an alien threat to so-called German racial community. Today's young generations must understand that German military leaders prior to and during WW2 targeted innocent civilians and persecuted them with no valid reason based on their political, ideological, racial, and behavioral grounds with a full disregard for human life.

A study of the Holocaust helps students think about the use and abuse of power, and the roles and responsibilities of individuals, organizations, and nations when confronted with human rights violations [1]. The goal is to heighten awareness of genocide in today's world. Studying the Holocaust helps students developing an understanding of the ramifications of prejudice, racism, anti-Semitism, and stereotyping in any society. It helps develop an awareness of the value of diversity in a pluralistic society and encourages sensitivity to the positions of minorities [4]. The Holocaust demonstrated how a modern nation could utilize its technological expertise and bureaucratic infrastructure to implement destructive policies ranging from social engineering to genocide. The Holocaust provides a context for studying the dangers of remaining silent and indifferent in the face of the oppression of others. Today young generations are expected to learn that it is the responsibility of citizens in a democratic society to identify the danger signals and to know when to react [8].

### **Holocaust Education: Passive and Active Methods**

There are numerous approaches to teaching the Holocaust. Approaches which use passive learning methods include reading stories and books about the Holocaust and its moral and ethical

consequences, or viewing documental, historical, or biographical movies, When choosing Holocaust literature, educators must consider the historical accuracy of the selected works [9] and should also balance material covering negative actions by the perpetrators of the Holocaust with positive actions taken by the rare individuals who fought against the Holocaust. For example, Elie Weisel's Night, a survivor's account of the horrors of the concentration camp, could be paired with the film "Schindler's list" by Steven Spielberg, based on a novel by Thomas Keneally, which allows students to observe the moral growth that took place in the life of Oskar Schindler who matured from a greedy war profiteer to a rescuer of Jewish people.

While books and movies are important instruments for Holocaust education, using these tools does not actively engage students and thus risks portraying the Holocaust to students as a particularly bad period of history which has little relevance to the present day or to their lives. To get students to see the relevance of the Holocaust to their own lives requires using active learning methods. One example of a more active learning approach involves using drama in Holocaust education, which not only introduces students to another genre, but also offers a unique experience that may not be achieved by simply reading other types of literature. Participating in dramatic productions allows students to truly interact with the history [10,11]. There are many strategies for incorporating drama into the classroom, ranging from reading plays in class to participating in the actual research, writing, and production of a Holocaust drama [12,13]. Teachers also use music as a way to teach students about the Holocaust [14]. Musical compositions can be incorporated into many other subject areas where the Holocaust is being taught or Holocaust music can be used in a specific music class to enrich the content of the unit [14].

Another approach to Holocaust education which uses active learning methods involves visiting historical places such as concentrations camps, museums, monuments, or other place directly related to the Holocaust. The Holocaust is still remembered thanks in part to Holocaust museums in cities around the world, and those who visit these museums (especially those located in actual Holocaust sites such as Auschwitz) report that this experience has a much more significant impact on them than merely reading about such places in a book or watching a movie about them. While it is generally impractical to have an entire class or school visit these distant sites, they can be used more easily as in-service training opportunities for teachers.

It is central that educators preparing to teach about the Holocaust receive in-service training opportunities whenever possible. Many Holocaust organizations dedicated to promoting Holocaust education, including the museums located on Holocaust sites provide workshops and training sessions for those interested. It is important to use a variety of methods so that students can be exposed to a comprehensive Holocaust education, and to use the resources that are available as efficiently as possible. One way to overcome the resource challenge posed by taking a large number of students to Holocaust sites in central Europe, for example, is to have a very small number of students make these trips and construct active learning experiences for those students who were unable to go. The American Service Academies Program is a good example of this approach.

### **A Case Study: The Holocaust Education at the USA Coast Guard Academy**

As USCGA cadets possess limited knowledge on the issues related to the Holocaust, it is vital to provide cadets with academic studies and

leadership training opportunities that focus on the Holocaust and genocide issues. Teaching and learning about the Holocaust calls attention to universal issues that are central in UNESCO's efforts to promote peace and mutual understanding. In response to this, the USCGA Honors Program provides its members with the opportunity to participate in the American service academies program (ASAP). This program is a three-week summer educational initiative that was created by the Auschwitz Jewish Center for a select group of cadets and midshipmen from the four USA military academies. The ASAP accepts cadets from all fields who exhibit a dedication to academic scholarship, an interest in cultural issues and a strong commitment to civic engagement. The selected cadets must demonstrate not only outstanding academic achievement but also exceptional leadership potential and effective communication skills. Those selected cadets and midshipmen will be expected to convey what they learned in Poland to their peers at the Academy and throughout their professional CG careers and personal lives.

Over the last eight years with funding support provided by the CGA Alumni from a class of 1955, the USCGA Honors Program was able to send fourteen USCGA cadets for the Holocaust summer training through the ASAP. Educating about the Holocaust through the ASAP helps future USCG leaders understand the key concepts that are critical when studying mass violence or terrorism. When cadets explore the history of massive human rights violations, they are able to draw on their understanding of the Holocaust and become more aware of their own responsibilities as the leaders in the USA CG. Given the fact that genocide, mass atrocities, and violations of human rights are no longer historical but contemporary realities in the twenty-first century, a careful study of the Holocaust provides a comprehensive understanding of the political, economic, and social ramifications of the many faces of discrimination, prejudice, and intolerance. Therefore, an analysis of the mechanisms that led to the Holocaust helps cadets recognize the importance of accepting and appreciating diversity rather than seeing it as a cause for discord. Teaching and learning about the Holocaust sensitizes cadets to the position of minorities and, most importantly, to the cruel and evil tendencies and intentions of terrorist groups such as ISIS.

We have witnessed an increasing rate of terrorism, violence, discrimination, and social injustice towards individuals of different ethnicities, religion or race. Keeping in mind the recent increasing popularity of far-right ideologies and the absence of a non-institutional platform for learning about the Holocaust and injustices of Nazi regime, the USA Coast Guard Academy (USCGA) held the 2015 USCGA American service academies program (ASAP) Holocaust Symposium on Saturday, 21 November 2015. The USCGA Honors Program hosted cadets and midshipmen from the USA Military Academy (USMA) and USA Air Force Academy (USAFA), and students from Connecticut College for the 2015 USCGA ASAP Holocaust Symposium as well as several Alumni of the ASAP Program. The 2015 USCGA ASAP Symposium was organized to expand cadets' knowledge about the Holocaust and the Nazi regime in the context of cultural, educational, and state institutions. The goal of the Symposium was to promote awareness about genocide and the ethical dilemmas armed forces officers face during commissioned service. Several cadets from the USCGA, USAFA, USNA, and USMA volunteered to actively participate in the Symposium. They all participated in the ASAP Holocaust Internship to study genocide and Holocaust issues in Oswiecim, Poland that was organized by the Museum of Jewish Heritage and held in New York City, Washington DC, and Poland between 2008 and 2015.

The ASAP Holocaust Symposium started with a presentation of Mr. Shiri Sandler on the history and objective of the ASAP program. Then, the USCGA Cadets and Midshipmen formed a discussion panel where the ASAP Alumni shared their experiences from studying in Poland with all 4/c cadets who were required to attend the Symposium. After Professor Wingrove-Haugland, Professor of Morals and Ethics at the USCGA, delivered a presentation on ethical and moral issues behind the Holocaust in the context of the leadership and followership, the CGA cadets and the guests worked in discussion groups on the lessons from the Holocaust. Dr. Wingrove-Haugland provided group discussion topics that covered the following lessons from the Holocaust:

- Progress does not prevent atrocities; it magnifies them
- Civilization is no immunization against evil
- Evil exists
- Good people also exist
- Most of us are somewhere in the middle
- Each of us is capable of doing more harm than good
- There are no innocent bystanders
- The worst thing you can do is to consider someone less than human
- The best thing you can do is to acknowledge someone's humanity
- Hitler and the Nazis were human beings, not sub-humans
- Those who remember the past often end up repeating it anyhow
- Saying "never again" is not enough

Through discussion and exchange of opinions, the 4/c cadets were expected to understand that respecting differences is the only right way to go through life in our modern world. The group discussion also opened up a platform for discussions about the importance of leadership and silent followership in organizations. The participating cadets and midshipmen recognized the ethical implications of the Holocaust and understood that genocides occur because people and governments make decisions that perpetuate discrimination and persecution [15]. When focusing on Germany's political choices, cadets are expected to gain valuable insights into the making of history and instances of genocide and crimes against humanity. Cadets will be able to understand that man-made catastrophes like the recent problems in Syria and Iraq are not accidents of history but can be prevented. When studying the Holocaust, cadets realize the complexity of genocide and that those events cannot be simply explained but are the result of multiple historical, economic, religious and political factors. In turn, this contributes to the understanding that preventing genocide and mass atrocities can begin with the identification of warning signals.

A Holocaust Survivor, Mrs. Gisela Marianne Adamski, also spoke to the cadets about her Holocaust experience during the 1940s. Her testimony added greatly to cadets' understanding of history and enriched their experiences. By listening to a personal story, cadets discovered an individual experience that they were able to add to the collective dimension. They were also exposed to the story of lives before and after the Holocaust by a speaker who emphasized cultural and historical dimensions of genocides and crimes against humanity. A careful comparison of the Holocaust with other examples of mass violence helped cadets to identify common patterns in the genocide process and facilitated the understanding of specificities and differences between events of mass violence. By concentrating on the various destructive policies carried out by Nazi Germany and its

collaborators and examining other genocides, she paid attention to the policies particular to a given genocide.

Group discussions and study of the Holocaust during the 2015 ASAP Symposium taught cadets and midshipmen that the Holocaust was a State enterprise legitimized by the law. It also led cadets to think about political responsibilities and governmental structures. By studying and analyzing the factors that led to Holocaust, students were led to ask questions about the abuses of political power for violent purposes that have been taking place on both a national and international level worldwide. We need to raise cadets' awareness about the roles and responsibilities of the State, individuals and society as a whole in the face of increasing human rights violations. Future military officers must understand the consequences of the actions of governmental and quasi-governmental organizations, of military units, and of civilians in order to see how these actions can lead to destruction of innocent people.

Since it is a newly developed program, the USCGA Honors Program's 2015 ASAP Symposium has not yet been assessed to provide formal information regarding the impact of the Symposium on the CGA cadets and attendees. However, informal feedback that was obtained during group discussions indicated that the Symposium should not be limited to the freshmen but all levels of education at the CGA. According to the participants, one of the benefits was that the cadets were actively and eagerly engaged in the learning process throughout the group discussions.

The CGA Honors Program recognizes that the history of the Holocaust is one of the most effective and most extensively documented issues for a pedagogical examination of basic moral and ethical issues in college education. A structured inquiry into Holocaust history yields critical lessons for an investigation of human behavior. A study of the Holocaust addresses the central tenets of education in the United States. College graduates as the future leaders of our society must understand what it means to be a responsible citizen, officer, leader and follower. Through a study of the Holocaust, students must realize that democratic institutions and values are not automatically sustained, but need to be appreciated, nurtured, and protected. They also learn that silence and indifference to the suffering of others and the infringement of civil rights in a society can unintentionally perpetuate the problem. The 4/c cadets who participated in this Holocaust Symposium learned that the Holocaust was not an accident in history; it occurred because individuals, organizations, and governments made choices that not only legalized discrimination but also allowed prejudice, hatred, and ultimately mass murder to occur.

The ASAP Symposium was organized by the USCGA Honors Program to provide USCGA cadets with an authentic learning experience about the Holocaust and the issues related to genocide, terrorism, injustice, intolerance, and atrocity that extend beyond what they are taught in the classroom. This symposium was the second ASAP Symposium organized by the Honors Program since 2008. As the ASAP supports our mission and makes the USCGA the Center of Academic Excellence on leadership education and Holocaust training, the Honors Program brought together cadets from participating academies to discuss moral and ethical issues related to the Holocaust, genocide, and terrorism with USCGA staff, faculty, and cadets. The USCGA Honors Program considers the Holocaust and genocide education to be critical for the Academy's leadership, as it contributes to the CGA's broader effort to produce ethical leaders with empathy for and understanding of people of diverse cultural backgrounds. The ASAP represents a unique opportunity to develop more historically-

minded leaders, strengthen the moral fibres of the CG mission, and contribute to the development of practical and effective responses to the plague of genocide.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Holocaust education is a responsibility of all academic institutions; we must teach students about the reality of crimes perpetrated during WW2, commemorate the victims, and sustain a meaningful dialogue between history and memory. The Holocaust was not the first or the last genocide in the history of humanity, but it was unprecedented in many ways and is still the most radical attempt to destroy every member of a group without exception. Studying the history of the Holocaust is an emotional challenge, and it requires knowledge and historical analysis. Students in academic programs must study the experiences of Jews under Nazi rule. By studying the history behind the WW2 and the Holocaust students will be able to comprehend the suffering, feel empathy with the victims of the Holocaust. The personal approach to Holocaust education supports students' readiness to explore the roots of the Holocaust as cruel examples of human genocide and tragic moments of our history.

Holocaust education has a number of other important goals. They all depend on the perspective of the educator, the curriculum subject in which it is taught, and the age and needs of the students and the educational institutions. The goals of Holocaust education are moral, ethical, and historical, seeking understanding of the past, looking for the answers to explain why and how the Holocaust happened and providing understanding of the importance, the significance, and legacy of the Holocaust. The objectives include contemporary and personal reflection on moral, ethical, and civic questions arising from an understanding of the Holocaust.

Holocaust education must help students understand that the Nazi genocide machine was aimed not only at the destruction of the European Jewish Community but also at the Jewish seed itself. It was a war not only against the Jews racial existence but also against the Jewish proactive potential. Holocaust education must make current young generations aware that the number of individuals imprisoned and murdered in the concentration camps challenges our ability to comprehend the extent of their suffering. The most important lessons that we expect the students can come to realize are that democratic institutions and values are not automatically sustained, but need to be appreciated, nurtured, and protected; that silence and indifference to the suffering of others or to the infringement of civil rights in any society can-however unintentionally-perpetuate the problems; and the Holocaust was not an accident in history; it occurred because individuals, organizations, and governments made choices that not only legalized discrimination but also allowed prejudice, hatred, and ultimately, mass murder to occur.

In sum, the study of the Holocaust: (1) assists students in developing an understanding of the consequences of prejudice, racism, and stereotyping in any society; (2) helps students develop an awareness of the value of pluralism and encourages tolerance of diversity in a pluralistic society; (3) provides a framework for discovering the dangers of remaining silent, apathetic, and indifferent in the face of others' oppression; (4) validates how a modern nation can apply its technological expertise and bureaucratic organization to implement destructive policies ranging from social engineering to genocide; and (5) helps students think about the use and abuse of power, and the roles and responsibilities of individuals, organizations, and nations

when confronted with civil rights violations and/or policies of massacre and genocide. As students comprehend the historical, social, religious, political, and economic factors that cumulatively resulted in the Holocaust, they gain an appreciation of the complexity of the subject and a perspective on how a convergence of factors can contribute to the disintegration of democratic, moral, and ethical values. Students come to recognize that it is the obligation of citizens in a democracy to learn to identify the danger signals, and to know when and how to react to stop allowed prejudice, hatred, and ultimately, mass murder to occur. A structured inquiry into Holocaust history yields critical lessons for an investigation of human behavior, as well as for an appreciation of the dangers of prejudice, stereotyping, and dehumanization for a democratic society.

The authors of this paper argue that additional research should be conducted to determine the effectiveness of approaches to Holocaust education that use active learning methods such as those described here. This type of research could focus on improving the training offered and increasing the impact it has on developing moral, ethical, and leadership skills of the future military leaders. We also recommend that research be conducted with students who have participated in Holocaust education lessons. This type of research could be conducted in a number of ways including pre- and post-lesson interviews or surveys with students to investigate their attitudes of topics such as tolerance and prejudice. The research with students could also be conducted with those who participated in Holocaust studies one or more years ago in an effort to determine any long-range effects the lessons may have had on them. Ensuring that Holocaust education efforts are as effective as possible is extremely important to efforts to combat genocide today, and to ensure that atrocities of the scope of the Holocaust never happen again.

The authors hope that all institutions of higher education will follow the USCGA example and work hard to establish concrete opportunities to learn about the Holocaust as students who study the Holocaust become sensitized to examples of injustice, persecution, prejudice, and violations of human rights today. The author believe that today all college programs are responsible for providing opportunities to the students in order to make them sensitive to the moral and ethical concerns of today's world.

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