MEASURING HOLOCAUST KNOWLEDGE AMONGST CANADIANS

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ABSTRACT

The essay examines the responses of some 1500 Canadians to a public opinion survey on knowledge of the Holocaust, awareness of genocide and attitudes towards discrimination and diversity. One of most of the detailed surveys conducted to date on Holocaust knowledge, the results show strong correlation between greater reported Holocaust knowledge and concern over genocide and higher recognition of anti-Semitism as a societal problem. But greater reported Holocaust knowledge did not consistently correlate with greater acceptance of diversity. The author advocates for cooperation in developing global baseline information on knowledge of the Holocaust.

1. INTRODUCTION

Assessing the degree of knowledge that people possess about the killing of six million Jews during the Second World War can be rather complex. By consequence, there have been relatively few efforts to measure the degree of knowledge about the Holocaust across various countries. To do so would require agreement around a common set of questions to provide for some benchmark against which to determine whether level of knowledge is satisfactory. Nonetheless, given the view that when it comes to the Holocaust, "The World Must Know" (Berenbaum) one might expect notwithstanding the obstacles more effort would be directed at some global evaluation.

As education about the Holocaust is intended to carry a universal message aimed at preventing its re-occurrence, it is no surprise that the bar is set very high when it comes to the degree of Holocaust knowledge. Hence, observers are often surprised to learn that many people remain unaware of the Holocaust. To properly evaluate how to reach those without knowledge of the Holocaust it would seem vital to know how many are unaware and in what segments of the population they are concentrated.

There is concern that the dissemination of such knowledge faces a challenge with the passage of time as there will be fewer witnesses to carry the message. At the same time, new technologies provide educators with the means to reach large numbers of people hence potentially raising the bar when it comes to generating widespread awareness (of course such technologies also invite the risk of more individuals of employing similar technologies to distort people's knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust). By consequence, the need to ascertain the level of knowledge and understanding is all the more necessary.

A survey commissioned by the American Jewish Committee in 2006 across seven countries (the United States and six European countries) asked "how important is it for 'all people' (our emphasis) in your country to know about and understand the Nazi extermination of the Jews during the Second World War." Overall some 80% of the respondents declared it essential or very important, a figure described by AJC's analyst as a strong majority. Still depending on one's expectation it might be contended that the one in five respondents not sharing that view is a cause

for concern. We shall discuss whether this is attributable to not possessing a strong knowledge of the Holocaust.

Despite the growing distance in time from the Second World War, there is some optimism about the global degree of interest in acquiring knowledge about the Holocaust. Bauer (2006) notes that: "…more and more people show an interest in this particular tragedy…[and that is]…why is there a flood of fiction, theater, films, TV series, art, music, and of course historical, sociological, philosophical, psychological, and other academic research, a flood that has rarely if ever been equaled in dealing with any other historical event…" At the same time there is much concern with the refusal of far too many people to learn the lessons of the Holocaust. Wiesel (2009) remarks that: "…if the civilized world allowed the crimes in Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda and Darfur to happen, it is because the lessons of Auschwitz and Treblinka have not been learned. And these lessons have not been learned quite simply because, for many reasons, the civilized world would rather not know." There is of course no contradiction between Bauer and Wiesel, nor is it a contradiction that there exists a growing desire to know about the Holocaust but a growing refusal to learn its lessons. That gap underscores the challenge facing education around the Holocaust. Knowledge about the Holocaust does not operate in a "leaning vacuum" as people's understanding of it is shaped by their overall learning experience.

That which follows attempts to assess the relationship between the estimated level of knowledge about the Holocaust on the part of the Canadian population and their attitude towards genocide, anti-Semitism and diversity. It does so by correlating responses to some 44 questions from a national survey of 1500 individuals conducted by the firm Leger Marketing for the Association for Canadian Studies in the month of October, 2008.

The first of its kind in Canada, the survey represents one of the most comprehensive enquiries conducted globally on this issue. Given the universal message aimed at combating hatred it is widely assumed that holocaust knowledge will result in greater openness to diverse cultures. Insights from the survey will be offered in this regard which in turn are intended to encourage reflection over the impact of holocaust knowledge on multicultural and citizenship education.

2. THE CHALLENGE OF SURVEYING HOLOCAUST KNOWLEDGE

As mentioned there have been relatively few large-scale quantitative studies of knowledge about the Holocaust and even fewer tests of how such knowledge correlates with views on genocide, diversity and multiculturalism and other relevant matters. There can be limits in drawing strong conclusions on the basis of public opinion survey measurement and the formulation of clear questions is crucial. In 1993, media in the United States reported results of a Holocaust-knowledge study conducted by Burns Roper for the American Jewish Committee (AJC) and analyzed by Golub and Cohen (1993). The survey found that 22% of Americans believed it possible that the Holocaust had never happened. Debate ensued over the method employed to arrive at that disturbing conclusion and it was determined that the survey question was constructed with a confusing double negative (1994). The question read as follows: "Does it seem possible or does it seem impossible to you that the Nazi extermination of the Jews never happened?" Simplifying the question, Moore and Newport (1994) found that fewer than fewer than ten percent of the American population appeared to doubt that the Holocaust had occurred. In the aftermath of the controversy, Bischoping (1999) notes that several survey researchers deliberating on the topic of measuring holocaust knowledge concurred that other survey questions could produce more consistent estimates of public ignorance on this important matter.

In 2005, the AJC commissioned a seven country survey on the memory of the Holocaust which gauged opinion in Austria, France, Germany, Poland, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States). Analyzing the findings, respected researcher Tom Smith (2005) observed that: "knowledge of the Holocaust is limited and uneven across these nations." Nonetheless, he contends that the survey demonstrates strong support across the countries for preserving knowledge of and teaching students about the Holocaust.

Smith (2005) suggested that since people presumably learn more about their own history than others do, it might have been assumed that Holocaust knowledge would be greater in countries that were most directly involved. By consequence he expected that Germans and Austrians

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would know more than Poles who in turn would know more than France, the United Kingdom and lastly the United States. That was not the case as the survey revealed that knowledge was greatest in Sweden, followed by France, Germany, Austria, the United Kingdom, Poland, and the United States. Smith observed that knowledge in Sweden was greater than expected, and the Germans and, especially, the Polish were less informed than their historical proximity would predict.

The AJC survey asked two types of questions. One set looked at knowledge of events reflected by a question on whether had heard of Auschwitz, Dachau, and Treblinka. Another question asked whether they knew how many Jews were killed during World War II. On the first question, the ability to identify these places as concentration camps or some related facility (such as death camps, extermination camps, or camps) responses ranged from 91 percent in Sweden to just 44 percent in the United States (in Austria it was 88%, Poland 79%, France 78%, Germany 77%, and the UK 53%). The percentage indicating they didn't know ran from 46 percent in the United States to 5 percent in Sweden. A question asking, "Approximately how many Jews in all of Europe were killed by the Nazis during the Second World War?" generated the correct response from some 55 percent in Sweden to 30 percent in Poland (49% in France and Germany, 41% in Austria, 39% in the UK and 33% in the US).

Another set of questions focused on the commitment to preserve and transmit knowledge about the Holocaust. In this regard those agreeing that it essential or very important for all people to know about the Nazi extermination of the Jews ranged from 89% in Austria to 70% in Poland. Respondents were asked whether it was time to put the Nazi extermination of the Jews "behind us" or keep remembrance strong. Responses ranged from 92% in Sweden who felt it was important to keep the memory strong to 70% in Austria. At this point it is worth noting the gap amongst Austrians significant percentage of those saying all should know and the not insignificant share agreeing it was time to put it behind us. As to requiring the teaching of the Holocaust in the schools of the country's surveyed, responses ranged from 92% of Austrians to 69% of Poles (in Sweden it was 91%, in France it was 86%, in the US 80%, Germany 79%, and the UK 76%).

The AJC survey raises important questions about the gap between knowledge of the Holocaust (as defined by the survey criteria) and commitment to preserving its memory. Stronger knowledge of a particular issue more often correlates with support for its transmission. In part, this is because those unaware of the issue presumably do not know what they're being asked to transmit. However looking at the AJC survey, two things need to be borne in mind. First when it comes to testing knowledge transmission the question provided for a preamble which laid out the objective of the Holocaust. The second point relates to Smith's link between proximity and knowledge. Under certain circumstances proximity may result in the desire to create distance with the events where such knowledge undercuts a group's collective sense of belonging. In other words, knowledge and understanding may be affected by a group's capacity to come to terms with painful historic memory. We'll return this issue in the conclusion.

3. ASSESSING CANADIANS KNOWLEDGE OF THE HOLOCAUST

To test the self-estimated knowledge of Canadians about the Holocaust, the ACS-Leger survey put two questions to respondents. First they were asked how often they heard about the Holocaust and second they were asked if they had a good knowledge of the Holocaust. The challenge when it comes to employing self-estimation is the relative character of individual knowledge assessment. Hence the objective of the survey is to see how those self-evaluating Holocaust knowledge respond to various issues relevant to its transmission as well as to understand whether they grasp the universal message that Holocaust awareness aims to attain.

"Knowledge of the Holocaust is limited and uneven across these nations."

According to the ACS-Leger survey, some 82% of respondents say that they had heard about the Holocaust either often (52%) or sometimes (31%) while 17% report that they either rarely (10%) or never (7%) heard of it. As observed below, the older segment of the population was more likely to report having "often" heard about the Holocaust. The youngest cohort, ages 18-24 were most likely to acknowledge "never" having heard about it.

As to the strength of the respondent's knowledge of the Holocaust, some 65% agreed they had a good knowledge. Age was not a significant factor in Canadians self-evaluation of their knowledge about the Holocaust. Amongst Canadians, the gaps in self-estimated knowledge are most pronounced on the basis of one's first language and their level of education. In the case of educational attainment some 52% of those with high school or less reported a good knowledge compared to 68% with a college degree and 74% with a university degree. On the basis of language, some 49% of the Francophone population agreed they possessed a good knowledge compared with 71% of anglophones and 66% amongst those Canadians whose first language was neither English nor French.

Table 1

HEARD ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST?	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	RARELY	NEVER	DK/REFUSED
18-24	42.1	37.6	7.3	12.9	–
25-34	44.5	32.2	13.5	7.8	2.0
35-44	48.5	32.4	14.0	4.4	0.7
45-54	53.5	30.7	8.6	6.9	0.3
55-64	58.9	26.8	8.5	4.5	1.3
65 and over	59.6	25.1	9.4	5.1	0.8

Source: Association for Canadian Studies and Leger Marketing "Survey on Holocaust Knowledge and Genocide Awareness in Canada" October 9-12, 2008

Table 2

	HEARD ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST?		
I HAVE A GOOD KNOWLEDGE OF THE HOLOCAUST	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	RARELY
Strongly agree	30.7%	10.0%	14.8%
Somewhat agree	50.9%	45.8%	27.1%
Somewhat disagree	12.8%	27.1%	24.5%
Strongly disagree	4.4%	12.6%	21.9%
DK/Refused	1.3%	4.6%	11.6%

Source: Association for Canadian Studies and Leger Marketing "Survey on Holocaust Knowledge and Genocide Awareness in Canada" October 9-12, 2008

In the table 2 we correlate the degree to which people report having heard about the Holocaust with their estimated degree of knowledge. Not surprisingly the more often one reported hearing about it, the more likely self-estimated strong knowledge of the Holocaust.

4. GOING TO THE SOURCES: WHERE CANADIANS SECURED INFORMATION ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST

People acquire knowledge about the Holocaust from a variety of sources. And there knowledge consumption habits are interconnected. In other words those more likely to have read a book about the Holocaust are also more likely to have seen a film on the subject. Overall, some 56% have seen a film about the Holocaust, 51% read newspaper articles about it, 36% report having read a book about the Holocaust and 13% acknowledge seeing a museum exhibit. Some 39% reported learning about the Holocaust through a course in school and amongst the 18-24 cohort that figure rises to 60%.

Of those affirming a good knowledge of the Holocaust some 54% have often read a story in the newspaper about it, 42% have often seen a film on the Holocaust, 41% have leaned about it through a course in school and 31% say they have often read a book on the subject.

Some 55% of Canadians surveyed agree that they would like to learn more about the Holocaust. The desire to learn often correlates with age as 72% of the youngest cohort (18-24) expressed further interest in doing so. Such interest also correlates with self-estimated knowledge with 60% of those self-estimating a good knowledge expressing a desire to learn more in contrast with 34% self-estimating weak knowledge. Some 45% of Canadians surveyed expressed interest in participating in a ceremony remembering the victims of the Holocaust. Finally, some 75% of Canadians agree that learning about the Holocaust should be compulsory in school. As observed below, those self-estimating

Table 3

	I HAVE A GOOD KNOWLEDGE OF THE HOLOCAUST			
% AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
I would like to learn more about the Holocaust	59.4	64.4	52.0	34.1
Learning about the Holocaust should be compulsory in our schools	91.0	81.8	75.7	43.5
I would be interested in participating in a ceremony remembering the victims	61.5	51.5	34.1	24.6

Source: Association for Canadian Studies and Leger Marketing "Survey on Holocaust Knowledge and Genocide Awareness in Canada" October 9-12, 2008

Table 4

	HEARD ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST?			
HEARD ABOUT A GENOCIDE TAKING PLACE IN THE WORLD TODAY?	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	RARELY	NEVER
Often	53.4%	21.8%	16.7%	5.1%
Sometimes	36.1%	48.2%	30.8%	22.4%
Rarely	6.3%	17.1%	26.3%	12.2%
Never	3.1%	12.5%	23.1%	59.2%
DK/Refused	1.2%	0.4%	3.2%	1.0%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Association for Canadian Studies and Leger Marketing "Survey on Holocaust Knowledge and Genocide Awareness in Canada" October 9-12, 2008

strong knowledge were most likely to agree that learning about the Holocaust should be compulsory in schools.

5. HOLOCAUST KNOWLEDGE, GENOCIDE AWARENESS AND ACTION

Wiesel (2009) and Bauer (2006) have expressed similar concerns that the Holocaust not become a precedent that genocides continue to take place suggests to them that too many people have yet to understand the lessons of the Holocaust. A set of questions was included in the ACS-Leger survey that probes awareness of genocide and the desire to take action to prevent it. Responses to these questions were correlated with self-estimated knowledge of the Holocaust to examine the relationship between them. More Canadians report having often heard about the Holocaust (52%) then about whether genocide is currently taking place in the world (36%). As observed below, those respondents saying they often heard about the Holocaust were far more likely to report having heard about genocide taking place than those less likely to have heard about the Holocaust.

The survey of Canadians suggests that the most knowledgeable about the Holocaust tend to be most concerned over genocide. However the percentage identifying genocide as an important global problem and the desire for action to prevent its occurrence operates relatively independently of the level of knowledge of the Holocaust. However those with the very lowest self-estimate of knowledge of the Holocaust include a substantial percentage of persons responding "don't know" (percentage listed in brackets) when asked about their degree of concern over genocide and the desire for preventive action.

6. OPENNESS TO DIVERSITY

Salmons (2003) suggests that teaching the lessons of the Holocaust might inspire youth to work harder towards a fairer, more tolerant society that sees strength in diversity, values multiculturalism and combats racism. He further

Table 5

	I HAVE A GOOD KNOWLEDGE OF THE HOLOCAUST			
% AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE	SOMEWHAT AGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
Agree that I am very concerned about genocide occurring in the world	93.2%	91.2%	78.5%	49.0 (38)
Agree that Genocide is an important problem in the world today	93.2%	91.5%	82.9%	56.0(29)
Disagree that we can't do much to prevent genocide from occurring today	70.1%	72.3%	69.2%	43.9(29)
Agree that we should send Canadian troops to areas where genocide is occurring	72.6%	70.7%	61.3%	37.5(26)

Source: Association for Canadian Studies and Leger Marketing "Survey on Holocaust Knowledge and Genocide Awareness in Canada" October 9-12, 2008

contends that as required in the United Kingdom education about the Holocaust is clearly linked with the objectives of intercultural education and the preparation of students for participation in a multicultural society. Maitles, Cowan and Butler (2006) point out that research with secondary students provides evidence that Holocaust education can make an important contribution to human rights awareness and foster appreciation of the harmful effects of stereotyping and scapegoating. Survey research they conducted with primary and secondary school children in Scotland supports the view that while teaching the Holocaust can have some influence, it cannot eradicate all racist attitudes.

In the ACS-Leger survey correlations are provided for self-estimated knowledge of the Holocaust with the extent to which respondents see anti-Semitism as a problem in society. Another set of correlations are offered for self-estimated knowledge of the Holocaust with various statements around diversity. The choice of the statements was made on the basis of identifying the most frequently asked questions by polling firms in Canada in the last decade to gauge the population's opinions on immigrant integration and diversity. It is important to keep in mind that the ACS-Leger survey is not focused on learning outcomes from Holocaust education and therefore does not compare with the study in Scotland. However it does attempt to shed light on the similar operative assumption that Holocaust knowledge leads to greater openness to diversity.

Overall the ACS-Leger survey reveals that some 58% of Canadians regard anti-Semitism as a societal problem (17% strongly agree and 41% somewhat agree). As revealed below the survey does provide evidence that those with higher self-estimates of Holocaust knowledge are more inclined to describe anti-Semitism as a societal problem. In effect therefore it might be concluded that they are more concerned with anti-Semitism. Though the percentage that self-report low Holocaust knowledge are less likely to believe that anti-Semitism is a societal problem (38%) a significant share of that group indicate that they do not know (38%) as illustrated in brackets.

The importance of Holocaust knowledge as a causal factor in favorable views of diversity is borne out to some degree but the gap between the most and least knowledgeable is not as wide as might be assumed. Some 84% of those estimating strong Holocaust knowledge agree that society has been strengthened by the diversity of cultural and religious groups as compared with 75% that self-report low Holocaust knowledge. There is also a 12 point gap on the question of whether society should try harder to accept the customs and traditions of minority religious groups with nearly 69% of those describing themselves as most knowledgeable supporting greater acceptance compared to 56% of those that somewhat disagree when asked to assess whether they possess a good knowledge. Those self-estimating strong holocaust knowledge were just as likely (38%) as other respondents to agree that immigrants should give up their customs and traditions and become more like the majority. Hence Holocaust knowledge had no apparent bearing on responses to that question. On the issue of whether society is threatened by the influx of non-Christian immigrants, those estimating strong Holocaust knowledge were somewhat less likely to agree than other respondents. Clearly strong Holocaust knowledge may correlate with less greater acceptance and less fear of "others" but amongst those that self-estimate strong knowledge are a not insignificant minority that are concerned over diversity and the presence of minority religions. Similar to the observation

Table 6

	I HAVE A GOOD KNOWLEDGE OF THE HOLOCAUST			
% AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE	SOMEWHAT AGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
Anti-Semitism is a problem in our society	70.3%	63.5%	53.5%	38.0(38)
Society has been strengthened by the diversity of cultural and religious groups	83.9%	77.6%	74.4%	65(11)
Society should try harder to accept the customs and traditions of minority religious groups	68.7%	60.8%	56.0%	53(15)
Society is threatened by the influx of non-Christian immigrants	26.6%	33.6%	31.1%	34.3(18)
Immigrants should give up their customs and traditions and become more like the majority	38.4%	40.0%	39.8%	40.7(12)

Source: Association for Canadian Studies and Leger Marketing "Survey on Holocaust Knowledge and Genocide Awareness in Canada" October 9-12, 2008

made by Maitles et al. (2006) in research on pupils in Scotland the findings of the ACS-Leger survey suggest that Holocaust knowledge may reduce but by no means eradicates in this concerns around the presence of diversity.

That knowledge of the Holocaust appears to have less bearing on opinion with respect to some questions around societal diversity may have less to do with the impact of Holocaust teaching than the manner in which issues of diversity are learned and understood. In effect knowledge about the Holocaust may not always offer guidance when it comes to matters that are the object of debate in pluralistic society. Educators can't be expected to offer coherent responses to matters that being constantly debated outside the school context. As mentioned therefore the impact of learning about the Holocaust cannot be considered in a vacuum. Both within and outside the classroom young people are exposed to ideas that can modify the impact of education about the Holocaust. Researchers need to consider the broader learning experience to best evaluate the impact of the message conveyed through learning about the Holocaust.

7. CONCLUSION: TOWARDS AN INTERNATIONAL SURVEY ON HOLOCAUST KNOWLEDGE

Establishing the national level of knowledge about the Holocaust is a formidable task. Perhaps the most important element in pursuing such inquiry is the identification of relevant questions which is crucial in providing useful insights into the issue. Questions that permit us to properly assess Holocaust knowledge are essential towards determining how such knowledge influences views on anti-Semitism, racism, discrimination and diversity.

The survey results reviewed above examine the degree to which the Canadian population has heard about the Holocaust and their self-estimated knowledge of the Holocaust. Some will question whether this approach is best suited to assess Holocaust knowledge since one's own evaluation of a "good knowledge" may not translate into varying degrees of awareness of say facts and figures when it comes to the Holocaust. Similarly saying one has "often" heard about the Holocaust may also vary according how one understands often. Still we chose this approach over the top of mind questions that ask for responses to facts and figures about the Holocaust that also possesses limits in understanding an individual's knowledge of the Holocaust.

The essence of our survey however lies in looking at the relationships between the degree to which, on the one hand, they heard about the Holocaust and their estimated knowledge of it and, on the other, their reactions to the lessons around discrimination to which such knowledge purportedly gives rise. The survey results suggest those reporting strong knowledge of the Holocaust are more likely to describe contemporary anti-Semitism as a problem, somewhat more likely to be concerned over genocide but more divided around acceptance of diversity in certain form.

Reactions range from surprise to shock when observers in Western Europe and North America learn that younger people are unaware of the Holocaust. Such

reactions may be based on too strong an expectation of how widespread such knowledge should be. In the absence of reliable information about which segments of the population are unaware it is difficult to develop successful strategies to reach youth that do not know about the Holocaust. International cooperation in educating future generations about the Holocaust requires that the obstacles notwithstanding some comparative instrument is introduced that quantifies knowledge and looks at the substance of what we is being taught across various jurisdictions.

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