CARVING A PATH FORWARD: A CANADIAN RESPONSE TO HOLOCAUST DENIAL AND DISTORTION

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The Holocaust remains one of the most well-documented atrocities in human history. Yet, Holocaust denial and distortion persist in Canada and worldwide undermining both the memory of the victims and the fight against antisemitism. Holocaust denial and distortion are more than just a perversion of the truth; they are dangerous forms of antisemitism used to delegitimize Jewish suffering and attack Jewish communities.

According to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism,[1] Holocaust denial and distortion are explicitly recognized as forms of antisemitism. Holocaust denial involves efforts to negate the reality and scope of the Holocaust, including denying the existence of Nazi death camps or downplaying the number of victims. Holocaust distortion, while often more subtle, includes minimizing the atrocities, falsely equating the Holocaust with other historical events, or shifting the blame onto the victims.

Both forms of Holocaust revisionism share a common goal: to erode the legitimacy of Jewish history and identity while perpetuating antisemitic

1 holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definition-antisemitism

myths and conspiracy theories. They also erase and deny the memory of the 500,000 Roma and Sinti, along with the many LGBTQ+ persons, persons with disabilities, and political dissidents who were persecuted and killed by the Nazis and their collaborators in horrific crimes against humanity. Holocaust denial is often used by extremists on all sides of the political spectrum to attack Jews and the legitimacy of the State of Israel, which occurs far too often in a post October 7th world.

THE IMPACT OF HOLOCAUST DENIAL AND DISTORTION

Holocaust denial and distortion have been weaponized against Jews in Canada and globally, used to delegitimize their historical experiences and promote antisemitic conspiracy theories. It causes the uninformed to ask, "if the Jews are lying about the Holocaust, what else are they lying about?" As we approach 80 years since the liberation of Auschwitz and witness the dwindling number of Holocaust survivors, the passage of time makes Holocaust denial and distortion more dangerous, as the loss of firsthand testimonies creates a vacuum that allows false narratives to spread more easily.

Denialists often accuse Jews of fabricating or exaggerating the horrors of the Holocaust for political gain, particularly in relation to the existence of Israel. This rhetoric is deeply tied to classical antisemitic tropes, painting Jews as deceitful and manipulative.

These attacks go beyond distorting history; they aim to sow distrust of Jews and foster a climate of hate and divisions amongst society, ultimately increasing the risk of antisemitic incidents and violence.

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THE ROLE OF INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The internet has made it easy to get information in a matter of seconds. Unfortunately, it's often misinformation. The digital world has allowed for hate to spread, often unchecked and Holocaust denial and distortion is no exception. Social media platforms, where content moderation can be inconsistent, have become fertile ground for Holocaust denialism to spread and to impact those accept what they learn online as the truth and don't fact check.

In Canada, alarming trends show that Holocaust skepticism is particularly pervasive among younger generations. A study by the Association for Canadian Studies (ACS) revealed that Canadian youth between the ages of 18 and 24 exhibit the highest rates of Holocaust skepticism compared to other age groups. Worryingly, this same demographic also reports higher rates of negative views toward Jews, suggesting that a lack of knowledge about the Holocaust may contribute to antisemitic attitudes.

These findings underscore the urgent need for enhanced Holocaust education, especially for younger generations who are most vulnerable to the spread of misinformation online.

THE POWER OF EDUCATION IN COMBATING DENIAL

Education is the most powerful tool in the fight against Holocaust denial and distortion. It was heartening to see that most provincial governments have taken significant steps toward ensuring that students across the country receive a comprehensive understanding of this dark chapter in human history. Starting in the fall of 2025, most provinces across Canada will begin implementing more robust, mandatory Holocaust education programs in their school curricula.

To assist in the success of these initiatives, my office convened a symposium in September 2024 with Canada's leading Holocaust educators. This event provided a platform for experts to discuss best practices and identify challenges for implementing the new mandatory, robust Holocaust education being rolled out for grade 10 students in most provinces.

One of the key takeaways from the symposium was the importance of teacher training. Teaching the Holocaust is an emotionally and intellectually challenging task. If teachers are uncomfortable or unfamiliar with the material, they risk passing on false, inaccurate or incomplete information to their students. The symposium attendees emphasized the need for comprehensive professional development programs that will help educators feel confident and prepared to teach the complexities of the Holocaust in an age-appropriate way, ensuring that the historical truth is preserved and effectively conveyed to the next generation.

Students need to gain factual understanding of the Holocaust from teachers who are equipped to provide these important lessons. Teachers of today need the proper training as do the teachers of tomorrow. Teachers' colleges need to bring in specialized courses to ensure that all teachers who graduate are prepared to educate their students about the Holocaust in an accurate and meaningful way. There is a plethora of sources out there on the Holocaust and teaching the Holocaust that many may not know where to start looking for information. The IHRA website[2] provides resources for education professionals including a toolkit against Holocaust distortion that make for a great starting point for educators to turn to for information on best practices in Holocaust education.

THE NATIONAL HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE PROGRAM

However, Holocaust education cannot be confined to the classroom. Recognizing this, the Department of Canadian Heritage launched the first call for proposals for the National Holocaust Remembrance Program (NHRP) on November 8, 2024. This program will provide funding to support initiatives that seek to preserve the memory of the Holocaust and help improve Canadians' understanding and awareness of the Holocaust and contemporary antisemitism.

The NHRP will offer grants to schools, museums, community organizations, and cultural institutions to develop projects that engage the public in Holocaust education and remembrance.

2 holocaustremembrance.com/for-education-professionals

This national effort represents a critical step in ensuring that Holocaust remembrance remains an integral part of Canadian society. By supporting programs that foster awareness and understanding, Canada is reinforcing its commitment to remembering the past while combating the rising tide of Holocaust denial and antisemitism.

THE CANADIAN HANDBOOK ON THE IHRA WORKING DEFINITION OF ANTISEMITISM

Another tool in the fight against Holocaust denial and distortion is the Canadian Handbook on the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism,[3] released in October 2024. This comprehensive guide includes real-life Canadian examples of Holocaust denial and distortion, providing practical insights on how these forms of antisemitism manifest in modern society. By illustrating how Holocaust denial is not just a form of historical revisionism but a dangerous attack on Jewish communities, the Handbook underscores the importance of recognizing antisemitism in all its forms. We cannot effectively combat antisemitism if we do not have the tools to identify it. This resource will help educators, policymakers, and institutions understand and confront these insidious threats.

THE NEED FOR A MULTIFACETED APPROACH

While these initiatives are vital, addressing the challenges posed by Holocaust denial and distortion requires a multifaceted approach.

More needs to be done outside of the classroom to reach the younger Canadians who get their information online. Crucial in countering the spread of Holocaust denial and distortion is the need for more innovative solutions to reach youth where they are by creating and promoting accurate and accessible resources online. For example, countries like Finland with a high degree of media literacy – particularly among youth – are more resilient to mis/disinformation, including Holocaust denial and distortion.

Outside of the digital world, there are many resources that play an important role in combatting Holocaust denial and distortion. Public memorials, museums, and community events play an essential role in keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive. Institutions like the Toronto Holocaust Museum, Montreal Holocaust Museum, the National Holocaust Monument, and Holocaust Education

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3 holocaustremembrance.com/for-education-professionals

Centres in Winnipeg and Vancouver, offer important spaces for education and reflection, and they must continue to be supported and expanded.

CONCLUSION

Holocaust denial and distortion remain potent forms of antisemitism in Canada, undermining historical truth and perpetuating hatred against Jews. When Holocaust denial and antisemitism go unchecked, it creates a dangerous environment where hate is normalized, and historical truth is distorted. This emboldens those who seek to spread falsehoods and conspiracy theories, allowing extremist ideologies to flourish.

We are seeing this play out in real time as similar tactics of denial are used in response to contemporary atrocities, such as the October 7th terrorist attacks. This refusal to acknowledge truth, whether about the Holocaust or modern-day violence against Jews, is not merely a matter of historical or political debate – it fuels ongoing antisemitism, undermines justice, and threatens the safety of the Canadian Jewish communities and the fabric of Canadian democracy.

The lessons of the Holocaust remind us that silence and denial in the face of evil only encourage hate. As Holocaust denial and distortion persist, and as new forms of historical erasure emerge, it is critical that Canada continue its commitment to robust Holocaust education and remembrance, while actively combatting all forms of antisemitism, both historical and contemporary. By safeguarding truth and confronting denial, we can honor the memory of the victims, protect future generations, and stand firmly against the resurgence of hate.