THE RISE OF HOLOCAUST SKEPTICISM AND ITS SOURCES: A CANADIAN CASE STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

Some one in six Canadians between the ages of 18 and 24 believe that the Holocaust is exaggerated. These are among several worrisome findings from a Fall 2024 survey (Leger for the Association for Canadian Studies). It's a view shared by a similar percentage of Americans in the same age group (overall, this view is held by five percent of Canadians and eight percent of Americans). Denial and distortion about the Holocaust remain critical concerns in Canada and elsewhere. Holocaust denial is widely subjected to legislative sanction, and there is a continued need for vigilance in this regard. But addressing the view that the Holocaust is exaggerated may present a different challenge for contemporary educators and policymakers.

> **"Some one in six Canadians between the ages of 18 and 24 believe that the Holocaust is exaggerated. These are among several worrisome findings from a 2024 survey that highlight a troubling trend of Holocaust skepticism."**

We use the term "Holocaust skepticism" to describe the view that the Holocaust is exaggerated. Its proponents are referred to as Holocaust skeptics. This study examines the extent of such beliefs, their potential sources, and the underlying sentiments driving these worrisome perspectives.

THE DATA

As observed in the Table 1, five percent of Canadians agree that the Holocaust is exaggerated, with the percentage dropping below four percent

among Canadians over 45 years old. Overall, over one in seven Canadians (13%) say they don't know or prefer not to answer. The extent to which this view is held by persons aged 18 to 24 stands in stark contrast to those in the 45+ cohort.

Persuading skeptics will not be simple. As seen in Table 2, Holocaust skeptics often believe they have a good knowledge of genocides across history. Among those who think the Holocaust is exaggerated, two-thirds claim good knowledge about historical genocides.

WHY DO THEY BELIEVE THE HOLOCAUST IS EXAGGERATED?

To better understand the reasoning behind Holocaust skepticism, we asked individuals holding this view to explain their stance in one sentence. As shown in Table 3, the responses are vague, with the principal observation being that the Holocaust receives too much attention.

TABLE 1.

I THINK THE HOLOCAUST IS EXAGGERATED	CANADA TOTAL	18–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	65+
Yes	5%	16%	8%	5%	4%	3%	2%
No	82%	69%	78%	78%	81%	85%	91%
I don't know / Prefer not to answer	13%	15%	15%	17%	15%	12%	7%

Source: Leger for the Association for Canadian Studies, September 22–24, 2024.

TABLE 2.

I HAVE A GOOD KNOWLEDGE ABOUT GENOCIDES IN HISTORY	I THINK THE HOLOCAUST IS EXAGGERATED (YES)	I THINK THE HOLOCAUST IS EXAGGERATED (NO)
Yes	66%	55%
No	32%	35%
I don't know / Prefer not to answer	2%	10%
Total	**100%**	**100%**

Source: Leger for the Association for Canadian Studies, September 22–24, 2024.

TABLE 3.

WHY DO YOU THINK THE HOLOCAUST IS EXAGGERATED?	PERCENTAGE
Overreacting/Overly publicized (in media, books, movies, etc.)	19%
Lack of access to the full truth/Need for unbiased history	8%
Discrepancies in numbers/Difficult to verify the exact figures	7%
Not the worst event in history/Not just Jews suffered	6%
Attracts too much attention/empathy	5%
We should focus on the present/Move on from the past	4%

Source: Leger for the Association for Canadian Studies, September 22–24, 2024

PERCEPTION OF THE NUMBER OF JEWS MURDERED

More than one in three Holocaust skeptics think fewer than three million Jews were murdered during the Holocaust, compared to just one in ten among those who reject Holocaust skepticism (Table 4).

Between 2019 and 2024, there has been a notable increase in the number of Canadians who believe fewer than six million Jews were murdered. This rise is particularly significant among the 18–24 age group (Table 5).

HOLOCAUST SKEPTICISM AND NEGATIVE ATTITUDES TOWARDS JEWS

There is a clear connection between Holocaust skepticism and negative attitudes toward Jews.

TABLE 4.

HOW MANY JEWS DIED DURING THE HOLOCAUST?	I THINK THE HOLOCAUST IS EXAGGERATED (YES)	I THINK THE HOLOCAUST IS EXAGGERATED (NO)
Less than one million	8%	1%
One million to three million	26%	9%
Three million to five million	15%	11%
Six million or more	16%	50%
I don't know / Prefer not to answer	35%	29%
Total	**100%**	**100%**

Source: Leger for the Association for Canadian Studies, September 22–24, 2024

TABLE 5.

APPROXIMATELY HOW MANY JEWS WERE KILLED?	NOVEMBER 2019	MAY 2024
18–24	11%	27%
25–34	22%	31%
35–44	23%	21%
45–54	16%	23%
55–64	15%	21%
65–74	16%	21%
Total	17%	24%

Source: Leger for the Association for Canadian Studies, September 22–24, 2024

Among those aged 18 to 24, one in six believes that Jews exaggerate the Holocaust (Table 6).

SOCIAL MEDIA AND HOLOCAUST SKEPTICISM

Social media has fundamentally transformed how young people consume information. Among those who believe the Holocaust is exaggerated, 44% say the popularity of an online source affects their level of trust, compared to 26% of those who do not hold this view (Table 7).

Similarly, 37% of Holocaust skeptics say they are more likely to trust viral information, compared to 11% of those who disagree with Holocaust skepticism (Table 8).

CONCLUSION

Holocaust skepticism is not due to a lack of available resources but rather an increased reliance on social media for historical information. These findings underscore the need for further analysis of how social media impacts trust in historical facts. Addressing Holocaust skepticism requires strategic engagement with younger audiences and efforts to build critical media literacy to preserve collective memory and combat misinformation.

“Holocaust skepticism is not due to a lack of available resources but rather an increased reliance on social media for historical information.”

TABLE 7.

POPULARITY OF AN ONLINE SOURCE AFFECTS TRUST	YES	NO
Agree	44%	26%
Disagree	56%	74%

Source: Leger for the Association for Canadian Studies, September 22–24, 2024

TABLE 8.

TRUST IN VIRAL INFORMATION	YES	NO
Agree	37%	11%
Disagree	63%	89%

Source: Leger for the Association for Canadian Studies, September 22–24, 2024

TABLE 6.

JEWS EXAGGERATE THE HOLOCAUST	TOTAL	18–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	65+
NET Agree	8%	16%	7%	10%	7%	5%	6%
NET Disagree	70%	56%	64%	65%	64%	79%	80%
I prefer not to answer	22%	28%	29%	25%	28%	16%	14%

Source: Leger for the Association for Canadian Studies, September 22–24, 2024