

Tackling Holocaust denial and distortion in the classroom



HOLOCAUST
MEMORIAL
DAY TRUST



Holocaust Memorial Day Trust (HMDT) is the charity set up by the UK government to promote and support Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) as a result of the UK's commitment to the Stockholm Declaration. This is the international day on 27 January to remember the six million Jews murdered during the Holocaust, and the millions of people killed under Nazi Persecution and in genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur.

27 January marks the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest Nazi death camp.

This resource is intended as a guide for teachers who are running Holocaust Memorial Day activities, or teaching about the Holocaust, and outlines how to recognise and address any incidences of Holocaust denial and/or distortion.

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What is Holocaust denial? What is distortion of the Holocaust?

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) has a useful working definition of both Holocaust denial and distortion [here](#), from which this guide draws its definitions, and some examples.

Broadly speaking, **Holocaust denial** is any attempt to deny the Holocaust happened.

Holocaust distortion, sometimes referred to as 'soft denial' or 'Holocaust revisionism' is where the Holocaust is acknowledged to have happened, but where the extent or nature of the Holocaust is questioned, minimised or trivialised.

It is important to note with these definitions that Holocaust distortion can, of course, lead to denial, particularly when the uniqueness of the Holocaust is questioned or when facts are distorted so grossly that the reality of the Holocaust is denied.

In classroom practice, examples of Holocaust denial and distortion may not always be easy to identify and define as such, especially when they intersect with contentious or controversial contemporary issues. Distortion, in particular, often forms a wide spectrum of incidences. This guide is not designed to include an exhaustive list of all forms of what is, and is not, Holocaust denial and distortion.

If you are unsure of whether a topic or statement would fall into either category, use the ideas and tools suggested in the other parts of this guide to open up further conversation with the student(s), ideally in a more private setting. This will help to facilitate a deeper understanding of what your student(s) views are, how they arrived at them, and what next steps it is appropriate to take.

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Why is it important to address Holocaust denial and distortion?

Holocaust denial and distortion are both forms of antisemitism, and it is vital that educators confront this prejudice whenever they encounter it. Moreover, attempts to delegitimise the facts of the Holocaust are painful insults to its victims and survivors, and all they endured during that terrible time.

As well as making sure that identity-based hostility is always challenged, Holocaust denial and distortion intersect with many other forms of denial and conspiracy thinking, such as climate denial, anti-vaccine movements, and claims of fake news. Failing to confront Holocaust denial and distortion from students, even if it is not maliciously intended, is dangerous, as it normalises such thinking and the view that truths and facts are open to interpretation and debate.

Denial/distortion and antisemitism

IHRA's working definition of antisemitism includes Holocaust denial and distortion in its list of examples. Ignorant or uninformed remarks about the Holocaust may not be made with antisemitic intent, but they are still a form of antisemitism. These attitudes and beliefs can lead to other forms of antisemitic prejudice. Holocaust denial and distortion, therefore, represent prejudice which should be identified and challenged.

Schools may have formal mechanisms in place for countering identity based hostility and prejudice as part of safeguarding good practice. Please be aware this guide is not designed to replace or be part of such systems, but to give practical advice to schools and staff when educating students about the Holocaust and on Holocaust Memorial Day.

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History of denial/distortion

The history of Holocaust denial and distortion is complex, and began even as the Holocaust itself was still ongoing, as the Nazis attempted to destroy evidence of their crimes.

In the UK, Holocaust deniers were part of a small pseudo-academic group who worked to publish their claims in print, as well as speaking in public. This type of denial was at its strongest in the 1970s and 1980s, and reached its apex when David Irving sued Deborah Lipstadt for libel in 1996, after she identified him as a Holocaust denier in her book, *Denying the Holocaust*. Irving lost in a well publicised and damning verdict, which threw out the case and found Irving to hold antisemitic and pro-Nazi beliefs. A wave of prosecutions against Holocaust deniers in the UK and Europe in the 2000s, combined with the rise of the internet and social media, saw many of the denial publications of the 1970s and 1980s cease operations or reduce their output.

Whilst traditional Holocaust denial in print has reduced, the rapid expansion of the internet and social media platforms has created a new space for Holocaust denial to spread. Although outright Holocaust denial today is less prevalent than distortion, denial still exists and thrives within certain online groups, and has by no means been extinguished. The increasing prevalence of issues around fake news and questioning of proven facts in all social arenas, has provided opportunities for those wishing to spread misinformation and lies. The anti-racism charity Hope Not Hate's 2020 report *Fear and HOPE* found that 13% of young people aged 18-24 surveyed thought the official account of the Nazi Holocaust was a lie and the number of Jews murdered during the Holocaust was exaggerated on purpose, in contrast with just 2% of over 65s who held such views.

If you are interested in finding out more about the history of Holocaust denial and distortion, you can explore [this timeline](#) by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, [this video](#) by Yad Vashem, or read Hope Not Hate's book [Rewriting History: Lying, Denying & Revising the Holocaust](#) on the topic.

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Types of denial/distortion

Examples of Holocaust denial include:

- Denying that six million Jews were murdered by the Nazis
- Denying the methods by which Jews were murdered, such as the existence of gas chambers, mass shootings, torture and starvation
- Denying the intentions of the Nazi regime to murder all Jewish people
- Claiming the Holocaust is a conspiracy perpetuated by Jewish people

Examples of Holocaust distortion include several broad categories:

1. Downplaying and minimising the number of people who died during the Holocaust
 - Claims that many fewer than six million Jews died
 - Claims that there is a contemporary Holocaust 'industry' which overstates the severity and impact of the Holocaust
2. Minimising or trivialising the impact of the Holocaust
 - Claims that other groups/nations suffered as much or more than the Jews
 - Honouring or commemorating collaborators and perpetrators in spite of, and without acknowledging, their involvement in the Holocaust
 - Calling other events a 'Holocaust' and making inappropriate comparisons with the Holocaust
 - Making fun of, or joking about, the Holocaust with malicious intent

3. Blaming Jews for 'bringing the Holocaust on themselves'
 - Claims that the Jews deserved what happened to them
 - Claims that the Jews were at fault for the Holocaust, or did not do enough to survive
4. Claims that the Holocaust was a positive event
 - Suggestions that the Holocaust did not 'go far enough'
 - Suggestions that the Holocaust should be emulated or repeated
5. Attempts to blur responsibility for the crimes of the Holocaust
 - Shifting the blame for the crimes of the Holocaust by ignoring or denying the role of collaborators within nations
 - Rehabilitating the reputations of collaborators or perpetrators
6. Revising history
 - Revising the historical assessment of the period, changing narratives to distort the past, usually seen in national political rhetoric and behaviour

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Where these are encountered by students

Students are most likely to encounter Holocaust denial and distortion online, particularly on social media – both of fringe websites and niche social media platforms, but also of major social media platforms too. Such content can often be presented as if it is affiliated with reputable platforms, individuals and institutions, which can make it difficult for students who unwittingly access this content, to realise it is untrue.

Some students may encounter Holocaust denial and distortion offline, through their personal relationships. This can mean it is confusing and distressing for students to have their views challenged.

In addition to this, students may see reports in the mainstream media on the topic of Holocaust denial and distortion, perhaps as a result of a piece of research, or due to comments from a public figure. In such cases students are more likely to ask questions about the topic, or to repeat soundbites and quotes from media coverage, than to state views of their own.



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If you suspect students may mention Holocaust denial/distortion

Before you begin teaching about the Holocaust, or your activity for Holocaust Memorial Day, it is important to establish with your students that you will discuss topics which are very sensitive. Students should be encouraged to think before they speak, and it may be useful for teachers to lay out a particular framework for the discussion to follow, including a reminder of what is and is not acceptable behaviour.

It should be emphasised that although the Holocaust is a complex topic, and one that does occasion debate in some respects, there should be a clear message to students that the facts of the Holocaust are established and not something to be questioned. For more details on how to approach uncertainty and complexity, see our teacher guidelines [here](#).

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Suggested model

We have included a few examples of responses to scenarios/questions after the main advice to illustrate how these stages might work in practice.



Establish motive

If students make comments or ask questions that are based on denial or distortion, it is helpful to first establish the motive behind what they say, so that you can choose how best to deal with the situation. Are their comments:

- Genuine curiosity/disbelief about the topic and how the Holocaust could happen?
- A form of rebellion against authority/attention seeking?
- Testing you for a reaction?
- Intended to provoke an argument?
- Expressing their own view, or the view of someone else?

Each situation will require different handling, depending on group dynamic, class size, setting, and how well you know the students concerned. A student you know well, who makes a statement intending to provoke a reaction from their peers, for example, may provide an opportunity to open up a conversation around online misinformation and the importance of fact checking. A student whose motivation lies in personal antisemitic prejudice, however, will likely not offer such an opportunity, even if their statement is similar to the first student's in content.

If students deliberately express offensive or racist views, it is likely best that they be removed from the rest of the class or not allowed to contribute further to any class discussions. Similarly, if students persist in trying to derail discussions with denial or distortion, this may also be the best option. You may decide, based on your knowledge of your group, that it is not appropriate to engage your student(s) in the third, questioning, stage – you know your students best.

In such cases, make it clear to your student(s) that you will speak with them further at a later, more appropriate, time and setting.

Assert the historical authenticity of the Holocaust

Always avoid allowing a debate to develop on the known facts of the Holocaust. Refer your students back consistently to the known facts, and wealth of primary evidence and survivor testimony about the Holocaust. Good teaching practice in Holocaust education encourages the use of primary sources and testimony as the root of learning, and is one of the strongest tools to counteract such harmful claims.

Question the claim and/or open discussion of why the claim has been made

Ask students about where they encountered the opinions or points they have voiced. Contrasting the rich and varied archives of verified evidence about the Holocaust, to whatever sources students have drawn such views from, may provide a useful starting point for discussion on the need to consider sources carefully, and how misinformation can easily spread. Reiterate to the rest of your students the overwhelming weight and reliability of evidence behind the information you have given them.

Follow up

In many cases, following up with a student about comments or points they have raised, is likely to be an informal process at the end of a session or activity. Whether or not the student's remarks were intended to cause harm, it is important for educators to help students gain an understanding of the connections distortion and denial have to antisemitism, and the harm this causes to individuals and society.

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Constructive dialogue during follow up

Encountering or experiencing denial and distortion can be upsetting for students for a range of reasons. This is particularly true if students have a personal, family connection to the period. Some students may simply find the discussion of such topics and the knowledge you impart, to be upsetting, and this is normal.

In either case it is likely to be a distressing experience if students hear lies about the Holocaust, or are forced to confront the fact that narratives they have been told are untrue.

If students have encountered such views as part of their out of school environment, particularly at home, it can be difficult for students to process that the people who they trust and admire, are wrong in this instance, and hold antisemitic views. Students may become angry or refuse to engage in learning – it is important in such cases that students are offered a safe space to speak in confidence with trusted adults in school about these issues.

This is not only to ensure they feel supported, but to encourage students to think more critically about the sources of their information, and how they form their own opinions. For some students this may form an ongoing dialogue between the student(s) and educator(s). Additionally, Holocaust denial and distortion may be a warning sign that students are being drawn into more extremist views and activity, antisemitic or otherwise, which pose a safeguarding concern.

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What if a student says...?

Below are some examples of ways to address things students might say. These are not definitive, and the general model above holds within these situations.

‘This can’t possibly be true. No-one could do that to someone else.’

Students may struggle to accept that the Holocaust happened once they grasp the gravity and extent of the genocide. Relating facts to personal testimonies of survivors and others impacted by the Holocaust, as in our life stories, offers a way for students to empathise with the victims and survivors of genocide in a way which will not overwhelm them. Ensure you talk to your students about the steps that lead to genocide and explain that the Holocaust did not happen suddenly, or for no reason. Instead, it was the cumulation of years of persecution and violence. You may want to use our **10 stages of genocide poster**.

‘But what about the suffering of group X during the war? It was the same or worse.’

It is important to acknowledge the suffering the Nazis inflicted on many other groups, including gay and disabled people, and many others. It may be that if students have a personal interest or connection to other groups, that you can use this to explore how the Nazis persecuted non Jewish groups as part of your HMD activity, or in another session, using our **life stories** or **resources**.

However, it is important to make it clear to students that the experiences of Jewish people during the genocide were exceptional and unique. Jews endured centuries of antisemitic prejudice and persecution which the Nazis cultivated further. The Nazis targeted Jews for complete annihilation as part of a plan the Nazis called ‘The Final Solution to the Jewish Problem’. Although other groups suffered persecution, Jewish people and Roma and Sinti people were the only groups the Nazis targeted for total destruction. You can read more about the Holocaust and Nazi Persecution on our website **here**, or in our **teacher information sheets**.

‘Well, what happens today to group X is just as bad.’

Similarly to the statement on other groups’ suffering during the war, students may have strong feelings about social justice and the persecution of other groups in society today, especially if they are part of, or connected to, such a group. It is important to validate the empathy students have for marginalised and discriminated people today.

However, the unique nature of the Holocaust in comparison to other tragedies or injustices should be made clear to students. Discussing the definition of what is genocide, and how the term came to be legally defined as a result of the Holocaust, is a useful way to clarify students’ thinking.

Baronita Adam

Baronita Adam is a member of the Roma community. Through a project with the Roma Support Group, she has spoken about the prejudice she has faced in her lifetime, and shared her mother’s memories of being targeted by the Nazis and imprisoned in a concentration camp.



‘My mother’s parents and her sister died in the concentration camp. Some were shot, tortured. She was lucky to escape when the war finished.’

Baronita was born on 7 February 1959. She lived with her mother Crucita (pronounced Kruchitza), father Iosif (pronounced ‘Yosiph), and siblings in Cetatea Veche, a small village in Romania.

Roma people were historically known as ‘Gypsies’ and faced discrimination because of their different way of life. Years before Baronita was born, her mother Crucita was persecuted by the Nazis because she was Roma. When Baronita was old enough, her mother told her about these experiences, stories which she has now shared as part of the Roma Support Group Oral History Project.

Crucita’s experience of Nazi persecution

Before World War Two, anti-Roma discrimination was widespread in Romania. In 1941, Romania supported Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union and joined The Axis Alliance, supporting Nazi Germany. Within days, violent attacks broke out and thousands of Roma people were murdered, alongside many Jews. Following the invasion of the Soviet Union, Romania regained land that had been seized from them and acquired new territories. Romanian authorities set up a military administration in a new region, Transnistria, and with German support they established ghettos and concentration camps. Many Roma and Jewish people were sent there.

Crucita told Baronita that at this time, her community was attacked by Romanian troops. Along with her family, she was lined up to be taken as a prisoner. Seeing that, further up the line, the soldiers were harassing young women and dragging some of them into the forest, Crucita and her sister attempted to escape and hide. They slipped out of the line and ran, finding a large pipe nearby. Several people hid in the pipe but Crucita said she was afraid, and hesitated. The pipe began to roll but her toes were trapped underneath, and three of them were cut off. As she was bleeding badly and unable to run, the soldiers caught them, and they were taken away to a camp. Baronita does not know for certain which concentration camp her mother was taken to, but it is likely to be one in Transnistria.



My mother saw with her own eyes, she saw people dying in front of her, dying from thirst, hunger and they were making them slaves.

Crucita told Baronita that in the camp, people were subjected to hard labour, and tortured and shot by the guards. Crucita’s parents and sister were murdered there, and she remained in the camp until it was liberated.

We have many life stories and resources on the victims of Nazi Persecution and the genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur on our website, along with **our blogs** about the situation faced by groups such as the Rohingya in Myanmar and Uyghurs in China. IHRA also has a useful resource page on teaching the Holocaust and genocide in a comparative way **here**. This kind of teaching must avoid implying a hierarchy of suffering. Students should be guided to understand that feeling empathy for the victims of one genocide, does not preclude feeling the same degree of empathy for Jews who were persecuted in the Holocaust, or for those groups who are persecuted today.

In this case, it may be appropriate to encourage students, once they have learned about the Holocaust and genocide, to do something to tackle contemporary identity based hostility nationally, or in their local community – if this is something students are interested in, our **Take Action - an activity for HMD** resource, for example, may be useful.

‘Jews have done bad things to other people.’

If your students struggle to recognise Jewish people as victims, it is worth exploring why this is. Students may have encountered antisemitic stereotypes, or conspiracy theories around Jewish people which need to be deconstructed. Our **lesson plan on discrimination**, produced with Stand Up! Education Against Discrimination, and the information and resources provided by **IHRA**, the **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**, and Yad Vashem **here** and **here**, on the history of antisemitism and antisemitic tropes, are a good starting point.

If students raise points about the current conflict between Israel and Palestine, we recommend you move away from the topic. It is so complicated it is possible it will derail your activity, and is a separate issue to teaching about the Holocaust and genocide. If your students are interested and you would like to deliver a session on this conflict, there are many organisations and charities that can help, such as **Solutions Not Sides**, the **Council for Christians and Jews**, and the **Quakers in Britain**.

‘But I read/saw that what you just said isn’t true/has been exaggerated.’

Explore with students where they encountered these views, and discuss the difference between reliable and unreliable sources. Many students will have some consciousness of ‘fake news’, and it may be useful to examine how misinformation and untruths are spread, and the damage they can do. Students may feel unsure of how to find information they trust, particularly online. You may wish to discuss ways to identify and verify reliable sources of information; and give students examples to look at from HMDT, Yad Vashem, the USHMM.

DISCRIMINATION - YESTERDAY AND TODAY

In partnership with Stand Up! Education Against Discrimination

THE POWER OF WORDS HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL DAY 2018

HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL DAY TRUST

This resource is designed for use with secondary school aged students or young people. It is also suitable for adult learning groups.

Please note there are some upsetting examples of online antisemitism on slide 23.

YOU WILL NEED:

- Associated PowerPoint presentation: *Discrimination – yesterday and today*
- Life story of Jo Ingabire. Two versions (easy to read and full formats) are included at the end of this lesson plan for you to choose from, according to the level of your learners and the time you have available
- Three differentiated Nazi propaganda worksheets. You will need one per person or small group

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE:

This resource has been created to explore issues around discrimination. It is differentiated throughout for different abilities.

You can use this lesson plan as notes or a basic script as you go through each PowerPoint slide.

Your students will learn the history of how discrimination and hateful uses of language were used by perpetrators during the Holocaust, Nazi Persecution and the Genocide in Rwanda.

You will also discuss antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred in British society today, and what to do if you are the victim or a witness to a hate crime.

This flexible resource includes suggested activities as outlined below. You can choose some or do them all – in one session or over several. The optional extension activities that you will find throughout are not included in the timings.

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Next steps

You can find free, downloadable resources for marking HMD in your school, such as lesson plans, life stories, creative activities and more, on our website here: hmd.org.uk/resources.

Thank you for taking the time to think about your approach before marking HMD with your students. If you have any further questions or would like to discuss your plans, please contact the Education Officer on education@hmd.org.uk.

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Suggested resources

Here are some more resources you may find helpful:

- IHRA's [website](#), [working definitions](#), [articles](#), [research](#), and [teaching and learning guidelines](#)
- Hope not Hate's book: *Rewriting History: Lying, Denying & Revising the Holocaust*, available [here](#) and [here](#)
- The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe's guide for teachers on [Addressing Holocaust Denial, Distortion and Trivialisation](#) including suggested approaches to specific scenarios
- The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum resources on [antisemitism](#), [Holocaust denial](#), and [a timeline of the history of Holocaust denial](#)
- Yad Vashem's [video explanation](#) of Holocaust denial and distortion

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Let us know about your activity by adding it to our activity map:

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Learning from genocide - for a better future