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Combatting Bigotry through Canon and Curriculum – Teaching the Holocaust in Denmark's Upper Secondary Sector**

INTRODUCTION

During an autumn 2024 study trip visit to the Holocaust Memorial Center in Budapest (HDKE), one of my upper secondary students (Student S1) turned to me with a shocked impression on their face and asked: "This actually happened?" In most cases and devoid of the proper context, such a question would make alarm bells ring in the head of any History teacher; however, Student S1 did not say that in an attempt to deny the Holocaust, but because they were almost in a state of disbelief that human beings were and are capable of committing such atrocities, leading me to ask myself why the student apparently had not properly obtained knowledge about the Holocaust before. As the years pass and fewer and fewer eyewitnesses are left to tell their stories of the Second World War and the horrors of the Holocaust, those events begin to feel quite remote to my students, who mostly are in their late teens. Forgetting is not an option, and the recent Danish inclusion of the Holocaust in historical canon is one attempt to avoid that.

This paper explores how and why the Holocaust became a canonical point in the Danish school system in 2022, and what introducing that canonical point has meant for my teaching. Regarding the Danish education system, the difference between the comprehensive primary school and the more selective upper secondary schools will be briefly laid out, followed by a presentation of some of the challenges of teaching the Holocaust, and the motivational benefits and potential dangers of an official canon. This paper is partially based on political statements and curricula, but I include as many classroom observations and student statements as possible in order to discern what seems to work in terms of teaching, and how desperately far we still have to go as educators. In spite of the historical name "Cathedral School" making it sound like a specifically Christian institution, my school is a non-religious one with a fairly diverse student body, mostly hailing from an upper working-class or (lower) middle-class background in a medium-sized provincial town. Furthermore, part of this paper is a depiction of and reflection on my own journey from someone who did not usually teach the Holocaust (or much of the Second World War, for that matter) to someone who quickly had to figure out how to teach it, and finding out that I probably should have done so much sooner.

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** I would like to dedicate this paper to the memory of Auschwitz survivor Arlette Andersen (1924–2022, née Lévy), who taught at the upper secondary school from which I graduated, Fredericia Gymnasium, from 1961 to 1994. After staying silent about Auschwitz for almost half a century, Arlette Andersen began tirelessly touring schools to give talks about her experiences during the Holocaust as a reaction to the rise in Holocaust trivialisation, distortion or outright denial during the 1980s. According to her own calculations, from 1990 until the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, she gave 426 talks. Hearing Arlette Andersen's stories always left the students stunned, and her loss has left the Danish education system missing what was probably its most tangible link to the Holocaust. May her memory be a blessing.

In terms of the binding of this case study,¹ it is crucial to emphasise that what is presented in this paper is not meant to be a pathway to deradicalize someone who adheres to one of the extremist ideologies found across the political spectrum; doing so is beyond the scope of a single theme in History spanning approximately ten 90-minute lessons. Exactly how much it may change the perceptions of students already leaning in an antisemitic direction due to their primary socialisation from a specific political or religious background is also highly debatable. Yet those groups are not the primary target audience here. The students, I believed that I had a realistic chance of reaching were the ones who, not unlike Student S1, had not previously gained an adequate level of knowledge, had never met a Holocaust survivor, and/or simply had trouble grasping the Holocaust and were in dire need of help to turn the incomprehensible into something tangible. Moving that middle group would hopefully make the biggest impact and help move the student discourse from one of incredulity to understanding. I hope that my findings may serve as inspiration for other educators in a situation not wholly dissimilar from mine and that the statements of my students may be a reminder that it is possible for teaching to make a difference.

For good measure, it should be stated that all translations from Danish into English are my own and have been phrased in ways that convey the tone and choice of words as accurately as possible with no censorship, apart from anonymisation.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical approach in this case study was deliberately chosen to balance as many different elements as possible. In 1990, a fellow Dane named Sten Larsen penned an article called “Why is History so boring?” in which he argued that for History as education to succeed, it must walk on two legs: The intellectual one and the emotional one.² This idea of a balanced approach is hardly a paradigm shift, but it is a useful reminder, especially for less experienced teachers, or even experienced ones who find themselves having to suddenly teach a new theme. It is vital that everything is rooted in solid facts but also retains an emotional appeal that affects the students and their experience. In spite of – or perhaps because of – the fact that the Holocaust became a canonical point through a government decree, I attempted to distance myself from what French historian Pierre Nora wrote was the purpose of the historian or history teacher in the 19th century: half soldier, half priest, and someone who instilled patriotic fervour in the people of a nation, especially students.³ The importance of this decision grew as it became more and more obvious that certain narratives about Denmark and the Holocaust needed to be challenged. Keeping with Nora, a crucial point became the question of how something is remembered and how a site of memory may be open to multiple interpretations. Furthermore, another Danish expert, Aase Ebbensgaard, advocates for limited use of “aesthetic learning”, which necessitates a shock or a jolt to shake the perceptions of the students, something that in turn creates a situation that makes them far more open to learning something new and to challenge their own worldviews,⁴ e.g., by confronting previously held beliefs, bringing students face to face with harsh reality, or introducing them to less than savoury parts of the past of which they were not aware. This does seem to yield results but should be used sparingly. However, as a shock introduction to a new theme or to shake things up when basic knowledge appears to be established, the motivational and learning potentials of aesthetic learning are undeniable.

Since this is a theme about genocide, theory about the development of a genocide should be included. At first, I applied the ten stages formulated by Gregory Stanton⁵ as the standard. However, based on an approach centred around how terminology should be used as a springboard to analysis or a means to an end, not a goal in itself, those ten stages did not always work as intended;

1 Baxter & Jack 2008: 546.

2 Larsen 1990: 278.

3 Nora 1996: 5.

4 Ebbensgaard 2008: 8.

5 <https://www.genocidewatch.com/tenstages> (last access: 5 August 2026).

too many students used them as a checklist, not as a springboard. As will be shown, the phases defined by HDKE⁶ worked better in terms of engaging the students and having them take deeper dives into the analytical material.

As for the case study itself, the goal has been to obtain multiple triangulations, especially in terms of data source triangulation (different moments in time, different spaces, a variety of persons), methodological triangulation, and data type triangulation.⁷ The in-depth interview with Student S2 (40 minutes) took place on 26 September 2025, almost a year after the Holocaust theme and their visit to HDKE to see whether it left a lasting impression. The one with S3 and S4 (slightly longer than an hour) is from 21 April 2026, and soon after they decided to visit Auschwitz during their spring break, which brought up memories about what they had learned. In both interviews, the students volunteering were high performers, resourceful, and needed little prompting, although I did ask them to react to specific information and examples of extremism, as will be demonstrated. To obtain different perspectives, an anonymous digital survey and immediate reactions from the classroom and at HDKE from a much broader range of students are also included. Classroom observations stem from four different classes from 2023 to 2025, with three of those visiting HDKE. Everything was and remains based on Action research, particularly the Plan-Act-Observe-Reflect wheel as it is presented by the University of Pittsburgh.⁸ Since I began my Holocaust teaching practically from square one, albeit founded on extensive teaching experience, I could continuously adapt to my observations, the students stated experiences, and their knowledge or lack thereof of the Holocaust. As will be shown shortly, the freedom provided to the individual teacher in the Danish system made the Action research approach highly applicable.

THE DANISH EDUCATION SYSTEM AT A GLANCE

From approximately the age of six to sixteen, practically all Danish children and young adults attend some version of compulsory and comprehensive school. In most subjects, the curriculum is somewhat set, and Danish and History, for instance, have long canonical lists of authors and historical events that must be covered.⁹ This is quite the contrast to the more selective two- or three-year programmes in the upper secondary school sector where I teach and that are – on paper, at least – for students interested in higher tertiary education in their future. In practice, the upper secondary sector or “gymnasium” is for the mainstream and must accommodate a socially and academically diverse group of students, even as exam requirements are very high. Teachers are mostly granted sumptuous freedom and leeway in their planning, and for oral exams individual teachers even decide their own exam material; an example of my own Holocaust exam material may be found later in this paper. This degree of freedom may perhaps best be demonstrated by there being no specific historical events that had to be covered in History according to the rules in place from 2017 to 2022. For instance, there was no requirement that the Second World War be included, just “The struggle of ideologies in the 20th century”.¹⁰ Fulfilling this is also possible via, say, a theme on the Cold War, China, the Spanish Civil War, or, as I often chose due to personal interest and expertise, the history of the Baltic region. In my case – and that of many other History teachers that I know of – excluding or only briefly including the Second World War and the Holocaust was not done to neglect those monumental events, but due to a – retrospectively misguided and naïve – impression that the students knew all about those subjects from primary school, and that our far too limited number of History lessons would be better spent teaching something else. However, in 2022, something far more specific was added to those fairly loose guidelines for every single educational branch teaching some variation of History at any level.

6 <https://hdke.hu/en/from-deprivation-of-rights-to-genocide/> (last access: 6 August 2026).

7 Mills et al. 2010: 749–750.

8 <https://www.provost.pitt.edu/student-success/action-research/what-action-research> (last access: 5 August 2026).

9 <https://emu.dk/grundskole/dansk/kanon> (last access: 29 April 2026) & <https://emu.dk/grundskole/historie/historiekanon/> (last access: 29 April 2026).

10 <https://uvm.dk/media/ypkk231w/historie-a-stx-august-2017.pdf> (last access: 29 April 2026): 2.

OFFICIAL MOTIVATION BEHIND INCLUDING THE HOLOCAUST AS A CANONICAL POINT IN HISTORY CURRICULA

In January 2022, the Social Democratic government of Denmark released its plan of action against antisemitism, a 28-page publication based on the works of a committee appointed in 2020, and which lists focused efforts in primarily education, prevention, and protection. The plan is highly transparent in its motivations and goals and in its use of the past as a role model for the present:

“Because we have a historical responsibility to take care of/watch over the Danish Jews, just like the Danes did during the Second World War. About 97% of the Danish Jews were saved. Many regular Danes helped, as did the [Lutheran] State Church and its priests. It is an important part of Danish self-understanding and history.”¹¹

The deliberate identification with the Danes of the past could hardly be more obvious. In terms of the language used, the definite plural of “the Danes” (meaning all Danes) is noteworthy, as is the praise for the church, hinting that that branch of Christianity is an essential and positive aspect of Danish identity. However, when it comes to the rescue of the Jews, something is not mentioned: on average, Danish fishermen who smuggled or ferried the Jews across to safety in Sweden charged the equivalent of two months’ pay for a regular worker per person to be transported, but in some desperate cases it could be fifty times that amount.¹² Half of the total cost was paid by the Jewish refugees themselves, the other half by non-Jewish Danish donors, often from some of the wealthiest families.¹³ In other words, the rescue was not solely made possible through the labours of non-Jewish Danes. Was it dangerous for the fishermen? That was absolutely the case, and some helped with no expectation of payment, but the discussion of whether rescuing the Jews was an altruistic or financially opportunistic enterprise has been going on for decades. The rescue is rather well-known internationally, e.g., historian Bo Lidegaard’s book *Countrymen* was even translated into English and is readily available.

To its credit and in spite of the just-mentioned elements that were silently left out, the plan of action does not only praise the nation; it also recognises antisemitism in Denmark historically, especially in the heyday of nationalism in the early 19th century, and terrorist attacks on the Great Synagogue in Copenhagen in 1985 and 2015 by extremist groups or individuals.¹⁴ As for everything in between, it becomes very vague, which this paper will elaborate on later.

Regarding education, the plan goes beyond ordinary knowledge of “what actually happened” and outlines how: *“Danish children and young adults are to be made able to reject antisemitism and other forms of intolerance.”¹⁵* Critical thinking, including propaganda and media literacy and the ability to spot and dismiss “fake news”¹⁶ is at the very centre of this approach.

Nevertheless, education, dialogue across religions, and various outreach and intelligence-based initiatives alone are not enough, and the plan of action also includes other direct measures such as detaching members of the military to support the police permanently guarding the Great Synagogue of Copenhagen at all hours.¹⁷ However, this paper was written by a teacher, not an expert on interfaith outreach or armed security initiatives, and will almost solely cover education, including its societal context.

¹¹ Regeringen 2022: 4.

¹² <https://folkedrab.dk/temaer/oktober-43-flugten-til-sverige/artikler-om-oktober-43/hjaelpen-til-danske-joeder-hvorfor-hjalp-saa-mange-hvad-var-risikoen> (last access: 29 April 2026).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Regeringen 2022: 8.

¹⁵ Ibid. 13.

¹⁶ Ibid. 13; the English term is actually the one used.

¹⁷ Ibid. 19.

COMPULSORY/PRIMARY SCHOOL AND THE POTENTIAL DANGERS OF A HISTORY CANON

For compulsory and comprehensive school, all of the Second World War and what happened around it were boiled down to three elements in 2022:

- The Holocaust,
- The so-called “August Rebellion 1943”; this may not be particularly well-known outside of Denmark, but it is the historical name of the time when the democratically elected Danish government ceased cooperating with Nazi Germany more than three years after the Third Reich’s occupation of Denmark, and resistance intensified,
- The Rescue of the Jews.¹⁸

Danish volunteers in the SS, including concentration camp guards, are not mentioned, nor is the Danish policy of cooperation. Nora’s words about the 19th century historian singing the glories of the nation are clearly not irrelevant.¹⁹ However, that is not the only challenge.

For decades, official reports have warned that the teaching of History is in dire straits in the primary school sector. Around the turn of the millennium, only one third of History lessons were taught by a trained and qualified History teacher. By 2015, that number had risen to 60%²⁰ and does not seem to have improved much since, which is a far cry from the government goal that 95% of all lessons should be taught by a fully trained and qualified teacher.²¹ This, in turn, leads to problems such as the teacher sticking closely to a textbook, repeating the type of History teaching they experienced themselves in primary school, and generally less engaging teaching.²²

Based on my surveys and interviews with my own students, quite a few of them simply appear to have been shown the controversial film *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2008) when they were 13-15 years old (some younger), and that was it – at least as my students recall. The problematic element of using this film in the classroom is well-attested in Holocaust literature²³ despite warnings against showing it uncritically,²⁴ meaning that Denmark is no outlier in this regard.

An anonymous digital survey conducted towards the end of the Holocaust theme in October 2025 yielded these replies from my students across several different classes:

AT THE END OF THE FILM, FOR WHOM DID YOU MOSTLY FEEL SORRY?	Bruno: 9	Shmuel: 7	Neither: 1	Both: 5
WHEN DID YOU WATCH THE FILM?	Grade 3-6: 3	Grade 7: 8	Grade 8: 9	Grade 9: 2 (second time)

Taxonomically, these first questions were very basic statement-orientated ones, with the following asking for more self-reflection. Although none were deliberately phrased in a way to extract a certain pattern, perceptive students may have had an inkling that asking them to look back and reflect implicitly nudged them towards a reassessment of the thoughts of their younger selves. A few of my students remarked that they had not watched *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, simply because their teacher openly refused to show it to them – not because of its historically and educationally dubious content, but because the teacher personally found it too heartbreaking. No

¹⁸ <https://emu.dk/grundskole/historie/historiekanon/historiekanon> (last access: 29 April 2026).

¹⁹ Nora 1996: 5.

²⁰ <https://www.folkeskolen.dk/naesten-40-procent-af-historietimerne-varetages-ikke-af-en-historielærer> (last access: 29 April 2026).

²¹ Kristensen & Skov 2019: 3.

²² <https://historielab.dk/historie-et-forsmaaet-skolefag> (last access: 29 April 2026).

²³ Stuart– Pettigrew et al. 2022: 97.

²⁴ International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance 2026: 51.

matter what, I have lost count of the number of times I have talked about the film with a student who unabashedly states that they mostly felt sorry for Bruno in the end because he was not supposed to walk into the gas chambers. Usually, I maintain eye contact for a few drawn-out seconds while I see the cogs whirring in the student's brain until I hear the student utter some iteration of: *"Hang on...Shmuel wasn't supposed to walk in there either. None of them were!"* Variations of this realisation may be found in my survey.

Respondent 10, who mostly felt sorry for *"That German boy"* (the student's own words), supported their choice with the words: *"Because he was innocent and not condemned to be in that situation, like the boy in the stripped [sic] pyjamas was."* The student's choice of the word "condemned" indicates an impression that the concentration camp prisoners had been tried before a judge. However, upon further reflection and a question on how the student felt about their interpretation now, the student added: *"I mean, that's a wrong way of interpreting it since it's really the boy in the stripped [sic] pyjamas we should feel sorry for."* In other words, with a bit of prompting through a single follow-up question, this student was able to reflect critically on their previous beliefs, and they were not alone.

The same seems to hold true for Respondent 24, who mostly felt sorry for the mother *"Because her reaction was so heart-rending"*. Once again, a little prodding led to far more nuance:

"I can easily understand that it must be horrible losing your son in that way. But if it wasn't for them and all the others who owned concentration camps, it would never have happened. So I clearly mostly feel sorry for the Jewish boy and all the others who were killed in the camp."

Questioning previously held beliefs is possible and a vital part of History education, and a discernible pattern appears when looking at these statements.

The thoughtful Student S2, who seemed to have a knack for putting what many students stated into words, said: *"I'm ashamed to say it, but it was Bruno. I could relate to Bruno's normal life, not the boy in the striped pyjamas."* In the middle of our conversation, they could not remember Shmuel's name. This is not meant to be a criticism of that student but an indictment of the idea that allowing *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* to serve as the primary teaching element about the Holocaust is a good idea in any way. Nevertheless, or maybe because an analytical angle was applied, talking about *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* in my classes eventually became a valuable learning experience in all cases, with my students eventually realising that the film is deeply problematic in hindsight. Of course, they would not have had to reflect on that had they not been shown that film in primary school in the first place. Student S3 demonstrated a particular level of critical thinking, recollecting that they watched *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* in the 8th grade, and that:

"The ending makes you feel so much for the German mother. Luckily, we watched it at an age where I was able to contextualise it a little, thinking: But what about all of the other mothers who lost their children or were sent to the gas chambers themselves? That wasn't something we discussed in class, but a thought I had to make on my own."

This is commendable on the student's behalf, but hardly something that can be expected of the average 13-year-old student. The teacher's lack of guidance or framing for the students borders on the irresponsible, and Student S3 was left to ponder exactly what their classmates learned in the end.

THE DANISH NARRATIVE AND WHAT IT DOES NOT SAY

Another problematic element is the simple fact that the canonical points mentioned above do not tell the entire story about Denmark and the Holocaust, sadly. As mentioned earlier, the Danish rescue of the Jews in 1943 was – first and foremost – laudable and daring, although not all Danes did it solely out of the kindness of their hearts. That nuance is easy to include and has been so for years, including in the mainstream film *Fuglene over Sundet/Across the Waters* from 2016. The director of that film, Nicolo Donato, is the grandson of one of the sailors bringing Jews to safety and recalls his grandfather's words that the sailors, fishermen, and other helpers should not see themselves as

heroes and that his grandson “must never forget that there’s something called Jewish money”.²⁵ In the words of Donato:

*“We pat ourselves on the back because of what we did during the war. Many Jews were rescued, but it was very few people who helped without wanting something in return. (...) I mean, the fishermen and the others did a damned good job. It’s just difficult to respect that when you do not tell the whole truth.”*²⁶

Once again, such a statement is not viewed as controversial, is fairly widespread knowledge, and may be taught by a reasonably well-informed teacher without any difficulty. What is not usually taught is the Danish approach to refugees during the 1930s, even if well-researched information about it is readily available on mainstream sites such as the one referred to below.

In 1935, social democratic politician K.K. Steincke, who is still often revered as the father of the highly touted Danish welfare state, was named Minister of Justice, and using the Great Depression as his reasoning, Steincke introduced a harsher refugee policy. From 1936, border guards were instructed to pay extra attention to anyone arriving at border checkpoints who carried large amounts of luggage, acted in a noteworthy way, or simply looked Jewish.²⁷

This political approach towards refugees received broad support across the political spectrum in Denmark, with the sole criticism coming from the Communist Party. From 1938, a full stop for refugees was enforced, with Steincke proclaiming that Denmark was “incapable of making any significant contribution to solve the so-called Jewish question, if it can be solved at all”²⁸ while trying to convince everybody that there was no need to worry about Denmark being flooded by Jewish refugees. Even before that, Denmark mostly accepted political refugees, not those persecuted because of their ethnicity or religion. In the end, Denmark took in a total of approximately 1500 Jewish refugees, including a number of scientists who found a temporary safe haven at the University of Copenhagen. However, those numbers pale in comparison to other smaller neighbours of Nazi Germany when between 10–12.000 Jews made their way to Switzerland and 25–30.000 sought refuge in the Netherlands during the same time period.²⁹

Even more troubling and overlooked is the reaction to the so-called Kristallnacht pogroms found in *Jyllands-Posten*, one of the leading Danish newspapers in 1938, and which still exists today: in the beginning, this editorial asks: “Is this law and order?”³⁰ At first glance, this title hints at an obviously well-deserved rebuke of the terror taking place in Nazi Germany, but when I first found and read this editorial as an adult, my jaw dropped as the article proclaims the following:

*“Many good and decent Jews exist, but there are also remarkably many Jews that have become highly visual in a less than savoury way in fraud cases and maybe also in the despicable pornography and foetus-killing cases that have occurred in recent years. Also, within the Danish world of business Jews appear whose methods are no credit to their kind.”*³¹

Following this, it proclaims: “It was not Russians, but Jews with Russian names, who drowned Russia in blood”,³² which is nothing short of unvarnished antisemitism. Finally, this widely read newspaper concludes: “One may concede to Germany that it is its right to get rid of its Jews. But in return one may demand that it happens in a decent manner.”³³ To a certain extent, this editorial suggests that the Jews brought this trouble upon themselves.

If students are not told or taught that this antisemitism was also an element in the history of Denmark and the Holocaust, do we run the risk of them remaining ignorant or developing the

25 <https://www.dfi.dk/nyheder/bagsiden-skall-ogsaa-frem> (last access: 29 April 2026).

26 Ibid.

27 https://danmarkshistorien.lex.dk/Den_danske_flygtningepolitik_1933-1939 (last access: 29 April 2026).

28 Steincke 1938.

29 https://danmarkshistorien.lex.dk/Den_danske_flygtningepolitik_1933-1939 (last access: 29 April 2026).

30 *Jyllands-Posten* 1938.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

belief that someone will always do the right thing automatically? When I show this editorial to my students, they universally react with shock and horror, immediately asking me how it was possible that they were not told of Danish antisemitism in primary school. These outbursts are often accompanied by an angry expletive or two from the students, who tend to feel almost deceived that this was not mentioned to them.

Luckily, at my level I have a chance to rectify the rose-coloured glasses of primary school; not just because the Holocaust and other genocides were added as “core elements” in upper secondary schools, no matter the focus of that specific education across the spectrum of general studies, business, and STEM-orientated school types, but also because I am allowed to design my own curriculum and choose my own teaching materials with no government interference. Exactly how much of a privilege this is I realised in 2023 when a Jewish-American exchange student from Texas confided in me how exciting it was for them to read an excerpt from *Maus* by Art Spiegelman in our class, since that book had just been removed from their high school library back home. Admittedly, that teacher privilege of having the freedom to plan and choose independently could potentially be a double-edged sword: what would happen if a class were subjected to a teacher who holds antisemitic views or decides to only teach Holocaust denial or distortion? It is a theoretical risk, but since the individual school administration has access to each teacher’s lesson plans and an external assessor monitors the exams and is obligated to review and comment on the teacher’s exam material, that risk appears to be miniscule. Hopefully, all extreme or misleading cases will be uncovered and reported, and – as far as I am aware – nothing of the sort has happened.

A more immediate challenge is that the canonical point of the Holocaust and other genocides added no additional resources or lessons, leaving individual educators scrambling to figure out the best way of teaching. No standard textbooks are mandated, which may even make it more difficult for inexperienced teachers to find out where to begin. Instead, History textbooks are usually written by experienced teachers for private, competing publishers. Those textbooks seem to rise to the current challenge, which may be demonstrated by two examples from different decades: The highly praised *The Third Reich – Community and Crime* was originally released in two editions in 1998 and 2002 and covers the background, rise, and fall of Nazi Germany. Although six pages out of 122 are dedicated to the persecution of the Jews 1933-1939, the Holocaust itself is only allocated approximately two pages of text, a map, and two gruesome photos of a mass grave in Bergen-Belsen and naked Jewish women about to be shot in Latvia in 1941.³⁴ This book also includes an impressive number of primary sources and eyewitness accounts, finishing with two examples of Neo-Nazi movements in Germany in 1978 and 1992. Inevitably, this book feels somewhat dated to students in 2026. Student S4 stated that a chronological approach that does not include recent events may leave students with an impression that it was “*Something horrible in the past, it can’t happen again, and it’s a good thing that it’s in the past.*” On the other hand, the very recent *On the Trail of/Tracing Nazism* begins in the present day with the question “*Why is history important?*”³⁵ and describes the international rise of far-right movements and violent extremism before delving into the past. Over the course of the book, it continuously points out potential parallels between the past and the present and asks the students how to remember the past and what to learn from it before it returns to the present. In addition, the book covers online radicalisation and introduces terms such as the Overton Window and red pilling³⁶ to help students navigate in their everyday experiences and what they encounter online. The change is remarkable and a sign of how urgent it is to do something about rising antisemitism, Holocaust distortion, and the risk posed by a growing admiration of authoritarianism.

34 Frederiksen 2002: 108, 111.

35 Jensen 2026: 10.

36 Ibid. 160–161.

THE HOLOCAUST AND EXAM MATERIAL

Educating the students about the past and opening their eyes is one thing, but it must of course eventually lead to an exam and, hopefully, decent results. History teachers at my level choose our own exam material, which must consist of material previously unknown to the student, include different types of sources, and usually have some element of use or misuse of the past. With only their notes to help them and 90 minutes to prepare, the individual student must formulate two or three problem statements and answer those with the exam material and their previous knowledge. This is challenging or even daunting for the average student, who must be prepared for everything, but it also means that everyone has to know how to analyse very diverse material quickly and think for themselves. As my Holocaust exam material, I chose the following sources:

1. SS soldiers shear the beard of a Jewish man in Warsaw, 1939.³⁷
2. The Wannsee Conference, January 20, 1942, Adolf Eichmann's Protocol.³⁸
3. Heinrich Himmler: The Posen/Poznan speech, 4 October 1943.³⁹
4. Cutting women's hair in Sobibor before the gas chambers, 1943/1970s.⁴⁰
5. Comment about the Waffen-SS became the final straw, 2024.⁴¹
6. Photo of a participant in the Storming of the Capitol in Washington, D.C., 6 January 2021.⁴²

My reasoning behind these choices was to provide the students with sources made during the Holocaust, a mix of statistics and images, and a few examples of different ways of remembering the Holocaust – both an extremist appearing to celebrate Nazi crimes (Source 6 and Source 5). In Source 5, Anders Vistisen, a Member of the European Parliament from the right-wing nationalist Danish People's Party, distances himself from his usual partners in Alternative für Deutschland as a result of, e.g., Maximilian Krah's statements trivialising the days of Nazi Germany. Sources 2 and 3 expect the students to assess the level of centralised planning of the Holocaust, with the latter also allowing the students to demonstrate traditional source criticism by explaining the value of it being the minutes of a secret meeting. Methodologically, Source 4 brings source criticism into play, too, since it is Toivi Blatt's memoirs, and alongside Source 1 it emphasises the "deprivation of dignity" aspect that students particularly respond to, as this paper will return to later.

Exam results so far have been remarkably positive, with students easily navigating the different types of sources, spotting patterns and dehumanising elements and comparing the memory of the Holocaust to something we studied in class. In a written message, Student M, who randomly received this material for their exam and passed with top marks, later recalled the material as being *"exciting and overwhelming"*, *"overwhelming because it almost feels unreal that such vicious hatred could take off (...) in a time that is actually far closer than you think"*. I do find it noteworthy how this student was rightfully shocked and appalled but nevertheless did not lose sight of the expected level of historical craftsmanship, created problem statements and took a professional and analytical approach to the material. However, my students do not only have comments about the exam but also about what being taught about the Holocaust meant for them.

37 Source: Anne Frank House (<https://www.annefrank.org/en/timeline/105/jews-are-humiliated-in-occupied-poland/>; last access: 5 August 2026).

38 Source: Yad Vashem (<https://www.yadvashem.org/docs/wannsee-conference-protocol.html>; last access: 5 August 2026).

39 Sources: 100 Dokumente (https://www.100dokumente.de/Dokumente/Rede_des_Reichsf%C3%BChrers_SS_bei_der_SS-Gruppenf%C3%BChrertagung_in_Posen [My translation]) and Yad Vashem (https://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%204029.pdf; last access: 5 August 2026).

40 Source: Rashke, Richard 1982: *Escape from Sobibor. The Heroic Story of the Jews Who Escaped from a Nazi Death Camp*. Boston, 122–123.

41 Source: Helms, Magnus (21 May 2024): Kommentar om Waffen-SS blev dråben: Anders Vistisen stiller ultimatum til tyske AfD. *Jyllands-Posten* (<https://jyllands-posten.dk/politik/ECE17122553/kommentar-om-waffenss-blev-draaben-anders-vistisen-stiller-ultimatum-til-tyske-afd/>; last access: 5 August 2026).

42 Source: Li, D. – Walters, S. (2021, 13 January): Man in "Camp Auschwitz" shirt, photographed at U.S. Capitol riot, arrested in Virginia. *CBS News*. (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/man-camp-auschwitz-shirt-photographed-u-s-capitol-riot-arrested-n1254070>; last access: 5 August 2026).

WHAT MY SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS SAY ABOUT STUDYING THE HOLOCAUST

During my observations, surveys, and interviews, there is a discernible pattern among students: the Holocaust seems like something very distant and is difficult to understand, as the following statements suggest:

Student S2: *"We are a generation who haven't experienced war until now. Denmark is a safe or protected society, isolated from cruelty."* Students S3 and S4 independently repeated the same idea, referring to the Denmark that they grew up in as a *"cosy little spot"* where it was practically impossible to imagine anything remotely as horrible happening.

A somewhat similar sentiment was made during a 2025 visit to HDKE, when Student R turned to me in the permanent exhibition and said: *"It's really difficult grasping this; it's so extreme. I understand the concept of rights being removed in Hungary today, but somehow it seems like something very far away."* Earlier that day, the class had visited the Embassy of Denmark and had been given a lecture on, among other elements, the risk of democratic rights being rolled back in modern Hungary. Almost all of the students listened with rapt attention and found it relatable, but the words of Student R clearly indicate that even that foundation of knowledge is insufficient for my average student to fully comprehend the Holocaust – if doing so is even possible.

Because the question is: how does a teacher make the Holocaust real and tangible to the students in an everyday classroom setting? Showing the clip of the US paratroopers of the 101st Airborne Division liberating one of the Kaufering subcamps in *Band of Brothers* always seems to make a lasting impression, even if that episode does not truly manage to capture the real horrors of concentration camps. Another surprisingly effective exercise has been to simply place the students in smaller groups, hand them a timeline of the Holocaust focused on Nazi Germany from 30 January 1933 to the beginning of the Nuremberg Trials in October 1945,⁴³ and ask them to identify three elements: the first time things take a serious turn for the worse, then when the point of no return is reached, and finally when it turns into genocide. Quickly, the students realise that agreeing on the point of no return is very difficult, that small changes snowball rapidly, and, as Student S2 said, suddenly they found themselves practically highlighting everything. It is vital, especially today, that students understand that it did not begin with gas chambers and that genocides tend to develop slowly until they suddenly go really fast.

An activity that may help students realise how quickly circumstances can change was something I stumbled upon during a road trip. I randomly spotted and stopped at the First World War German cemetery at Damvillers in France and noticed two headstones that stood out among the hundreds of black crosses: those were for Jewish-German soldiers. I took a picture of one of them, which marks the grave of 38-year-old Landsturmmann Sally Benjamin, who was killed in 1917.

Seeing this picture leads to a universal, surprised reaction from my students, who struggle to come to terms with the fact that Adolf Hitler could become Chancellor of Germany sixteen years (approximately the students' age) after Christian and Jewish Germans fought and died side by side. Reminding students that history is not a steady, progressive march towards an ever-increasing number of rights is an important aspect of the role of an educator, perhaps even helping students notice deteriorating conditions in their own societies.

Student S2 told me that one of their brothers is familiar with Jewish fellow students at university who have stopped wearing a Star of David necklace to avoid receiving unwanted attention. However, Student S2 is an exception to the norm, as most students seem to be either unaware of growing antisemitism or believe that it is mostly an issue in the United States of America or, at the time of writing in April 2026, what media report as *"a spate of (...) incidents"* in the UK.⁴⁴ Sadly, Denmark is no different.

43 <https://folkedrab.dk/eksempler-paa-folkedrab/holocaust/tidslinje-holocaust> (last access: 29 April 2026).

44 Grierson, Jamie 19 April 2026 (<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2026/apr/19/police-investigate-attempted-arson-attack-north-west-london-synagogue>; last access: 29 April 2026).

LONG WAYS TO GO YET – AND HOW RAPIDLY THINGS ARE MOVING OR DETERIORATING

In the current context and climate, antisemitism is exploding: at least 89% of Danes with a Jewish background have experienced or witnessed antisemitism online or in public over the last 12 months, according to a report from the Jewish Community in Denmark.⁴⁵ More incidents (309) occurred from 7 October 2023 to the end of 2024 than from 2014 to 6 October 2023 (286),⁴⁶ and it is estimated that relatively few incidents are reported.⁴⁷ The same conclusions were supported by a separate report from the Danish Institute for Human Rights published on 20 September 2025.⁴⁸ In the days before and after the publication of the latter, mainstream news media reported that a football match that included a team of 12-year-old boys from the Jewish club JIF Hakoah had been cancelled out of worries about the safety around the match.⁴⁹ When Student S3 saw those reports, they immediately reacted with an unfiltered: *“That’s fucking sick. That wasn’t my perception at all.”* Once again, this was not a student denying something happening, but trying to adapt to new and surprising information that nobody had made them aware of. Apparently, those reports and news articles simply disappeared in the overwhelming maelstrom of online content.

Bringing that knowledge to the students is vital, and the list of recent antisemitic incidents in Denmark just goes on and on. During the local elections campaign in November 2025, Social Democratic politician Lars Aslan Rasmussen shared pictures of his election posters being vandalised with the phrase *“Zionist swine”*,⁵⁰ arguably due to Rasmussen being a staunch and highly outspoken supporter of Israel.⁵¹ On 10 October 2024, the director of the Jewish Museum publicly revealed that his museum experienced rapidly dropping numbers of visitors, especially students and school classes. Earlier that same year on 23 May 2024, the museum was vandalised with graffiti depicting a swastika inside a Star of David.⁵²

Without a doubt, the government plan to combat antisemitism did not arrive a moment too soon, and pushing back is an uphill battle. To return to my students, History and its critical analytical methods also need to counter what the students meet on social media, as the Blue Square Alliance stated in their 2025 article *“Holocaust Denial Adapts for the Social Media Age,”* which debunks several myths and ends with the warning:

“As social media becomes a primary source of historical awareness for many, especially younger audiences, these narratives challenge the reliability of survivor accounts and the public’s understanding of documented events.”⁵³

This is a common topic among my students too, when they describe the uneasy feeling that they have when they cannot tell what is real and what is not since they see *“AI all over the place and deepfakes. The brain can’t fully register that something is real”* (Student S3). The importance of online and media literacy and transferable analytical skills was perhaps best summed up by Student S4: *“It’s possible for me to be really good in class, but then a TikTok pops up, and then I trust it at once. Everything I spent eight hours on [at school] just goes out the window.”* The student being aware of this and frustrated by it represents a clear demand for more training. Furthermore, Students S3 and S4 both agreed on the difference between *“book smart and street smart”* or *“clever in school, but not in life”* and the need to build even more of a bridge between school and the world outside of it.

45 AKVAH 2025: 8.

46 Ibid. 3.

47 Ibid. 8.

48 Lassen–Steffensen–Zuleta 2025: 130.

49 <https://nyheder.tv2.dk/samfund/2025-09-21-aflysning-af-boernefodboldkamp-vaekker-roere-joedisk-klub-kalder-det-skandaloest> (last access: 29 April 2026).

50 <https://www.facebook.com/LarsAslanRasmussen/photos/en-uges%C3%A5-gik-der-pr%C3%A6cis-%C3%A9n-uge-f%C3%B8r-mine-valgplakater-blev-overmalet-med-zionist-/1377028333781142> (last access: 29 April 2026).

51 <https://www.raeson.dk/2025/lars-aslan-rasmussen-om-iran-tak-israel-nogen-skulle-jo-goere-det-beskidte-arbejde> (last access: 29 April 2026).

52 https://www.linkedin.com/posts/janus-m%C3%B8ller-jensen-aa19a236_bes%C3%B8gstallet-rasler-ned-storkonflikt-sender-activity-7250153882008387584-aDfR (last access: 29 April 2026).

53 <https://www.bluesquarealliance.org/command-center-insights/holocaust-denial-memes-social-media> (last access: 29 April 2026).

I am sincerely grateful to one of my students who took the personal initiative to have a look around social media and sent me a handful of TikTok screenshots (see Appendix), after which they both laconically and with a *decidedly exasperated air* remarked, “And now my TikTok feed is just full of that” (Student B), proving the power of the algorithm: a handful of clicks or just a few lingering stares at certain posts will flood what the user sees, all too easily trapping them in a loop or an echo chamber. On the other hand, Student S4 could not recall encountering anything like that in their social media feeds but did see other accounts online reacting with what the students verbatim described as a “*What the fuck is going on?!*” level of outrage.

It is noteworthy that in the screenshots shared by Student B, references to Men at Work’s former hit “Down Under” and the popular game *Clash of Clans* are used to soften the impact of this serious and distorting topic. The posts found in the screenshots also bring up the utterly discredited claim that only 271.000 Jews died during the Holocaust, which the aforementioned article from the Blue Square Alliance covered, too, and that a basic knowledge of history would help students debunk. I have found some success by introducing the students to the concept of Schrödinger’s Joke as explained by Erin Stoner:

“(…) a purgatory between sincerity and jest.” (….) “In cases where alt-right ideology is scrutinised in the public eye as being offensive or damaging, responsibility is evaded if the content is claimed to be said in jest rather than sincerely.”⁵⁴

This deliberate strategy of hiding behind supposed humour and deciding whether a statement is meant to be taken seriously or not depends on the reaction of the audience seems highly relatable to my students and actually makes them reflect. Adjusting their previous statement, Student S4 was, after all, aware of this phenomenon and had seen certain outrageous statements handwaved with an “*Oh, that’s just dark humour*”. Student S2 reacted bluntly to an image of a protester in the United States wearing a “6MWE” T-shirt (short for “6 Million Weren’t Enough”) with “*Oh, that’s sick!*” Generally, after having been introduced to the concept of Schrödinger’s Joke and worked with extremist memes, posts, and other representations found online, I see more students contacting me to show me what they encountered by chance, often asking me if it should be taken seriously or if it is something that we could use in class. I find this encouraging in a situation that might seem like a losing battle.

The question of digital literacy is one where History as a subject and its methods may take the lead. Source criticism is mentioned as a central pillar by the Swedish Psychological Defence Agency, especially against “malign information influence”,⁵⁵ and the Norwegian TIDROS approach (Tendency, Interpretation, Duality, Relations, Omission, Self-assessment) is explicitly linked to the core historical methodology of Leopold von Ranke.⁵⁶ If students learn the basic historical craftsmanship of source criticism and are encouraged to apply it to what they face outside the classroom, a synergy effect is highly probable as the students become more proficient at historical analysis, take advantage of that in class, and develop the expertise that History teachers aim for, while still developing essential skills for handling the world and misinformation. As Oana Nestian-Sandu concluded at a 2023 workshop, what is needed is:

“finding ways to collaborate among different institutions, organisations, experts of Holocaust education, schools, etc. This is such a complex subject that it cannot be left to just a few entities to address it properly.”⁵⁷

I teach each of my history classes for either 90 minutes or three hours per week, depending on our timetable. On average and per their own estimate, my students spend four to six hours per

54 <https://gnet-research.org/2023/07/28/schrodingers-joke-the-weaponisation-of-irony-and-humour-in-the-alt-right> (last access: 29 April 2026). This approach has also been a valuable tool in discussions of online reception of other historical subjects such as the Crusades or Vikingism.

55 <https://mpf.se/psychological-defence-agency/knowledge-and-support/thematic-library/source-criticism> (last access: 6 August 2026).

56 <https://uni.oslomet.no/dscguide/what-is-digital-source-criticism> (last access: 6 August 2026).

57 <https://holocaustremembrance.com/news/policymakers-educators-holocaust-distortion> (last access: 29 April 2026).

day on various social media, and some of them far more. In terms of pure quantity, teaching cannot compete with this. Even as recently as early November 2025, one of my youngest students told me that they had seen so many convincing TikTok videos claiming that the death toll from the Holocaust had been exaggerated (especially the 271 number) that they, too, had started to believe it. While working with various other genocides, another student showed me a purported map of what was supposed to be “Greater Israel” and insisted that it must be true because it was from a Cornell University website. Thirty seconds of reading would have revealed that it is an excerpt from a 1985 version of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.⁵⁸ Even if the student had not seen that, the border of “Greater Israel” on this map is portrayed as a snake, and since we had already spent a considerable amount of time working with the way an enemy is dehumanised in propaganda across time and culture, that depiction should have made the student pause. However, those reactions are definitely in the minority, as most students demonstrate a growing awareness of the importance of critical thinking online, as evidenced by the many students showing me something they stumbled upon without specifically being asked to do so; but even more is needed.

Then, what can we do? Create academically sound emotional encounters with the past, which is something I have learnt from HDKE and the phases referred to earlier: marginalisation, deprivation of rights, deprivation of dignity, deprivation of life. “Deprivation of dignity” really makes a deep impression on my students as they identify examples of what is happening in various sources, as it appears to be their zone of approximate understanding. Depriving a group of their dignity is clearly worse than depriving them of their fundamental rights but it is not as far away from the students’ understanding as organised mass murder. This is an example of making the abstract tangible for the students, as I hoped to do. The effect of this approach may also be seen in a different classroom: a younger colleague, whom I mentor as part of their teacher qualification training, asked their class to use Stanton’s theory, resulting in the students trying to make their sources fit into the theory rather than applying the theory to help them open and understand the sources. When my colleague asked me for advice, I suggested that they focus on deprivation of dignity and have the students read and analyse a secret proposal from 5 June 1942 to SS-Obersturmbannführer Walther Rauff on ways to make the gas vans of the Chelmno extermination camp more “efficient.”⁵⁹ Focusing on deprivation of dignity helped the students read between the lines and understand the dehumanising elements of describing the prisoners as “load” or “packaging”. Once again, things began making sense for the students through a focused approach based on a specific example.

Yet, it is possible to bring the students several steps closer to understanding the Holocaust. Three times I have brought classes to HDKE, and I quickly found a standard approach to instructing my students: before we enter, I tell them to make their way through the permanent exhibition at their own pace and that I shall stay behind to bring up the rear, talk, and answer any questions they may have. A generic model to guide students through an analysis of the way a museum represents the past is also handed out, just like I do when visiting any other museum, but it rarely seems to be necessary. I have seen several students break down in tears without running away, and I distinctly remember one student audibly whispering “No, no, no!” as we moved from Deprivation of dignity to Deprivation of life while the student still paused to read every single story despite being dyslexic. The physical descent downwards in the architectural layout of the exhibition as rights were taken away, the growing darkness, and the discordant and eerie noises in the Deprivation of life section combined with the sound of a heart beating faster before suddenly stopping invariably leave a lasting impression. This feeling is further exacerbated when the students think that this is the last part but walk up the stairs to the room with the horrifying video of a camp liberation before finally feeling a sense of relief when they end in the beautiful architecture of the synagogue. It is an impressive and varied structure that affects multiple senses and makes the students react to different atmospheres. Numerous students tell me that they have spent more time at HDKE than at any other museum or memorial. Yes,

58 <https://digital.library.cornell.edu/catalog/ss:27009352> (last access: 29 April 2026).

59 Quoted from Lanzmann 1987: 119-121.

some rushed through it for various reasons when I do not force them to stay together, but I feel assured that the majority felt like Student S2:

"I remember that you warned us before we went in, and I was like 'yeah, yeah...' But then I had a really uncomfortable feeling in my stomach, I got really sad. (...) Most clearly, I remember the film playing on a loop at the end. People stood up and walked away when it became too much. [Afterwards] I talked a lot to [the student's best friend] about it. We almost hadn't written any notes. We were completely overwhelmed. This is the way it [The Holocaust] was."

A year and a half after visiting, I asked Students S3 and S4 what they remembered, with S3 promptly replying:

"It affected my senses that the rooms changed, the lights, the floor, and the sounds. Really hard, but I only broke down when we exited into the synagogue. I cried, and it was so beautiful. How unfair and random it was. They were seriously and honestly just people."

S4 immediately added:

"Museums can easily turn into plate-text-that's-it. Here, there was something to relate to. I cried in the synagogue, too. So dark and brutal, and then so beautiful in the silence of the synagogue. It was like I held my breath all the way through and finally could exhale."

In spite of everything and without neglecting the horrors, both students were left with a tiny ray of hope and a deep appreciation of the sanctity of life. I wish that I could bring all of my students to HDKE. It is possible that the primary school teachers tried to achieve Larsen's emotional-intellectual balance with *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* but only succeeded in an emotional response that was far too intellectually misguided. At HDKE, however, that balance works perfectly. Several students, particularly S3, kept returning to the way the permanent exhibition affected several senses in the spirit of aesthetic learning and how that made everything more *"credible"* in the students' words. Finally, a growing number of students voice their frustration at the overwhelming amount of information, including in AI-generated form, which they encounter around the clock, and they voice a desire to know what is real. It seems that the authority of scholars, teachers, and museums is desperately needed for this.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The introduction of the Holocaust as a canonical point became a push for me to change my teaching and was more needed than I realised in 2022, as the Action research wheel had me reassess my teaching practice multiple times as it dawned on me how much work there was and is needed. Doing so has led me to a somewhat critical approach to the Danish national narrative, but also to a deeper understanding of genocides and human dignity, which eventually has reached my students and changed the worldview of the vast majority of them. It is easy to despair right now, including in education, but like Students S3 and S4's experience of ascending the stairs from the permanent exhibition to the synagogue, at times I see glimmers of hope. As Student M said about their History exam: *"[Source 6, the last picture in the material] just confirms that the time that the genocide happened in really isn't as far removed from the reality that we live in as maybe we thought."* I have to believe that if we confront students with the realities of the Holocaust as well as the good and the bad in their history, reach their emotions without sacrificing intellectual integrity, and use that moment to help them develop the skill to ask exactly what is going on right now, it has to make a difference. Anything else is too devastating to fathom.

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APPENDIX: SCREENSHOTS FROM STUDENT B

