

Red Flag Terms

Teaching and learning typically depend on communicating with words and images. That dependence is unavoidably fraught with problems when educators encourage students to appreciate the scope and depth of the Holocaust's horrors. Western civilization's relationships to language and imagery came under assault during the Holocaust. By design, the Nazis manipulated and abused language and imagery to implement the destruction of a people. In that context, learning about the Holocaust demands sensitivity to the power of conventional tools of communication. The call for sensitivity is not a matter of monitoring word choices for mere political correctness. Rather, it is about developing a more precise lexicon that might permit us to comprehend, convey, and resist what the Nazis set out to accomplish in their assault on life and culture.

We highlight the following terms, not to say that they should be avoided in all lessons, but so that they may be used in their proper contexts.

Anne Frank

Anne is considered the most famous child of the 20th century. Approximately 1.5 million Jewish children were murdered in the Shoah, but most people have heard of only Anne by name. A mystique has come to surround this one child, and it has served to divert attention from the most disturbing crimes and stories about the Shoah. Many educators have made the mistake of assuming the diary on its own can provide students with knowledge of the Shoah. In truth, Anne knew little about the Shoah (and nothing about the camps, including the one she and her sister would die in) when she wrote her diary. Thus, its scope and details are insufficient for providing an understanding of the 6 million. As several scholars have written, the diary is worth reading because Anne was a talented writer with a specific story of having to hide in Amsterdam due to her Jewish identity. Finally, educators should be mindful that much of what the public thinks it knows about the diary is shaped not by what Anne wrote, but by what appears in the Broadway play or the 1959 film adaptation. It is well documented that those works took great liberties to universalize Anne's appeal and to make famous her one line about believing "that most people are basically good at heart." Educators should beware of teaching that the Shoah is simply a lesson in trusting in the goodness of people, which ignores that Anne and most of her family lost their lives. Cynthia Ozick and Alvin Rosenfeld have written extensively about these themes.

antisemitism

This term was coined in the 1870s to name a political movement in Germany. Wilhelm Marr, who invented the German term, was part of this movement, so obviously he was not naming it to condemn it. Educators should be aware that scholars strongly debate what the term means today. For example, Ruth Wisse defines the term narrowly, writing that antisemitism specifically refers to organized political movement against the Jews. According to her thinking, when the term is misused when it is anachronistically applied to earlier instances in Jewish history. As such, many scholars prefer to use the term, *anti-Judaism*, for prejudice and discrimination in earlier periods.

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Other scholars use the term, antisemitism, more broadly to refer to prejudice and social or economic discrimination against Jews. Others have focused on how antisemitism is the longest hatred in human history and insist that its metaphysical dimensions make it distinct from other prejudices. More recently has come a debate over whether a “New Antisemitism” exists. Robert Wistrich, Joel Carmichael, Joshua Trachtenberg, and David Patterson are also among the prolific authors on this subject. Educators should note that most scholars and even Wikipedia now spell the term as *antisemitism*, not *anti-Semitism*.

banality of evil

First expressed by Hannah Arendt in her analysis of the Eichmann trial, this term has been criticized as a denial of the extraordinary nature of the Shoah and Nazi evil. Some people, though, defend Arendt’s use of the description. Wherever they stand on the use of this particular term, educators should still take care to avoid normalizing extraordinarily evil actions of individual perpetrators of the Shoah.

camps

For many Americans, images of the camps are the first thing that comes to mind when the Shoah is mentioned. Although half of the 6 million victims never set foot in any of the camps, their significance to the Nazis’ Final Solution should not be underestimated. Historians have traditionally identified 6 killing centers (the term, *death camps*, has fallen out of favor for these sites), where Jews and others were sent to be murdered. However, prisoners were also murdered in forced labor (slave) camps, which numbered in the tens of thousands across a huge network across Europe. Large camps, most notably Auschwitz, consisted of multiple camps, including a killing center and forced labor camps. Moreover, even within the same camps, policies could vary from day to day. While it is true that the Nazis and their collaborators in the camps frequently gassed the young, elderly, and infirm immediately upon arrival at a killing center, there were times when entire transports were gassed, including those who were healthy enough to perform physical labor. Only a very small minority of Jewish camp inmates survived, and most of them had the experience of having been in hiding far away from the camps or having been sent to more than one camp. Educators should make a point of ridding students of the assumption that all camps looked alike and operated in the same manner or that all camp inmates shared the same experiences.

choice

By design, the camps typically robbed victims of any semblance of choice regarding their lives and deaths. Lawrence Langer coined the term, “choiceless choices,” to refer to the illusion of choice that the Nazis sometimes presented their victims in the form of psychological torture. One example would be a mother being forced to choose between which child to save; the mother unfairly carries guilt, as though she could have somehow saved the other child. Similarly, Elie Wiesel faced a choiceless choice when his dying father called to him in Auschwitz for help and

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the teenager was not free to give it. Wiesel's misplaced guilt for his father's death was a common result of choiceless choices.

closure

Educators should help students avoid applying popular psychology terms to the Shoah, for they seldom do justice to the subject's complexity. Surviving the Nazi assault against the body and soul should be approached on its own terms and not be framed to fit some comforting worldview. Survivors do not get over the Holocaust, and there can be no closure regarding the memory of human beings who were tortured and reduced to ash.

death

The Nazi killing centers were designed to murder in a manner that denied the victims' humanity, and death is a normal part of the human experience. The Nazis thus set out to destroy not just life, but also death. Victims were denied normal semblances of remembrance, including graves. As the Nobel-Prize-winning poet Nellie Sachs and others have written, the familiar world was turned upside-down when human ash took to the air, making the heavens a graveyard. It is no accident that Nazi sympathizers actively deny the Holocaust. By doing so, they support the Nazi goal of denying posterity a sense that the victims had a right to death and memory in any conventional sense. The Nazis did not refer to the victims as having "died," but as having been "processed."

extermination

This term is borrowed from the Nazi lexicon, which reflects the Nazi belief that victims were on the level of insects or vermin. Many scholars have thus come to prefer the term, *annihilation*.

factory of death

It has become almost commonplace to hear this as a term for Auschwitz. However, in terms of production, use of workers, and organization, Auschwitz bore little resemblance to a factory. The notion that Auschwitz was a factory is borrowed from Soviet propaganda, which falsely depicted the Holocaust as a story of capitalist persecution of the proletariat. Robert Jan Van Pelt speaks of this.

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fate

This term is tied to a classical model of looking at the world, wherein human beings in the natural order have no real ability to determine what happens. By presenting a worldview that historical events are inevitable, the concept of fate implies that perpetrators, upstanders, and bystanders did not make choices, or at least that they are not responsible for their choices. Educators should avoid any implication that the Holocaust was an inevitable event. It was the result of terrible choices on the part of individuals.

forgiveness

We would do well to be sensitive that most traditional (religious, secular) approaches to forgiveness are not consistent with how most individual survivors have felt. Students should be encouraged to respect that survivors, who in many cases were left with nothing, have a right to their anger. Very few survivors speak in terms of forgiveness, and the few who have, particularly Simon Wiesenthal and Eva Kor, have faced strong criticism. Above all, we should avoid falling for the tempting illusion that the rest of us have any right to judge survivors' anger or to imagine that we can step into their shoes. Furthermore, reducing the Shoah to the narrow scope of forgiveness is a futile attempt to place extraordinary evil into an ordinary worldview. That is, most of us struggle with issues of forgiveness throughout our daily lives, but the special nature of Nazi persecution means that it cannot easily be compared to everyday circumstances. Framing the Holocaust in terms of forgiveness effectively normalizes a historical experience that should never be described as normal.

genocide

This term typically tempts students only to look for commonalities between crimes, rather than to acknowledge important differences between them. Educators should avoid lessons that obscure the specific details and themes of each mass murder. It is comparatively easy to convey what genocides have in common, but many lessons involving higher thinking skills will focus on what makes each genocide distinct.

hell

In Western tradition, hell is perceived to be a part of God's plan. There is therefore justification when people are condemned to go there: they brought the situation on themselves by making sinful choices. By contrast, Auschwitz, where innocents were burned, was not hell. In fact, many survivors and scholars contend that Auschwitz has no model for comparison. Alvin Rosenfeld writes about this.

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heroism

The concentrationary universe on many levels sought to deny acts of heroism and any positive recognition of such acts. For one thing, heroism depends on choice, which was typically and intentionally forbidden to prisoners. For another, the SS saw to it that acts that would be considered generous and brave in the outside world would doom innocent inmates. The SS typically responded to prisoners' selfless acts of heroism by retaliating against other innocents.

Holocaust

Most scholars agree that this term is a misnomer. "Holocaust" is an ancient Greek word for a type of holy sacrifice to God at the ancient Jewish Temple in Jerusalem in which the animal would be completely consumed by flames. Because the Holocaust by the Nazis and their collaborators was not a biblically ordained practice for honoring God, many educators opt to use in its place the Hebrew "Shoah" [Show-Ah] or the Yiddish "Churbn" [Koor-bən].

human spirit

The Shoah is overwhelmingly comprised of accounts of hopelessness, including hopes for rescue going unfulfilled. Being told by authors and filmmakers that the Shoah celebrates the so-called triumph of the human spirit might make us feel better, but such a simplistic reading tells us little about what really occurred. This is not to say that such testimonies of hope and redemption in the Holocaust are invented, but rather that they are the rare exception. Exaggerating the role of the human spirit in readings of survivor accounts will offer students a false understanding of history.

Kristallnacht

This term for the November 9-10, 1938 attacks on Jews, synagogues, Jewish holy items, and Jewish-owned homes, businesses, and other personal properties across the Reich, has fallen out of favor among academics and survivors in recent years. Because it calls attention to shattered windows, and not to the loss of human life and other things more precious than glass, it is euphemistic, and using a label like "Night of Broken Glass" sounds inappropriately poetic rather than horrific. Many people prefer the terms, November pogrom of 1938 or Reichspogromnacht, which do a better job of avoiding such issues of trivializing Jewish suffering in the Holocaust.

liberation

Educators should beware of the common tendency to see liberation as a dramatic moment in which everything improves. Not just persecution, but even murders of Jews continued in places such as Kielce, Poland after the war ended. Moreover, many survivors died from the sudden shift to eating regular meals, and other survivors died of disease or even killed themselves. Imagining that liberation fixed everything is a way of shifting attention away from the crimes and victims and towards the stories' heroes (usually American troops, as portrayed by Hollywood).

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man's inhumanity to man

This sort of terminology blankets individual, horrific crimes with vagueness in a manner that shields the speaker and the listener from a confrontation with the past. It also removes events from their unique historical contexts. Educators should choose language that refers to historical events in a manner that respects their specificity.

martyrdom

One famous and influential model of martyrdom, as exemplified by Jesus and others throughout history, depends on the victim making a choice to suffer and die for a greater good. For the most part, the Shoah did not offer targeted victims the freedom to choose how they would die. Very few Jews could achieve martyrdom in this sense during the Shoah. (Examples might be Janusz Korczak, Hannah Senesh, and Mala Zimetbaum.) The Nazis defined Judaism by blood, not by beliefs. In other words, even “Jews” who considered themselves Christians or atheists were condemned to death, as long as Nazism defined them as Jews. The Nazis and their accomplices also murdered Jews who were too young to have any beliefs: the babies thrown into flames in Elie Wiesel’s *Night* are a noteworthy example. Calling them “martyrs” is a way for us to feel better about meaningless deaths by falsely assigning them a noble purpose. All the same, it has been argued that the victims of the Shoah achieve the status of Kiddush Hashem in accordance with Jewish tradition; that is, they are martyrs in that their undeserved deaths as Jews serve to sanctify God’s Name in the eyes of the world.

other victims

Since the 18th-Century Enlightenment, Western culture has tended to celebrate the universal rather than the particular. Educators should be mindful that most Americans are thus uncomfortable with singling out particular groups or their historical experiences as unique. While other groups were also persecuted and murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators, only the Jews were targeted for total annihilation. Acknowledging this fact is not the same as saying that murdered Jews suffered more than murdered Jehovah’s Witnesses or murdered homosexual men, or that Jewish lives and deaths somehow mattered more than non-Jewish ones. Large numbers of Poles and Roma were gassed, and their suffering was no less unjust than that of the Jewish victims. However, the Holocaust is a term that is meant to designate the treatment of the Jews. (For the treatment of the Roma, the term, *Porajmos*, has come into use since the 1990s.) Similarly, attempts to compare Jewish victimization in the Holocaust to mass murders under Stalin and Mao miss the point that the Shoah was more than an act of mass killing, but also a deliberate attempt to torture, humiliate, and erase from memory a specific population. Educators should be careful about making comparisons, which can tend to lose sight of the lesson that nobody deserved to be a victim. Acknowledging the Holocaust as a Jewish experience is not a denial of other atrocities and genocides in history, including those perpetrated by the Nazis and their accomplices.

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rescue

While there are documented instances of rescue by brave individuals, such examples are the rare exception. Most people during the Holocaust were not involved in rescue in any way. Educators should avoid the tendencies in American culture to deny the Shoah by making it a story of rescues and of American heroism. Individual soldiers and battalions played important roles in freeing camp inmates and sometimes giving them hope, but this is not why troops enlisted or were drafted. The United States did not fight WWII to save Europe's Jews. Moreover, students need to develop an understanding that rescue was not easy to accomplish. Hiding even one Jew carried logistical challenges and harsh penalties.

resistance

Despite the popular myth, Jews did not make a choice to go "like lambs to the slaughter." While it is true that acts of physical resistance by Jews were typically crushed by the superior forces of their oppressors, they did happen on a grand scale in a few of the camps, in the Warsaw Ghetto, and elsewhere. Moreover, we should bear in mind that as a group, Jews frequently offered stronger physical resistance than even Soviet POWs in the camps. Educators should stress the significance of extreme hunger and collective punishment by the Nazis as factors that hindered physical resistance. Additionally, acts of spiritual bravery, such as fighting to survive against overwhelming odds, lending support to fellow victims, and sharing testimonies in various forms, certainly count as resistance and are worthy of attention.

scar

A scar marks a wound that has healed, but survivors have typically emphasized the point that healing is impossible. Lawrence Langer writes of the need to be careful with this metaphor in the context of Holocaust survivors.

tragedy

The classical model presents tragedy as sad, but beautiful. The protagonist meets his end because of his own tragic flaw. In the context of the Shoah, educators should be aware that the very idea of tragedy would thus blame the victim for his own torture and murder and would depict those crimes as inevitable.

willpower

While survivors had to fight to live, few have held to any belief that surviving was simply a matter of adopting the right attitude. Most survivors have referred to their own survival as random and can point to specific instances when they barely survived murder due to a moment of apparent luck. Willpower was a factor in survival, but it was not enough to ensure survival.

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worse

Constructing a hierarchy of suffering between Holocaust victims or between the Holocaust and other genocides is counterproductive. Educators should let the facts speak for themselves and not let lessons descend into simplistic discussions of who in history had it worse than others.