



International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance

Working Paper drafted by the Committee on the Holocaust, Genocides and Crimes  
against Humanity

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## History Never Repeats Itself, but Sometimes it Rhymes Comparing the Holocaust to different Atrocities

### Part 1: Introduction

The goal of this working paper is to explore what we mean by “compare” when we relate the Holocaust to other genocides and crimes against humanity. It builds on IHRA’s Education Working Group (EWG) paper, “The Holocaust and other Genocides.”<sup>1</sup> This earlier paper introduced educators to the idea of relating the Holocaust to other atrocities, established a sound rationale for a comparative approach, identified pitfalls to avoid, explored the history and definitional debates of key terms, looked at current efforts to prevent and punish crimes against humanity and provided web links to resources for further study. This working paper can be regarded as an addendum to the earlier EWG paper.

The current paper will add to this discussion by focusing more narrowly on the meaning of comparison. We will look at what is involved in comparing the Holocaust to other genocides and consider how we might engage in comparative analyses between the Holocaust and other atrocities, such as crimes against humanity and war crimes, in a manner that can contribute to Holocaust education, commemoration and scholarship. It will also consider some specific practical outcomes that such comparison might illuminate or afford.

This working paper is written for practitioners within the IHRA network – Holocaust educators, museum professionals and those who work to commemorate the Holocaust. These people and their institutions are bridges between the scholarly study of the Holocaust and the general public.

By way of introduction, let us first clarify what comparison does NOT mean, in the context of Holocaust study, education, representation and commemoration.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/educate/holocaust-and-other-genocides>

- It does not mean that other atrocities are carbon copies of the Holocaust. Every event has its own regional and historical specifics, unique to itself. We must never lose sight of the particular economic, social, ideological and political contexts of the Holocaust, in addition to the special impacts the Holocaust has made.
- It does not mean understanding the Holocaust as an ahistorical cautionary tale or a set of universally applicable lessons about evil.
- It does not mean ignoring particular aspects of the Holocaust, for the sake of universal applicability (e.g. obscuring the role of antisemitism in the Holocaust).
- It does not mean asserting a moral equivalency between the Holocaust and other events.

Comparative approaches should be mindful of the good practices identified in the above-referenced EWG Working Paper, “The Holocaust and other Genocides.” To summarize that discussion: good practice includes careful attention to regional and historical contexts of both the Holocaust and other atrocities being compared, attending to differences as well as similarities between atrocities, and being wary of creating hierarchies of suffering or making strategic use of a comparison toward a contemporary political agenda (e.g. hiding culpable aspects of one’s own national history, such as collaboration with the Nazis; attempts to gain political advantages; or minimizing the Holocaust).

What, then, does comparison mean in relation to the Holocaust? The comparative approach is a means of investigation that identifies elements or underlying structures of the Holocaust, properly contextualized, which share some similarity with another historical or contemporary event in order to gain insight into both. Two potential avenues for comparison are outlined below.

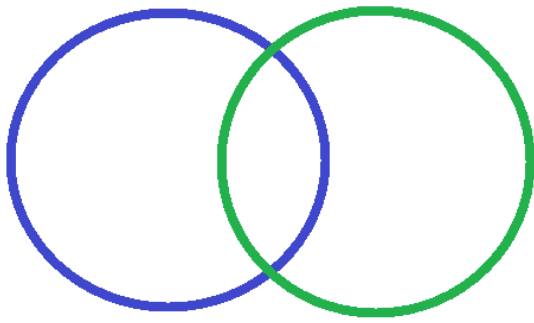
## **Part 2: Comparing the Holocaust to different Genocides**

When we compare the Holocaust, to what exactly are we comparing it? Many comparative attempts to bring the Holocaust into conversation with other atrocities adopt a “comparative genocide” approach. That is, they compare genocide to genocide, setting them side-by-side to identify commonalities and differences. Comparisons between the Holocaust and different genocides can be guided by schema established by thinkers such as Raphael Lemkin (intended group destruction, genocidal techniques of perpetration) or Gregory Stanton (stages of genocide).<sup>2</sup>

This type of comparison with the Holocaust – genocide to genocide – can be depicted visually as two overlapping circles. The goal is to set two instances of the same phenomena side by side, to identify similarities and differences. In doing so, insight can be gained into both events, and can help identify common elements between different genocides.

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.preventgenocide.org/lemkin/AxisRule1944-2.htm> and <http://www.genocidewatch.org/aboutgenocide/8stagesofgenocide.html>



To illustrate this strategy of comparison, consider the Rwandan genocide against the Tutsi. The United Nations' Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide provides one way to highlight the common ground.<sup>3</sup> This treaty protects four kinds of groups: national, ethnic, racial and religious. The Convention requires proof of genocidal *intent* to destroy the group, in whole or in part. Five categories of criminal activities are identified.<sup>4</sup>

- Killing members of the group
- Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group,
- Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part
- Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group
- Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

The genocidal activities identified in the convention can illuminate several similarities between the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide against the Tutsi. For example, in both cases State leadership was animated by a clear intent to destroy the group. The first four categories of criminal activity were carried out systematically by the State, with massive collaboration from civil society, against both Jews and Tutsis.<sup>5</sup>

Alongside these similarities, a contextualized analysis of both genocides can also make differences apparent. For instance, the build-up to both genocides took distinct paths. Unlike the Rwandan situation, Jews were not identified with a ruling ethnocratic colonial power, and the ideology of antisemitism, with its roots in medieval religious thought and its modern legitimization in nationalism and so-called "racial science," does not find an exact analog in the genocide against the Tutsi.

In sum, common elements can be drawn from a comparative analysis which can assist in understanding. Deeply contextualized knowledge of both elements being compared is essential

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<sup>3</sup> <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%2078/volume-78-I-1021-English.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Only one category of criminal activity needs to be identified in order to be accused or convicted of genocide, not all five.

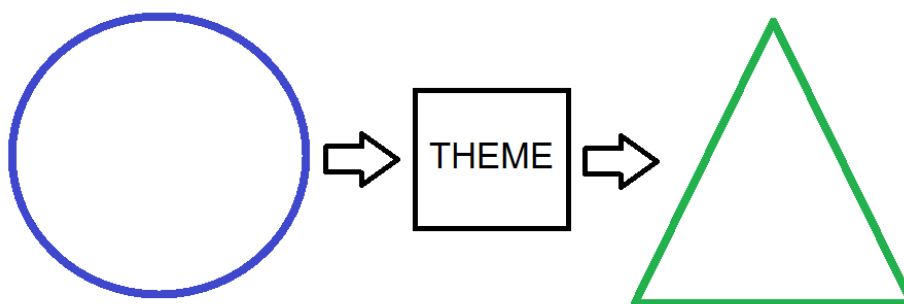
<sup>5</sup> In both cases, perpetrators targeted members of other groups concurrently with the genocides.

for effective genocide comparison.<sup>6</sup> This mode of comparison may also involve debates about whether a particular atrocity crime fits the definition of genocide.

### Part 3: Comparing the Holocaust to other Atrocities

Can we compare the Holocaust to other atrocities or gross human rights violations which are not widely regarded as genocides? If we seek a deeper understanding of the factors which enable people to perpetrate gross violations of human rights, the wealth of insight generated by Holocaust research has a great deal to offer. The definitional debates which accompany the concept of genocide are avoided in these types of comparisons. It is possible to draw out elements of the Holocaust to bring them into comparison with elements of other phenomena involving gross human rights violations, including crimes against humanity and war crimes. Contemporary concerns regarding mass violence, abuse of state power, persecution of minorities, destructive ideologies such as antisemitism, passive and active collaboration with oppressors, the psychology of rescuers, propaganda, the sometimes overlapping roles of perpetrator, victim and collaborator, and other pressing themes can be better understood by comparison to relevant and similar (though never identical) aspects of the Holocaust. There is a danger of minimizing the Holocaust or creating an inappropriate moral equivalency between the Holocaust and other events in comparisons of this type, and care should be taken to avoid such pitfalls by bearing in mind the particular circumstances and contexts of both the Holocaust and those violations to which it is being compared.

This type of comparison can be visually represented as follows. An exploration of a particular theme of general applicability is studied in its expression in the Holocaust. The insight gained into this theme is then extracted from the Holocaust and applied to another category of event which shares the theme. The theme acts as a bridge between the Holocaust and the other event, which may not be genocide but which shares a common thematic element with the Holocaust.



There are many examples of Holocaust-related themes which can be applied to a variety of different contexts. One example can be found in the way that crisis situations generate irrational fears that are rationally exploited by perpetrators of mass violence. For instance, the Reichstag fire of 1933, shortly after Hitler took power, provoked dramatic public insecurity in Germany. The insecurity was exploited by the Nazis as an excuse to suspend the Weimar Constitution and seize control of the political process in Germany. This manipulation of state power enabled an increasing cascade of attacks against Jews during the Holocaust. The insight gained by a careful

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<sup>6</sup> The EWG Working Paper, "Holocaust and other Genocides" provides more insight into the challenges and potentials of this mode of comparison.

and well-contextualized study of this episode and its consequences can shed light on the political manipulation of crisis situations in other contexts. For example, the beginning of the era of state terrorism in Argentina in the mid-1970s was preceded by a period of political instability. The theme also provides insight into the human rights risks of contemporary invocations of emergency powers by nation-states.

Another example of a thematic approach to comparison is the issue of refugees. What insight does the Holocaust offer contemporary refugee situations caused by mass atrocities? Many themes can be explored in the context of the Holocaust to inform our response to refugees today. They include, inter alia, the motivations of those who help or hinder refugees, the impact of forced displacement on economic life, the psychological effects of refugee experiences, the dynamics of diaspora communities, the vulnerabilities of refugees, understanding tensions between minority refugees and majority recipient populations and understanding the significance of statelessness.

The process by which Holocaust insight is applied to contemporary situations, few of which will be clearly identified as genocides as they emerge, will necessarily require a comparative approach along thematic lines. As Hannah Arendt wrote, the event illuminates the past – today’s challenges reveal the hidden insights embedded in our memory of the Holocaust.

#### **Part 4: Pragmatic Outcomes of Comparative Approaches**

Comparative approaches can yield concrete outcomes at a more pragmatic level. For instance, comparative approaches can encourage relationship building between different genocide- or atrocity-affected communities. Such measures can potentially contribute to or encourage joint memorial ceremonies that are meaningful to both groups at once.

Another important application of comparative approaches is to guide trans-national human rights interventions. The United Nations’ *Framework for Analysis of Atrocity Crimes* is a tool that uses a comparative approach to identify early warning signs for potential mass atrocities.<sup>7</sup> This analytic framework can inform policy and decision-making to protect civilians at grave risk of mass atrocity crimes. Such analysis can support initiatives under the R2P doctrine (Responsibility to Protect).<sup>8</sup> This doctrine holds that:

1. The State carries the primary responsibility for the protection of populations from genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing.
2. The international community has a responsibility to assist States in fulfilling this responsibility.
3. The international community should use appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian and other peaceful means to protect populations from these crimes. If a State fails to protect its populations or is in fact the perpetrator of crimes, the international community must be prepared to take stronger measures, including the collective use of force through the UN Security Council.

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<sup>7</sup>[http://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/adviser/pdf/framework%20of%20analysis%20for%20atrocity%20crimes\\_en.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/adviser/pdf/framework%20of%20analysis%20for%20atrocity%20crimes_en.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> United Nations, General Assembly, *Implementing the responsibility to protect: Report of the Secretary-General*, A/63/677 (12 January 2009), available from [undocs.org/A/63/677](http://undocs.org/A/63/677).

Deciding when and how to intervene is a very difficult choice, and the use of military force, which may be prompted by self-serving motivations beyond the protection of human rights, is not the only mode of intervention. The wealth of knowledge we have gained from the study of the Holocaust is entirely relevant to this task and can inform diplomatic and humanitarian interventions as well as harder measures. By illuminating common elements between the Holocaust and other gross human rights violations, a comparative approach can be used to identify at-risk situations in order to promote and inform a political will to effectively protect civilians from atrocity crimes.

### **Part 5: Summing Up**

The Holocaust is eminently relevant to the present day. Drawing comparisons with the Holocaust needs to be done carefully. There are pitfalls to avoid and good practice to follow. Comparative approaches can use the concept of genocide to identify shared elements between the Holocaust and other atrocities which have been identified as genocides. An alternative strategy is to engage in a thematic comparison, which explores a Holocaust-related theme and then applies the insights gained to understand other atrocities and gross violations of human rights, whether or not they are characterized as genocides. Careful Holocaust comparison through scholarship, education and commemoration can enhance learning and understanding our world, build bridges between communities, and guide political action today.