

January 2024

# IHRA Reflections on Terminology for Holocaust Comparison



INTERNATIONAL  
**HOLOCAUST  
REMEMBRANCE**  
ALLIANCE



Second edition published in 2024 by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA).

© 2024, IHRA

The views, opinions and positions expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the views of the IHRA's Member Countries.

All rights reserved. The contents of this publication may be freely used and copied for educational and other non-commercial purposes, provided that any such reproduction is accompanied by an acknowledgement of the IHRA as the source.



# About the IHRA

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance is the only intergovernmental organization exclusively focused on addressing issues related to the Holocaust and genocide of the Roma.

It unites governments and experts to strengthen, advance, and promote Holocaust education, remembrance, and research worldwide, and to uphold the commitments of the 2000 Stockholm Declaration and the 2020 Ministerial Declaration. Its network, made up of hundreds of delegates, works towards the IHRA's vision:

## **A world that remembers the Holocaust. A world without genocide.**

The IHRA's work strengthens the historical record and advances international policies and programs rooted in history that foster democratic and inclusive societies with greater resilience to prevent future atrocities. The IHRA empowers leaders to be ambassadors for change by building an international community, establishing and strengthening political commitment, and setting standards and developing tools.

One such tool follows. The IHRA Reflections on Terminology for Holocaust Comparison were drafted by the members of the IHRA's Committee on the Holocaust, Genocide, and Crimes Against Humanity during the Committee Chairpersonships of Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Australia, and Greece. The Committee is especially grateful to Clint Curle, Klaus Mueller, Olivia Marks-Woldman, Bruno Boyer, Donna-Lee Frieze, and Vassiliki Keramida.



# Table of Contents

	<b>Introduction</b>	5
<b>1</b>	<b>New practices in Holocaust comparison</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Holocaust comparison is a growing trend</li><li>• Encourage a cautious approach to comparison</li></ul>	6
<b>2</b>	<b>New popularization of terms</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Popularization of terms such as “Holocaust” and “genocide” have confused their meaning</li><li>• Reflect on the use of popularized terms</li><li>• Key terms</li></ul>	8
<b>3</b>	<b>New audiences</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Communicate the relevance of the Holocaust to younger and more global audiences</li><li>• Choose words responsibly related to your audiences</li></ul>	11
	<b>Conclusion</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reflecting on our choice of terminology can encourage fruitful comparisons</li></ul>	12
	<b>Resources and references</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Relevant IHRA resources</li><li>• Definitions of genocide</li><li>• Definitions of the Holocaust</li><li>• Selected additional references</li></ul>	13

# Introduction

## Words matter.

When we seek to compare the Holocaust with other events in which mass atrocity crimes (genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes) were committed, we engage with comparative approaches. When we strive to shed light on aspects that intersect or parallel one another, our choice of terms can communicate respect and bring clarity, or they can offend and distort. In comparative approaches, we strive neither to obscure the distinct features of the Holocaust nor different mass atrocity crimes. We can demonstrate contrasts between events.

The questions for reflection that follow can help policymakers, educators, museums, memorial organizations, and journalists within IHRA Member Countries and beyond adopt good practice and make responsible choices in terminology related to comparisons between the Holocaust and other mass atrocities.<sup>1</sup>

This resource neither encourages nor discourages comparative approaches. The Holocaust can be taught without using comparisons; many in the field do so successfully. Rather, this resource offers a guiding framework for those who use or respond to comparative approaches.

The questions are organized into three categories: new practices in Holocaust comparison, new popularization of terms, and new audiences.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This resource is part of a body of other IHRA documents on Holocaust comparison that are listed at the end of the document. Guidance related to key terms and other important issues beyond the scope of this working paper can be found in these IHRA documents.

<sup>2</sup> These Reflections were originally written in English; when choosing words in other languages to compare the Holocaust with different mass atrocity crimes, other specific issues of terminology may need to be addressed.



# New practices in Holocaust comparison

## Holocaust comparison is a growing trend

Many Holocaust museums and memorial centers are now engaging in educational activities about different mass atrocity crime events alongside the Holocaust, often in a comparative fashion.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, many academic courses and programs globally are teaching the Holocaust not only comparatively to other events in which genocide and crimes against humanity were committed, but also as a framework for understanding racism, xenophobia, and other current human rights issues.

To “compare” does not mean “to equalize,” but to carefully explore differences and commonalities. Careless comparisons distort understandings of both the Holocaust and other mass atrocity crime events. Taking a cautious approach to comparison helps to reflect upon what we mean when we compare multiple historical and contemporary events.

A reflective comparative approach can help:

- identify and understand the differences between events;
- carefully weigh similarities; and
- guide reflections and discussions.

<sup>3</sup>For an overview of programs in the fields of education, remembrance, and research using comparative approaches to the Holocaust, genocide, and crimes against humanity, see the IHRA resource, *A Matter of Comparison*, listed under “Resources and References.”

## Encourage a cautious approach to comparison

Given these new practices of Holocaust comparison, consider how answers to the following questions may guide your choice of terms:

**1** Does the choice of terms respect the historic particularity of each of the events that are being discussed?

**2** Does the choice of terms respect the historic particularity and unprecedented character of the Holocaust?

- 3** Does the word choice reflect the meaning that while there are common patterns between genocides, each case of genocide or mass atrocity crime differs from the Holocaust and from each other?
- 4** Could basket terms such as “other genocides” or “other victim groups” be interpreted as disrespectful regarding the specificity of a particular atrocity? Do these terms create a hierarchy of victim groups where some are named and others just subsumed into an abstract term?
- 5** Which terms would survivor communities prefer to use/would rather use?
- 6** When the term “compare” is used, can you specify your intention? For example, is your intention to find similarities and differences between the Holocaust and other events? Or do you aim to identify common patterns in order to combat genocide today? Or do you intend to compare certain topics or processes (such as the role of ideology, mass violence, war, or gender issues)? Or is there anything else that motivates your intention?
- 7** Does your choice of words unintentionally hide certain aspects of history and exploit the Holocaust or different mass atrocity crimes for contemporary political purposes, or trivialize them?

# New popularization of terms

## Popularization of terms such as “Holocaust” and “genocide” has confused their meaning

Increasing popular usage of the terms “Holocaust” and “genocide” have led to definitional confusion. The Holocaust was the systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million European Jews by Nazi Germany and those fascist and extreme nationalist partners and other collaborators who participated in those crimes.<sup>4</sup> However, sometimes the term “Holocaust” is extended to also include other targeted groups of the Nazi regime such as Roma and Sinti, communists, socialists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, homosexuals, persons with disabilities, Slavic peoples, and Soviet prisoners of war. Other times, the term is used as a universal symbol of suffering or simply to gather public attention to one’s cause, which confuses the meaning of this term and leads to distortion.

The term “genocide” can lead to similar confusion. There can be tensions between the legal meaning of the term as defined in the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, other scholarly definitions of genocide and the popular use of the term as a mourning metaphor to signify the most serious forms of harm inflicted upon a people by a perpetrator group.<sup>5</sup> Normative understandings of genocide tend to equate the term with mass murder alone, whereas the legal definition includes other constituent acts, so long as they are committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such. Some countries subscribe to specific understandings of key terms which are not shared by other countries. Translation of terms from one language to another may lead to unintentional distortions.

In some cases, terms that originated with the perpetrator have entered common usage; for example, the use of “extermination” for murdering, or “liquidating” or “cleansing” for forcible removal of a group of people from one place to another.

<sup>4</sup> The phrase “Nazi Germany and those fascist and extreme nationalist partners and other collaborators who participated in those crimes” may hereafter be shortened and referred to as “Nazis and their collaborators.”

<sup>5</sup> See the reflection point number eight below, the list of Key Terms in this section, and the “Resources and references” section at the end for more information on definitional issues related to genocide.





## Reflect on the use of popularized terms

- 1** Could some choice of terms be polarizing? Do some terms invite binary yes/no interpretations that obscure the nuances? Would different terms help to nurture critical thinking?
- 2** How do the legal definitions of terms such as “genocide” or “crime against humanity” correspond to your audience’s understanding? Does the audience understand the legal definitions of terms such as “genocide” or “crimes against humanity”?
- 3** Is your choice of terms related to your national and regional contexts? Are there specific national or regional histories that provide an additional layer of meaning to the terms?
- 4** Have terms related to past atrocities taken on a contemporary and/or politicized meanings?
- 5** Is the Holocaust or a mass atrocity crime described in a simplistic way, for instance, as a conflict or a civil war?
- 6** If you are translating terms into another language, are there any changes in meaning or tone? Should you consult with an expert in translation?
- 7** When we talk about victims of the Holocaust or different mass atrocity crimes, do we consider them as individual humans, as opposed to nameless victims (recalling perpetrator categorization)?
- 8** Have you considered the definitions of “Holocaust” and “genocide” as key terms?<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>See “Definitions of genocide” and “Definitions of the Holocaust” below. The word “holocaust” is a Greek word, found in texts from the 5th century BC, with the initial meanings of “wholly burnt/total burnt sacrifice.” Since then it is used in Greece to describe incidents of total destruction of small or large scale. The capitalized word “Holocaust” is used to refer to the attempted annihilation of the Jewish people by the Nazis and their collaborators before and during the Second World War.”

## Key terms

### Definitions of genocide

Consider the following definition when using “genocide” as a key term.



**The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the legal definition of genocide**

[Read the definition](#)



**An explanation of the legal definition of genocide**

[Learn more](#)

### Definitions of the Holocaust

Consider the following definitions when using “the Holocaust” as a key term.



**Imperial War Museum**

[Learn more](#)



**Yad Vashem**

[Learn more](#)



**US Holocaust Memorial Museum**

[Learn more](#)



# New audiences

## Communicate the relevance of the Holocaust to younger and more global audiences

Today, our organizations are facing new audiences with different levels of knowledge.

Young people might view the Holocaust as a distant event and they might know less than previous generations. But is the emotional connection weaker? The testimony of Holocaust survivors is a powerful way to connect youth to the Holocaust, but as years pass, fewer survivors are able to share their stories directly with students.

Your audiences may have little knowledge of European history. Some might have a closer connection to other mass atrocity crimes and in some cases have suffered or witnessed atrocities in their countries of origin. The relevance of the Holocaust may need to be explained.

Different communities around the globe continue to wrestle with the histories and legacies of mass atrocity crimes and/or are seeking new approaches to prevent atrocities from occurring. These global audiences are interested in how Holocaust education, commemoration, and research can inform their work. The starting point for these audiences is their own narrative of mass atrocity crimes.

### Choose words responsibly related to your audiences

Who are your specific audiences? You may have several at once. Think of each audience in particular, knowing their respective knowledge of the Holocaust or different mass atrocity crimes. Useful questions to address include:

- 1 Will different audiences understand a term in different ways?**
- 2 What background knowledge of the Holocaust, the Second World War, European history, or Jewish history is being assumed in your choice of terms?**
- 3 Does your audience have knowledge of the history of antisemitism? How has antisemitism been expressed in your region?**

- 4** To what extent does your choice of terms and categories reflect Western presuppositions?
- 5** What are your audiences' starting points as they relate to the Holocaust? For example, is the starting point how to combat antisemitism? Understanding the Second World War? The prevention of genocide today? What are the appropriate terms to reference these starting points?
- 6** What is known about mass atrocity crimes on the local level in your region? Are there any mass atrocity crimes that have a special relevance?

# Conclusion

## Reflecting on our choice of terminology can encourage fruitful comparisons

The global field of Holocaust and mass atrocity remembrance, research, and education is evolving, inviting new approaches to comparison between cases of genocide, new perspectives and questions, and new audiences. The use of inadequate terms may result in distorting both the Holocaust and the mass atrocity crime to which the Holocaust is being compared. Along with the Holocaust, each mass atrocity crime has particular features that deserve respect and understanding. Making reflective and respectful terminology choices fosters helpful public dialogue around the Holocaust and other mass atrocity crimes in our changing societies.



# Resources and references

## Relevant IHRA resources



### **The Holocaust and Other Genocides (2010)**

Introducing educators to the idea of relating the Holocaust to other atrocities, this resource establishes a sound rationale for a comparative approach, identifies pitfalls to avoid, explores key terms, looks at current efforts to prevent and punish crimes against humanity, and provides web links to resources for further study.

[Download PDF](#)



### **History Never Repeats, but Sometimes it Rhymes: Comparing the Holocaust to Different Atrocities (2016)**

Concisely explores 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.

[Download PDF](#)



### **A Matter of Comparison: The Holocaust, Genocides and Crimes Against Humanity; An Analysis and Overview of Comparative Literature and Programs (2021 ed.)**

A survey of programs on the Holocaust, genocide, and crimes against humanity in the fields of education, remembrance, and research. This overview includes universities and governmental and non-governmental institutions in both the IHRA and non-IHRA countries.

[Download PDF](#)



### **IHRA working definitions**

Important practical educational tools that help raise awareness of key issues related to the Holocaust and the genocide of Roma, such as Holocaust denial and distortion, antisemitism, and antigypsyism/anti-Roma discrimination. Working definitions help facilitate and guide work in the IHRA.

[Read the working definitions](#)



### **Recognizing and Countering Holocaust Distortion: Recommendations for Policy and Decision Makers (2021)**

The first comprehensive guide on combating Holocaust distortion, the Recommendations provide a clear action plan for policy and decision makers.

[Download PDF](#)



### **Understanding Holocaust Distortion: Contexts, Influences, and Examples (2021)**

This publication breaks down a complex topic to help you better identify incidents of distortion and denial.

[Download PDF](#)



### **Recommendations for Teaching and Learning about the Holocaust**

Crafted with fact-based and educationally sound techniques at its core, this resource helps curriculum developers and educators teach about the complex and nuanced history of the Holocaust.

[Download PDF](#)

## **Definitions of genocide**

Consider the following definition when using “genocide” as a key term.



### **The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the legal definition of genocide**

[Read the definition](#)



### **An explanation of the legal definition of genocide**

[Learn more](#)

## Definitions of the Holocaust

Consider the following definitions when using “the Holocaust” as a key term.



### Imperial War Museum

[Learn more](#)



### Yad Vashem

[Learn more](#)



### US Holocaust Memorial Museum

[Learn more](#)

## Selected additional references

Atkins, G. Pope. 2019. *Is the Holocaust Unique? Perspectives on Comparative Genocide*. 2nd ed. Routledge.

Bloxham, D. 2008. “Organized Mass Murder: Structure, Participation, and Motivation in Comparative Perspective.” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*. Vol. 22, no. 2. Fall: 203-245.

Lemkin, Raphael. 1946. “Genocide.” *American Scholar*. Vol. 15, no. 2: 227-230.  
<http://www.preventgenocide.org/lemkin/americanscholar1946.htm>

Masurovsky, M. 2020. “A Comparative Look at Nazi Plundered Art, Looted Antiquities, and Stolen Indigenous Objects.” *North Carolina Journal of International Law*. Vol. 45, no. 2. Spring: 497–526.

Millet, K. 2020. *The Victims of Slavery, Colonization and the Holocaust: A Comparative History of Persecution*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Salzburg Global Seminar. 2014. “Holocaust Education and Genocide Prevention: Sharing Experiences Across Borders.” Session Report 535. [https://www.salzburgglobal.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Documents/2010-2019/2014/535/SalzburgGlobal\\_Report\\_535\\_lo-res.pdf](https://www.salzburgglobal.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Documents/2010-2019/2014/535/SalzburgGlobal_Report_535_lo-res.pdf)

White, J. Newman, L. Melvin, G. Manderson, L. & Simpson, K. 2018. “Contextualizing Post-traumatic Stress Disorder Within Culturally Diverse Groups: Comparison of Holocaust Survivors and Sudanese Refugees.” *International Journal of Culture and Mental Health*. Vol. 11, no. 3: 321-331.