



# EDUCATING SECURITY SECTOR PROFESSIONALS TO PREVENT GENOCIDE

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As systematic and often state-sponsored violence, genocide is almost always committed with the active involvement or complicity of security sector institutions, such as the police and armed forces. In fact, genocide scholars have increasingly pointed to the importance of meso-level actors—especially local leaders and officials—in influencing when, how, and to what extent atrocities unfold. Effective genocide prevention must therefore include security sector professionals, who are responsible for protecting civilians in their communities.

Unfortunately, security sector training in the United States rarely covers the topic of genocide or its risk factors. Due to inadequate funds or tight training schedules, military and police trainees often miss opportunities to learn the lessons of history and reflect on their own responsibility to combat hate-based violence and extremism. Further, when educators fail to frame training in relevant and empowering ways, security sector professionals can react defensively or question the practical value of programming about genocide and human rights.

Recognizing the opportunity to meaningfully integrate genocide education into security sector training, numerous Holocaust museums and education centers nationwide have created programs to educate security sector professionals. Drawing upon Holocaust history to teach about the process of genocide, police and military professionals become better equipped to prevent atrocities—at the interpersonal and structural levels—and combat hatred in the world today.

## Security Sector Education at The HC

This brief reflects the work of The Zekelman Holocaust Center (The HC) in Farmington Hills, Michigan, which prioritizes engagement with security sector groups within its Adult Museum Education Program (AMEP). The HC's Security Sector Education (SSE) offerings include customized museum tours, workshops, and education programs. For police and law enforcement agencies, The HC offers a 3-hour state-registered professional development training. For military personnel, The HC provides private visits and virtual programs. The HC also leads specialized workshops for officers-in-training in college-based Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) programs. The HC provides educational opportunities to learn about the lessons of the Holocaust for any professionals whose mission is to protect and serve.

Holocaust education provides a unique opportunity for security sector professionals to explore themes including ethics, leadership, diversity, and responsibility, which can inform their approach to public service and give them ways to think about the challenges they encounter in their daily work. Through The HC's training programs, participants become equipped and inspired to act as courageous leaders, who can contribute to preventing genocide by combating hateful attitudes and behaviors.

# Teaching the Holocaust to Security Sector Professionals

An overview of specific security sector training topics are included below:

## Understanding Antisemitism and Hate:

Participants explore the long history of antisemitism, its centrality in mobilizing violence during the Holocaust, and the enduring effects of Holocaust denial on motivating hate crime and anti-Jewish bias in the world today. This prepares participants to act with cultural sensitivity when facing hate in their own communities.

## Radicalization of Security Sector Institutions:

Participants learn about ideological radicalization within German society, which normalized hatred and antisemitism. Specifically, participants examine the Nazification of police and military institutions through policies like the imposition of the Führer Oath, which re-shaped the relationship between the uniformed services and the state.

## Dynamics of Genocide Perpetration:

Participants study how low-ranking and ordinary people came to perpetrate violence during the Holocaust, especially by examining the influence of group conformity, brutalization, and desensitization on the commission of massacres by shooting in Eastern Europe during the "Holocaust by Bullets."

## The Power of Leadership:

Participants critically examine the toxic command climates created within Nazi security sector institutions, which enabled and encouraged individuals to commit mass killing. These are contrasted with positive examples—though rare—of leadership from uniformed professionals who encouraged resistance against the Nazi regime or facilitated the rescue of persecuted Jews. Participants are given the space to reflect on their own power to lead by example in their organizations.

## Choice and Ethical Decision-Making:

Participants review individual case studies focusing on the choices made by people in uniform to either commit or resist hate-based violence during the Holocaust. They examine the various personal, social, and situational factors that influenced how people made choices when faced with challenging ethical dilemmas. This inspires critical self-reflection about one's own moral standards and helps participants better prepare to make hard decisions in the field.

## Appreciation for Diversity:

Participants also learn about Jewish experiences in security sector institutions during World War II, like the Jewish service members in the US military. They are encouraged to reflect on the importance of diversity within security sector institutions and become equipped to challenge prejudice within their ranks.

## Justice for Mass Atrocities:

Participants examine how justice was pursued for the crimes of the Holocaust during the Nuremberg Trials and the standing precedent within international law that individuals must defy manifestly illegal orders, especially those that deny basic human dignity.

## Empathy-Building:

Through Holocaust Survivor stories and testimonies, participants are confronted with the extreme extent of human suffering that occurs during genocide. They come to understand how unchecked hatred ruins innocent civilians' lives and produces intergenerational trauma. This reinforces the necessity to act with compassion under all circumstances in their day-to-day responsibilities.

# Best Practices for Security Sector Education

Based on The HC's work with security sector professionals, the following recommendations can assist with program design and implementation:

## 1 Build Partnerships with Security Sector Institutions:

Consult with professionals from top-to-bottom of security sector institutions to learn about their needs and interests, so that programming can be tailored to their professional development objectives.

- This not only makes it easier for them to use staff time and resources to attend training sessions, but also ensures that the content is framed in a way that is engaging and relevant to their everyday jobs.
- Consider first hosting the leadership at different institutions for executive tours and planning meetings. Ask them how they think a partnership could be beneficial to the members of their organization and create a tailored program to fit their needs.

## 2 Focus on Local Community Connections:

Many security sector groups are interested in partnering with local Holocaust museums so that they can build stronger connections to the communities they serve. This helps them to act with increased sensitivity towards the individuals they encounter from diverse backgrounds while serving in uniform.

- For example, many security sector professionals seek a deeper understanding of the local Jewish community to raise their cultural awareness. By introducing security sector professionals to Next Generation Speakers (the children of Holocaust Survivors) who live in the local community, they gain a better perspective on the intergenerational impacts of the Holocaust and how Survivors and their descendants continue to be shaped by its legacies.

## 3 Empower Security Sector Professionals:

Avoid blaming security sector professionals today for the crimes of the past. Although it is essential to teach about how German military and police forces actively perpetrated the Holocaust, this should be taught in a way that encourages critical thinking and reflection on how the ethical and professional standards of security sector institutions today can and should be different.

- One effective method for teaching this difficult history is to provide examples of the few people in uniform who chose to resist antisemitism and unjust violence during the Holocaust. These counter-narratives show that obeying unjust orders was not the only option, and that individuals have a choice to perpetuate hate or prevent genocide. Security sector professionals should walk away feeling empowered to act as courageous leaders in the world today.

## About the Authors

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## Recommended Reading:

1. Browning, Christopher. *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. HarperPerennial, 1992.
2. Celermajer, Danielle, and Kiran Grewal. "Preventing Human Rights Violations 'From the Inside': Enhancing the Role of Human Rights Education in Security Sector Reform." *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 5, no. 2 (2013): 243-266.
3. Frey, David. "Educating the Military...and Others. Building the Basis for Effective Atrocity Prevention." In *Teaching about Genocide: Insights and Advice from Secondary Teachers and Professors, Volume 2*, edited by Samuel Totten, 159-168. Rowman & Littlefield, 2019.
4. Jacobs, Rachel, and Scott Straus. "Meso-Level Dynamics of Atrocities." In *The Oxford Handbook on Atrocity Crimes*, edited by Barbora Hola, Hollie Nyseth Nzititira, and Maartje Weerdesteijn, 235-254. Oxford University Press, 2022.