



Swastikas and Nazi Salutes: Addressing Holocaust Symbols in the Age of the Image

By Melissa Mott

In early 2019, Minnetonka High School outside of Minneapolis made national news after a photo surfaced showing two students performing Nazi salutes over a Hitler-themed invitation to a school dance. Only two months prior, a prom photo with a group of Wisconsin students giving a Nazi salute went viral. In March, Newport Beach, California students saluting a swastika made from red solo cups surfaced. This was followed by a second incident in Southern California, when a video emerged of Garden Grove high-school students giving a Nazi salute and singing a Nazi song during an awards ceremony last year.

Why have these images proliferated? How does all this affect those students who choose not to take part in the use of Nazi symbols but witness them being used by their peers? What, as educators, can we do to help students contextualize these signs and symbols within the arc of history, so that awareness of their power, their offensive nature and their potential harm will make students understand that they should not be used? Can Holocaust education strengthen and provide this connection to our humanity?



The Use of Symbols to Convey Ideas

From Aristotle and Plato to the Black Power movement, scholars have debated why – and how - symbols and images can convey ideas so powerfully. A ‘V’ for victory, a raised fist, a Confederate flag communicate emotions and ideas, and are lasting forces in our memory. The same power that pictures have to convey healthy, socially progressive ideals can be used to diminish the values of a society or spur them into question. Historically, we see symbols as rallying cries and clarion calls to unite around a single political idea or agenda. Whether wielding Nazi propaganda against Jewish citizens, or mobilizing the romanticism of American patriotism towards a common cause, images have the **ability to unify and divide.**



However, while images remain cornerstones of social and political change, they are also a form of social currency. Constantly bombarded on social media and on the internet, students live in the age of the image. In this new paradigm, we are not just consumers – we are now, through posting and sharing - producers. When these images become interactive vehicles for conversation on social media, the spread of hatred is not confined to a single incident. A Jewish graveyard is defaced by a swastika, and this suffering and anger is not restricted to those whose families are buried



there. It quickly becomes viral. Then, those who wish to cause harm, and to state “we don’t want you here” to an even broader audience, are granted a larger platform than ever before.

Similarly, the power to perpetuate harm takes place more and more on social media without an ideological motivation. In recent months, screen captures, and viral videos documenting incidents like in Minnesota, California, and around the U.S., have shown humanity at our worst. Many young people, in their zeal and desire for attention, have capitulated to peer pressure, boisterous, boundary-pushing displays of hatred, or even developmentally-appropriate, but ill-placed, rebelliousness.



What are we to make of these events, these decisions? Is it a dearth of empathy in an age of image saturation? Are students lacking knowledge in the continuity of their actions with a long, violent history? How can Holocaust education and the power of a single human story help build a lasting relationship with not only the history of the Holocaust and the meaning of these images from 1933 to 1945, but with their continued ability to harm?

What Do the Swastika and the Salute Represent?

The swastika has a long history. The most powerful and most recognizable symbol of the Nazi movement – the swastika was the visual expression of the Nazi party and it infiltrated German life. Because of its link to ancient Eurasian and Indian civilizations, the Nazis appropriated the swastika to connect themselves to the ancient Aryans, who they believed were a blond, blue-eyed race originating in India that had migrated to Europe by way of Asia. It was used on armbands and medallions, and by military and other organizations. It was not an innocent symbol, but a symbol of racism. As *Yad Vashem*, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center, writes on its website, the swastika “roused and galvanized the masses of Nazi followers, and terrified both the Nazis’ victims and the innocent bystanders of the world.”

Likewise, the Nazi salute was a symbol of public allegiance to Hitler, the leader of the Nazi party. Germans were generally expected to greet each other with the salute accompanied by “Heil Hitler”, or Hail Hitler. This happened tens of times each day – on the street, in school, in public places.

Because of their complete and total identification with the Nazis and hate speech, the new German government banned and outlawed these symbols at the end of the war. Violation of the law is subject to criminal proceedings. Here in the United State, however, where the First Amendment gives the right to freedom of speech, these images have not been banned.



“It’s a free country”, First Amendment Rights and Symbols

Uniting around a swastika, or a Hitler salute, isn’t harmful solely because of the events of the Holocaust. These historic events are the bedrock of the terror symbol and images evoked, but the lasting and persistent harm of these symbols and images has to do with their continued revival in connection with displays of violence, white supremacy, antisemitism, and racism. In a nation as pluralistic and multi-ethnic as the United States, for instance, a swastika or a Nazi salute do not only threaten Jewish students and community-members. The swastika is “the all-purpose hate symbol, the mother of all hate brands,” says Oren Segal, director of ADL’s Center on Extremism. Similarly, communities who have traditionally experienced privilege may be unaware of the impact these symbols and images have on the painful lived experiences of groups who have been discriminated against.



Symbols and images carry with them the associations of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust and they have also been given new life in an era of rising white nationalism, and divisive political rhetoric. Not long ago, the swastika appeared in Charlottesville, Virginia, alongside chants of “You will not replace us”. The incidents in Minnesota and California cannot be separated from the flagrant use of Nazi symbols and images by those actively intending harm. Students aren’t simply pushing boundaries: they are adding new meaning to these symbols by continuing their story, and thus, their harm. The only way to counter this is to help students connect with their own humanity by means of highlighting a single story, testimony, or experience during the Holocaust.

But what responsibility do schools, educators, and communities have in regulating or addressing students when use hate symbols? 1969 Iowa, a different kind of symbol was the subject of scrutiny when Mary Beth Tinker, a student in Des Moines, was punished for wearing a black armband as a silent protest against the Vietnam War. The school district claimed that it feared the protest would cause a disruption at school, but it could point to no concrete evidence that such a disruption



would occur or ever had occurred as a result of similar protests. The Supreme Court held: “It can hardly be argued that either students or teachers shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate.” Yes, free speech in schools remains a contested issue, with the implication that if speech is not hurting others, nor interfering with education, it is permissible.



Holocaust Education in the Age of the Image

At Echoes & Reflections, we seek to help teachers apply a number of pedagogical principles to help students ground their knowledge of the Holocaust in the human story of the individual. We do so in hopes that the lessons themselves can be lasting in the minds of young people. Our expectations of Holocaust education are high.

It is not enough to simply be students of the Holocaust, or of any mass atrocity – genocide, the Middle Passage and enslavement; not enough to know or memorize the events, dates, or statistics, or rattle off convenient cautions against oppression and dehumanization. In this era of historical distance, of image-saturation, of empathy overload, we must hone in on the power of a single human story to charge young people with the task of becoming ambassadors of these lessons and arbiters of Holocaust memory.

It's important to recognize that applying the learning from the Holocaust and genocide is not a finite experience, but a constant vigil. Responding to Nazi salutes and swastikas revived by young people and white Nationalist movements prove this. Their motivations may not be the same, yet the damage they cause to our social fabric is similar. It's almost more painful to see such images used when they are done frivolously and without concern about the import of the decision and the messages sent than when they are the intention of a malevolent group. The work of Holocaust education then, is the often thankless task of continuing to teach the harm wrought by unbridled hatred and violence, over and over again.

As is so often the case, we know that teachers are on the front lines to help address and make sense of these incidents and events. Thankfully, there are good resources out there to help in this regard. In addition to the programs and resources at Echoes & Reflections, our partner at ADL has a plethora of [Resources for Responding to Hate in the Community](#), that offers guidelines for discussing hate and violence with children, lesson plans on challenging bias and bullying, and how to recognize hate symbols. At [USC Shoah Foundation](#) teachers can find a range of digital, student-centered resources to explore the concept of 'othering', and action-oriented activities to help build community solidarity against hate.

On a more systemic level, there is a growing movement to use peaceful approaches to harm in a classroom and school in order to 'restore' justice to those harmed and peace in a community after incidents of hate and violence. These approaches engage those who are harmed, wrongdoers and their affected communities in search of solutions that promote repair, reconciliation and the rebuilding of relationships.

This process can be opened up to all who are interested or impacted in the issues, who can bring their context and knowledge and can help collectively envision needed changes in the school environment.

Restorative responses in schools have the potential to be very effective in changing behavior and improving campus climate. The entire school community can gain more understanding, empathy, and closure from discussions of how they engage with social media, and the impacts of their actions on others.

Schools and classrooms should always be, first and foremost, places of learning. The content of those lessons, and their delivery might change, but the moral imperative remains the same. Helping all students understand the consequences of



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their actions both inside the social media sphere, and in day-to-day-life, remains one of the foremost responsibilities not only of educators, but of all schools and communities.

To inspire classroom discussions on this topic, consider using the following guiding questions:

- What impact do hate symbols and images have on individuals harmed by them? What impact do they have on society at large?
- Why do students use harmful symbols and images frivolously and as vehicles for humor?
- How can schools and communities respond when an incident of hate occurs?