

# Teaching about Genocide in the South African Context

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## ABSTRACTS

On 27 April 1994, South Africa held its first democratic elections. The leader of the African National Congress (ANC), Nelson R. Mandela, was elected president. This democratic government, which was first of its kind for the country, had to introduce drastic changes in all spheres of governance. This political breakthrough affected every dimension and aspect of life. This meant that all fields that were influenced by apartheid, such as education, underwent critical changes to reflect the new democratic dispensation. This article explores how the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre (JHGC) teaches students and visitors about genocide in a South African context. It also looks at how understanding these histories of genocide assists students in exploring South Africa's own history and current forms of human rights abuses, including "othering".

Am 27. April 1994 fanden die ersten demokratischen Wahlen in Südafrika statt. Der Anführer des Afrikanischen Nationalkongresses (ANC), Nelson R. Mandela, wurde zum Präsidenten gewählt. Diese erste demokratische Regierung des Landes musste drastische Veränderungen in allen Bereichen der Staatsführung einführen. Dieser politische Durchbruch wirkte sich auf alle Dimensionen und Aspekte des Lebens aus: alle Bereiche, die von der Apartheid beeinflusst waren, wie z. B. das Bildungswesen, erfuhren entscheidende Veränderungen, um die neuen demokratischen Verhältnisse abzubilden. In diesem Artikel wird untersucht, wie das Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre (JHGC) Schüler:innen und Besucher:innen im südafrikanischen Kontext über Völkermord unterrichtet. Außerdem wird untersucht, wie das Verständnis der Geschichte des Völkermords den Schüler:innen hilft, die eigene Geschichte Südafrikas und aktuelle Formen von Menschenrechtsverletzungen, einschließlich des „Othering“, zu erforschen.

## 1. Introduction

South Africa's painful past of human rights abuses is always present in the classroom. "Race" was the fundamental ideology of apartheid. This system separated people into four main "race" groups, in order of hierarchy: "white", "Asian", "coloured", and "Black African". The 1950 Population Registration Act classified South Africans on the basis of their "race", and by 1966, 11 million people had been classified under this act.<sup>1</sup> In a post-apartheid South African society, one that is vastly different to the pre-1994 country, the legacy of apartheid is present for many.

Thirteen years after the 1994 transition to democracy, Holocaust history was included in 2007 into the grade 9 social sciences and the grade 11 history curricula. In this curricula, students learn about the Holocaust first before they study apartheid. One of the outcomes of this inclusion is that it provides students, as well as teachers, with knowledge to engage with concepts of "race" and racism, explore "othering",<sup>2</sup> and examine discrimination experienced by different groups while making connections to apartheid South Africa and themselves: "after all, the learners' parents and grandparents lived through apartheid, but they [the students] did not".<sup>3</sup> These connections assist students in acquiring a world view of the ideas and theories of "race", particularly those that were popularized in the twentieth century, as well as making a deep personal connection to their own multiple identities as socialized beings.

## 2. The Work of the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre

The JHGC features two main case studies of genocide as part of its permanent exhibition, namely the Holocaust and the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Both these historical events have particular linkages to South Africa. For example, apartheid, as a racial state, had some parallels to Nazi Germany in its laws. This is particularly discernible in the "Choices and Dilemmas" of the JHGC's permanent exhibition space, where students are made to reflect on the choices made by different actors during the Holocaust and reflect on their own dilemmas and the choices they make in their own lives. Teaching a history of genocide through the framework of choices often allows for deeper reflection and personal inquiry about why many ordinary people may choose to be bystanders, perpetrators, or upstanders in various events.

Through this framework and methodology of looking at the different choices, one can make connections to contemporary events and the choices made, without prejudgement. This improves the ability to exercise personal empathy as well as "historical empathy" in

1 Accessed at: <https://www.apartheidmuseum.org/exhibitions/race-classification>.

2 On the concept, see E. Said, *Orientalism*, London 1978.

3 R. Freedman, Teaching the Holocaust to nontraditional audiences: The South African experience, in: *Canadian Diversity* 7 (2009) 2, pp. 91–95, at 92, <https://acs-metropolis.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/canadiandiversity-vol7-no2-2009-n72j1.pdf#page=87>.

learning about traumatic histories and empowers students to engage in dialogue regarding actions and individuals' acts they may disagree with. These connections have significant impacts on those students and visitors who did not experience apartheid. It enables them to contextualize their own experiences with "race" and racism and to find a useful language and concepts that they can explore to talk about these issues.

### 2.1. The German Holocaust

Among other exhibitions, the JHGC's also includes a moving artistic installation of 600 identity photos of Jews from the town of Będzin, which allows the visitor to interact with the faces of Jewish victims of the Holocaust from this small Polish town. Here, the Nazi racial classification of Jews can be unpacked, with contrasts and parallels being made to racial classifications of "race" in apartheid South Africa. An education programme at the JHGC begins with an examination and self-understanding of what identity means to students as individuals and what it meant historically in events from the past, particularly making a connection to what identity meant in a racial state such as Nazi Germany. This can enable students to compare past situations to contemporary issues relating to "othering" in South Africa. At this time, terms such as "stereotypes", "prejudice", and "othering" are unpacked and explored.

Although the Nazi German racial state understood "race" differently than apartheid South Africa, racism and its effects have many similar aspects. While apartheid South Africa approached "race" through the prism of skin colour, Nazi Germany defined "race" through the prism of blood. Notably, Jews were regarded as a separate "race" by the Nazis because they believed they had a distinct "Jewish blood", which was different to the ideal Aryan or pure "Germanic blood". In apartheid South Africa, skin colour and straightness of hair determined who was considered white or "non-white". However, "othering" based on race and the creation and maintenance of these two examples of racial states bear many resemblances, thereby facilitating a dialogue about "race" in post-apartheid South Africa. This dialogue requires a safe approach in a safe space.

It is important to reiterate that making connections to pre- and post-apartheid South Africa, to Nazi Germany, or to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda is not meant as an exercise in comparison, neither in its inclusion in the national curriculum nor in the JHGC's education programmes and permanent exhibition. While there are some parallels, as Juliette Peires notes in her 2004 thesis,

the fundamental differences between the Holocaust and apartheid became most apparent in their terminal stages. Whereas Nazism led to genocide, the leitmotif of apartheid was cheap labour, not planned extermination. The Nazis created death camps and designed advanced technology especially for the purpose of speeding up mass murder and body disposal. Apartheid killings in South Africa were carried out by traditional means on an individual basis and not by large-scale extermination techniques. The killings in

South Africa were directed only at opponents of the regime and not for the purpose of exterminating a specific ethnic group.<sup>4</sup>

For many students that visit the JHGC and take part in its education programmes, it is the first time that they gain knowledge about Judaism or encounter Jewish history. The Jewish population in South Africa has always been small, as noted by JHGC founder and executive director Tali Nates:

*The majority of South African Jews are descendants of Jewish immigrants from Lithuania and Latvia, who came to South Africa before 1930 seeking refuge from poverty and discrimination. The 3,621 Jews that emigrated to South Africa between 1933 and 1936 were escaping Hitler's oppression.*<sup>5</sup>

Often, when engaging with many South African students about “race” as a social construct, many students remark that it is puzzling that while European Jews had the same “skin tone” as their Nazi perpetrators, they were not seen as “white” but discriminated against based on the idea of their “Jewish blood”. This exploration encourages dialogue about the devastating consequences of racial hatred.

## 2.2. The 1994 Genocide in Rwanda

Another history that the JHGC explores is the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, a deliberate, intentional, and systematic mass killing targeting the Tutsi population and perpetrated by Hutu extremists. In 100 days, between 7 April to 15 July, more than 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu were murdered. The relationship between the Hutu majority (85 per cent of the population) and their Tutsi minority neighbours (14 per cent) was complex. In the early part of the twentieth century, the Belgian colonial powers racialized the differences in a rigid and institutionalized way between the three groups of Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa. The study of the history of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda has not yet been made compulsory in South African schools, but it is available as an elective, and some schools choose to teach it. When students visit the JHGC, they also learn about the genocide in Rwanda and examine its complexities. In 2021, the publication *Portraits of Survival, Volume 2: The Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda* was published by the South African Holocaust & Genocide Foundation (SAHGF), the umbrella association of the Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Durban Holocaust & Genocide Centres in the country. This publication features stories about the lives of survivors of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. As part of his foreword, the executive director of Aegis Trust in Rwanda notes that

4 J. Peires, *The Holocaust and Apartheid: Similarities and Differences. A Comparative Study*, Master thesis in Jewish Studies, University of Cape Town, Faculty of Humanities, Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies, 2004, <http://hdl.handle.net/11427/6743>.

5 South African Jewish Board of Deputies 1937, p. 6, cited in T. Nates, *The presence of the past. Creating a new Holocaust and Genocide Centre of Education and Memory in post-Apartheid South Africa*, in: A. Pearce (ed.), *Remembering the Holocaust in Educational Settings*, London 2018, pp. 205–220, at p. 206.

*the stories of survival humanise the impact of genocide in a way that historical facts and statistics cannot achieve [...] testimony can help to develop empathy, critical thinking and even personal responsibility. Additionally, it can act as a catalyst to confront the prejudices within our own communities and even within ourselves.*<sup>6</sup>

### 2.3. Human Rights Violations in South Africa

As a post-colonial African country, South Africa also grapples with its own complexities regarding relations between different ethnic and racial groups. Some of these complexities have tended to spill over violently, especially in the case of the xenophobic violence the country has experienced since 2008. Often the term Afrophobia is used when discussing xenophobic violence in South Africa because the majority of the victims as well as the perpetrators have been “black African”. Many of the perpetrators exhibit a nationalistic attitude that ultimately leads to the “othering” of many foreign nationals in South Africa. As in the case of Rwanda, the colonial ties and remnants of the previous system need to be examined closely. Alon Skuy and James Oatway, two South African photojournalists, have documented since 2008 this xenophobic violence in South Africa. They have chosen eight images from their collection and created a small yet powerful exhibition, housed permanently at the JHGC and titled “Killing The Other”. This exhibition raises awareness of the dangers of discrimination, indifference, and nationalistic attitudes. Oatway and Skuy poignantly reiterate the words of Achille Mbembe: “No African is a foreigner in Africa. No foreigner is a migrant in Africa, Africa is where we all belong!”<sup>7</sup> These tragic events not only offer opportunities to learn from the past and apply those lessons for humanity to contemporary challenges as a young democracy, but also serve as a warning of what might happen if indifference and discrimination are left to thrive.

While post-apartheid South Africa has managed to make some strides since 1994, instilling and institutionalizing democracy through transitional and restorative justice practices, particularly through its Truth and Reconciliation Commission, instances of human rights abuses continue to occur. On 26 November 2022, the JHGC hosted a healing ceremony for the victims of the Life Esidimeni tragedy. This was organized by the Life Esidimeni family committee and the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (Sadag) and the civil society organization Section 27. With this partnership beginning in 2018, the choice of working with the JHGC to facilitate the families’ healing was not a coincidence.

6 K. Nates and T. Nates (eds.), *Portraits of Survival. Vol. 2: The Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda*, Johannesburg: South African Holocaust & Genocide Foundation, 2021, [www.holocaust.org.za](http://www.holocaust.org.za).

7 Cameroonian public intellectual Achille Mbembe, a research professor in history and politics at the Wits Institute for Social and Economy Research at the University of the Witwatersrand, quoted in: <https://www.brotherbook.co.za/>.

The Life Esidimeni tragedy describes the death of 144 people at psychiatric facilities in Gauteng, South Africa.<sup>8</sup> The reported causes included starvation and neglect. This was triggered when, as Brandon Ferlito and Amaboo Dahai note in their 2018 research,

*the Department of Health “precipitously” terminated its contract with Life Esidimeni, a facility that provided “highly-specialised chronic psychiatric care” to mentally ill patients. Over 2,000 mentally ill patients, some with comorbid conditions, were hurriedly moved to ill-equipped and unlicensed non-governmental organizations in an attempt to curb costs.*<sup>9</sup>

The JHGC was chosen as a space for memory, dialogue, and lessons from this tragedy as the families felt a strong connection to the centre’s teaching about the mass murder by the Nazis of the sick and the disabled, as well as the impaired. This makes it a fitting entry point to unpack instances of contemporary human rights abuses in South Africa, particularly in this case of deaths in great numbers and neglect of the mentally impaired. Such a connection also emphasizes the power and importance of the notion of empathy. As one of the most socially divided countries in the world, South Africa still has much work to do to overcome the racial past of apartheid and its remnants. Many choose the JHGC for human rights-themed temporary exhibitions, talks, conferences, and book launches. In July 2022, the JHGC hosted the launch of the book *Marikana*, by Alon Skuy. This book commemorated the tenth anniversary of the death of 34 miners, protesting over wages, shot dead by the South African Police Service (SAPS) on 16 August 2012 at Marikana, North West province. The SAPS also left 78 seriously injured. After this massacre, 250 of the miners were arrested, and none of the police officers or their superiors were prosecuted.<sup>10</sup>

This tragedy strongly connects to the memory of the Sharpeville massacre of 1960 and other instances of police brutality under apartheid. It also connects to themes at the JHGC’s permanent exhibition focusing on apartheid and contemporary human rights abuses in South Africa. This allows students and visitors to at least engage in a healing dialogue that connects the past to the present. This harkens to the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, chairperson of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission from 1996 to 2003 and known for his work as an anti-apartheid and human rights activist:

*We learn about the Holocaust so that we can become more human, more gentle, more caring, more compassionate, valuing every person as being of infinite worth, so precious*

8 G. Nicolson, Five years on, the pain of the Life Esidimeni continues, in: Daily Maverick [Johannesburg], 3 April 2021.

9 B. A. Ferlito and A. Dhai, The Life Esidimeni tragedy: Some ethical transgressions, in: South African Medical Journal 108 (2018) 3, p. 157.

10 South Africa History online, “Marikana Massacre”, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/marikana-massacre-16-august-2012#:~:text=On%2016%20August%202012%2C%20the,of%20the%20miners%20were%20arrested.>

*that we know such atrocities will never happen again and the world will be a more humane place.*<sup>11</sup>

Tutu notably spoke those words as the patron of the first Holocaust centre in South Africa, known since 2017 as the Cape Town Holocaust & Genocide Centre. Subsequently, these words have been included in the educator and learner workbooks for those engaging in the education workshops presented by the three centres of the SAHGF association.

### 3. Conclusion

The JHGC's education programmes, through the methods described above, share knowledge and insight with students and visitors and assist them in understanding that genocide as well as historical and contemporary human rights abuses, racism, and discrimination occur globally. The Holocaust and the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, with their own racial and complex underpinnings, continue to be an entry point for facilitating dialogue and connecting to South Africa's own painful histories as well as contemporary issues. At the end of an education session in 2022, Andile, a grade 9 student from Klip-town Secondary School in Soweto, Johannesburg, remarked:

*[This programme teaches us] not to only think about our struggles but also look beyond the closed doors. To consider someone else's feelings, whether they are blacks or whites or different religion. We are all human with feelings.*<sup>12</sup>

11 The Holocaust Lessons for Humanity, Educator's Resource Manual, Revised edition, Johannesburg, South African Holocaust & Genocide Foundation, 2013, p. 11.

12 Andile, grade 9 student from Kliptown Secondary School, Soweto, Johannesburg, South Africa. Comments after a school visit to the JHGC (2022).