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Opinion / Columnists

Allison Hanes: New toolkit designed to help Quebec teachers and students address genocide

The guide offers a comparative analysis of nine genocides of the 20th century and will help educators pass on the lessons of these atrocities to their students.

Allison Hanes · Montreal Gazette

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Heidi Berger started the Foundation for Genocide Education and urged the Quebec government to develop a guide for teachers to help them address the subject in classrooms. PHOTO BY FOUNDATION FOR GENOCIDE EDUCATION

Every year during [Genocide Remembrance, Condemnation and Prevention Month](#), we are urged never to forget the atrocities of the darkest chapters in history so that they will never be repeated.

Montreal's Armenian community recently gathered at Place du Canada to commemorate the 107th anniversary of the genocide against their people by the Ottoman Empire. Mayor Valérie Plante [attended a ceremony at the Montreal Holocaust Museum](#) and pledged \$1.5 million toward a new facility on St-Laurent Blvd.

But how can you remember something you are not aware of or have never learned about?

This is a question that has always troubled Heidi Berger, a Montreal filmmaker and daughter of a Holocaust survivor.

She made it her mission to continue her mother's work sharing her story of surviving the Nazis with young people after her mom died in 2006. But Berger realized after visiting schools and talking to students and teachers that although there

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Holocaust survivor Ann Kazimirski is seen with her daughter, Heidi Berger, in this undated picture that first ran in the Montreal Gazette in August 2006. PHOTO BY PHOTO COURTESY OF HEIDI BERGER

“They were telling me the truth: they were afraid to teach it; they didn’t have the skills to teach it; and they didn’t have the time to go do all the research to teach themselves how to do it,” Berger said. “And that’s when it hit me, the idea of going to the Ministry of Education and persuading them to have the study of genocide made compulsory.”

She eventually started the [Foundation for Genocide Education](#) to fight the spread of hatred, ignorance and intolerance.

Now, eight years after she first broached the topic and six years after she first found a sympathetic ear in government, the province has its [first pedagogical guide for teachers](#) to help them address this heavy but important subject in the classroom.

[Étudier les génocides](#) includes video testimonials from genocide survivors or their children, case studies, lesson plans and workbooks. The materials are available in French but will be translated into English by next fall. Berger’s goal is make it available for teachers across Canada — and beyond.

“We’re doing everything possible for this rollout so that they will embrace it,” Berger said. “We also produced an instructional video to help teachers understand the guide. We also have a PR video to excite the teachers to use the guide.”

The manual was written by Sabrina Moisan, a history professor at the Université de Sherbrooke, and Sivane Hirsch, a professor of ethics at the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, at the behest of Quebec’s Ministry of Education, with support provided by the Foundation for Genocide Education.

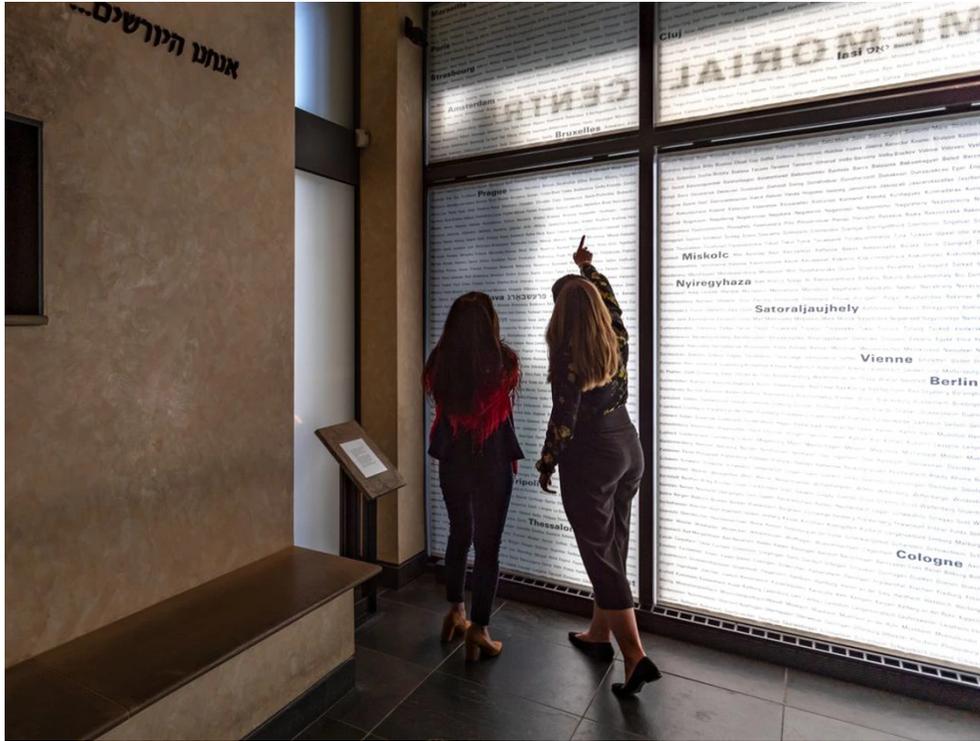
It’s intended for use in history or ethics courses at the secondary level, Hirsch said, where genocide is mentioned in the curriculum, but largely in passing.

The guide offers a comparative analysis of nine genocides of the 20th century: against the [Herero and Nama in Namibia](#) by German colonizers; [against Armenians by the Ottoman Empire](#); the Holodomor, the starvation of Ukrainians by the Soviets; the Holocaust against European Jews during the Second World War; the Nazi genocide against Roma and Sinti; the Cambodian genocide; the Rwandan genocide; the campaign to eradicate Muslims in Bosnia; and the genocide of Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Each of the communities represented were consulted.

“We decided to focus on these nine genocides because they are recognized either by the United Nations or the government of Canada. The only case that doesn’t quite fall into the criteria is the genocide against Indigenous Peoples. But in the context we’re working in, in Quebec and Canada, we said to ourselves ‘We can’t ignore this reflection,’” Hirsch said.

There is no perfect procedure for choosing what makes it into the guide, Hirsch said, but it is designed to foster

“In naming the steps, the idea is for students to be able to recognize how each one occurred in history, but also in other situations. So, for example, categorization is the first step and it’s distinguishing groups as us and them,” Hirsch said. “That’s something that happens all the time in society, even if Quebec society today, so obviously that doesn’t mean that we’re heading towards genocide — far from it — but it shows that we can identify the steps.”



“It is so important, so important to remember,” Mayor Valérie Plante said during the event marking Yom HaShoah at the Montreal Holocaust Museum on Wednesday, April 27, 2022. PHOTO BY DAVE SIDAWAY /Montreal Gazette files

The manual also includes lessons on prevention to empower students.

“It’s easy to say ‘What could we have done?’ after the fact,” Hirsch said. “But the idea is to say to young people ‘What can we do in situations like this? How can we prevent genocide?’ as we analyze each of the steps.”

Now that the guide has been published online, there will be training sessions for teachers to get their feedback and tweak the pedagogical materials.

Berger said the foundation is training more survivors of genocide to be ready to go into schools and share their experiences as well as producing accompanying interactive presentations. She expects demand for their services to increase.

“You know history is best passed on by storytelling,” she said. “It’s something when you hear our Rwandan survivor talking about his story. He’s in his mid-30s and he’s talking about seeing his whole family shot in front of him. And he’s there speaking. You can hear a pin drop. With all these presenters our students are enthralled by it. They’re fascinated.”

Although the guide is a huge accomplishment, Berger has not abandoned her original goal to make education about genocide compulsory for all students in Quebec — and some day all of Canada.

“I think the success of the guide has to be proven first,” she said. “Once we see the acceptance and once we see that it’s embraced and being used and that teachers are thankful they have this, that would be the next step, to make it mandatory.”

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