

# Using Memory and Education to Confront Racism

**Oftentimes students who partake in the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre (JHGC) education programmes, ask critical questions about the definition of 'race' and racism, particularly, regarding the Nazis and their targeting of the Jews of Europe (1933-1945) during the Holocaust.** In many of those instances, students view 'race' and racism through our South African prism, namely, skin colour differences between blacks and whites. The discussion inevitably looks at the notion of 'race', a socially constructed term, and that skin colour is just one of the human facets that can be used to racialize human beings and create a sense of otherness and racism, as was practised by the National Party (NP) in apartheid South Africa (1948-1994).

The Nazis defined Jews as a separate race from the Germans because of their 'blood'. Hatred of Jews had a long history. Jews were stereotyped, unjustly blamed for society's problems and excluded from most forms of economic activity. Antisemitism continued into the 20th century and provided fertile ground for the new ideology in Germany. Nazi ideology added a biological dimension to traditional antisemitism. They defined Jews as a separate 'race' and not a religious group. Anyone with at least three Jewish grandparents was regarded as Jewish by blood. Racial

discrimination offered no escape through conversion to another religion.

This is a powerful point and makes it imperative for us to discuss racism as a taught and learnt behaviour, because through this teaching and learning, it is passed on from one generation to the next. In this paper, we will have a brief look at Nazi Germany's racism and what similarities it may have to racism in South Africa during apartheid, as a racial state. The 3rd room of the permanent exhibition of the JHGC is characterised by its 'six pillars' of the Nazi racial state. These include *Nazi racial ideology*, the power of *propaganda*, instilling *fear and terror* in citizens, Germany as a *totalitarian state*, the use of *education* and *the law*.

Racial ideology in both Nazi Germany and apartheid South Africa used the law to implement extremist ideas. The *Immorality Amendment Act* of 1950,<sup>1</sup> which prohibited sex between whites and non-whites in apartheid South Africa is one example that stands out. This law aimed to protect the genetic purity of the 'white race' from the perceived impurity of 'other' non-white races. This is similar to the *Rassenschande*<sup>2</sup> (blood disgrace) Nazi law, which was an anti-miscegenation concept in German racial policy, prohibiting sexual relations between Aryans / pure Germans and non-Aryans. The *Population Registration*

*Act* of 1950<sup>3</sup> is another notable law. This law required that each inhabitant of South Africa be classified and registered in accordance with his or her racial characteristics as part of the system of apartheid in South Africa. This law is similar to the *Reich Citizenship Law* of 15 September 1935,<sup>4</sup> which was part of the Nuremberg Laws, classifying Germans into racial categories and Jews as a 'race' based on blood; it stipulated that "*Jewish subjects of the state were excluded from the Right of Reich Citizenship*". These laws poignantly point out just a few similarities between these two histories.

Often the mental and emotional effects of racism last longer than the physical brutality. This is why it is important to interrogate our conditioned minds, so that we may begin the process of 'unlearning' our own 'racial conditioning'. And education helps us in this process. In conclusion, while it is important to know historical facts about the Holocaust and other genocides and crimes against humanity such as apartheid, it is equally and vitally important to understand the effects these events have had on our conditioned minds in the present, namely thinking critically about our socially constructed racial identities and the attitudes that accompany those identities.

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A bench with the inscription "Only for Jews", Germany 1938



Black nannies sit on the grass while looking after white children because the park bench is for 'Whites Only', Johannesburg 1970's



Learners explore the 'six pillars of a racial state' in the exhibition space of the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre in 2020

1. <https://www.facinghistory.org/confronting-apartheid/chapter-2/introduction> 2. Paul R. Bartrop, Michael Dickerman, 2017. *The Holocaust: An Encyclopaedia and Document Collection*. pg1113. ABC-CLIO, Santa Barbara, California. 3. Deborah Posel, 2001. *What's in a name? Racial categorisations under apartheid and their afterlife* (PDF). pg. 56 Michigan State University. Accessed on 04/09/20: <http://transformationjournal.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/tran047005.pdf> . 4. Diemut Majer, 2003. "Non-Germans" Under the Third Reich. pg111. John Hopkins University press. Baltimore, Maryland