

Hashtag Hate: The Rise of Social Media Antisemitism in the 21st Century

Nathan Varghese

Mina Rosner Essay Contest

May 2021

Hate. A tempest that has raged throughout history, expressing itself in various forms. It has shown its face countless times and continues to rear its ugly head. In the past, hate has culminated in horrifying genocides that systematically targeted and killed specific groups. The Holocaust (1933-1945) was one such case, among the darkest chapters of our history. In my own life, I have had the opportunity to hear the stories of local Holocaust survivors, which has made the Holocaust, and the manifestation of hate, more real to me. When you listen to a survivor speak, and see the pain in their eyes as they recount the horrors they faced, you realize that this issue is so much more than the death count. Yet, the Holocaust was not the first, nor was it the last genocide. The Armenian Genocide (1915), Cambodia (1975-1979), Rwanda (1990-94), Bosnia (1991-1995)¹ and others serve as permanent reminders of what hate, in its cruelest expression, can do. Though we say, “never again,” we continue to see the ugly face of hate *ever* again. Horrors such as the genocide of the Rohingya (Myanmar), the Yazidi (Northern Iraq), and the Uyghur (China)² people are fresh in our memory, and hate continues to show its face in every nation. Verbal onslaughts, physical attacks, and more recently, scathing social media posts have all contributed to a rise in hate, both in Canada and around the world.³ This is where our world stands - and where my journey begins.

Since its founding in 2020, I have been an active member of the Westwood Historical Society (WHS), a grassroots organization committed to turning history into action. In March of 2020, we embarked on a mission - to create a documentary that incorporates student voices and survivor testimony, with the purpose of education. As a researcher and video editor in the historical society, I have gained a deeper understanding of the parallels between history and the issues we see today. Learning about the Holocaust has helped me recognize the forces of the past

that are resurfacing today. Antisemitism, a form of hate that targets Jewish people, is at the core of these forces. The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) defines antisemitism as “a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews.”⁴ This perception can manifest itself in a number of ways, including accusing the Jews of inventing or exaggerating the Holocaust, and “calling for, aiding, or justifying the killing or harming of Jews in the name of a radical ideology or an extremist view of religion.”⁵ According to B’nai Brith Canada, 2,610 antisemitic incidents were recorded in 2020, making it the “fifth consecutive record-setting year” for antisemitism in Canada.⁶ However, antisemitism is not a new problem, with its roots tracing back to the time of the Roman Empire.⁷ It has reared its head throughout history, from claims of deicide (accusing the Jews of being “Christ killers”) to physical attacks against the Jewish people. By the time of the Holocaust, antisemitism adopted a racial element, targeting the Jews as an “inferior” race.⁸ During the interwar period in Germany, they were scapegoated as the reason for the nation’s problems; considered inferior and not part of the “superior Aryan race.”⁹ Yet, these ideologies were not limited to Germany. Even in Winnipeg, groups such as the Canadian Nationalist took a similar stance, propagating these views through print.¹⁰

In the current era, we continue to see the proliferation of antisemitism and antisemitic ideology. Through my exploration of this issue, I have come to realize just how significant problem is. Vandalism, violence and verbal attacks are all forms of antisemitism that remain prevalent today. This January, the Shaar Hashomayim synagogue in Montreal was vandalized with Nazi swastikas.¹¹ The shooting at a Pittsburgh synagogue in 2018 remains etched in our memories,¹² and vehement antisemites continue to raise their voices, both verbally

and in print. Yet, the problem does not end there. Recently, we have seen these views infiltrate social media, exacerbating the issue. As a student who uses social media myself, I have witnessed antisemitic ideals invade these platforms. My work with the historical society has opened my eyes to the depth of the issue, which continues to grow. In the *2020 Audit of Antisemitic Incidents*, B'nai Brith Canada reported that 71% of harassment incidents in 2020 occurred online, an 11% increase from the previous year.¹³ Dr. Andre Oboler, CEO of the Online Hate Prevention Institute, identifies four key categories of online antisemitism - traditional antisemitism, Holocaust denial, new antisemitism and promoting violence against Jews.¹⁴ Traditional antisemitism echoes the rhetoric of the past, with claims on social media suggesting that the Jews control the world, or were even responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic. These claims are not far from those made by WWII-era groups such as the Canadian Nationalist, which in 1937 cried that, "International Jewry is the cause of wars, depression and world unrest!"¹⁵ Documents making antisemitic claims, such as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (1903) were also used throughout the 20th century, and are still used today to justify attacks on the Jews.¹⁶

In addition to traditional antisemitism, we have seen the prevalence of Holocaust denial and distortion. Holocaust denial opposes the fact that the Holocaust truly happened while Holocaust distortion warps the event's place in historical memory.¹⁷ The latter can play a more harmful role than one may expect - historian and IHRA honorary chairman Yehuda Bauer notes that, "a half truth is worse than a full lie."¹⁸ In addition, while Holocaust denial has often been limited to fringe groups, social media has allowed these ideas to spread.¹⁹

New antisemitism, another form of online antisemitism, can be harder to identify on the surface, as it seems to target the state of Israel, rather than the Jews. Dr. Oboler notes that this

form of antisemitism will often demonize the state of Israel in an attempt to demonize the Jews by association.²⁰ Finally, the promotion of violence against the Jews is exactly what it sounds like. This sentiment has been propagated via hashtags such as #HitlerWasRight²¹ (which effectively condones the killing of Jews) and research has shown that social media can serve as a vehicle for motivating real-life hateful action.²²

These examples highlight the rapid propagation of antisemitic hate on social media. As I have explored this topic, it has been especially shocking to see antisemitic TikToks and social media posts circulating the web, created by students around my age.²³ Unsurprisingly, there is an accompanying lack of Holocaust education in our society, especially among young people. In a survey of Holocaust knowledge and awareness, the Azrieli Foundation found that more than half of all Canadians and 62% of Millennials did not know that 6 million Jews were killed during the Holocaust.²⁴ Research has also found that social media can lead to the formation of harmful echo chambers, which can serve as a breeding ground for the hate we see across social media.²⁵ Antisemitic views can grow without voices of opposition, and a lack of education among young people (who are among the largest adopters of social media²⁶) can make it difficult to discern the truth.²⁷ Clearly, the issue of online antisemitism must be addressed. However, tackling this problem can be difficult. Researchers acknowledge that “the lines between what constitutes free speech and hate speech can be blurred,” making “regulation” on social media a challenge.²⁸ Considering the complexity of this issue, I believe education is at the core of the solution. Research has shown that only 45% of Millennials and Gen Z are even aware that antisemitism exists in Canada.²⁹ It is up to the next generation, our generation, to combat the rise of antisemitism, and the first step is historical education. More than learning dates and isolated

facts, it is about listening to the people that have lived through these events, when humanity was at its worst.

Throughout this journey, I have realized that the survivors who remain play a critical role in the preservation of historical memory - but they will only be with us for a while longer. It is up to us to listen, to learn, and to recognize the relevance of survivors' stories in our world today. As we develop this historical understanding, we will begin to see the world through a different lens - but with the multitude of information on the web and the complexities discussed earlier, discernment is of key importance. The IHRA's *Working Definition of Antisemitism* is a practical place to start. Rather than providing an answer for every situation, the definition provides guidelines to help discern the antisemitic nature of a statement or act, as a tool accessible to the greater population.³⁰ In my own navigation of the digital world, the working definition has been an invaluable resource; a place to start in an environment muddied with myths and misinformation. As we can see, hate and antisemitism have penetrated the fabric of society throughout history, and continue to do so to this day. As a student in the 21st century, I have personally witnessed this issue manifest itself in the digital realm, where social media has become a breeding ground for echo chambers and hateful ideas. Nevertheless, this is not the end of the story - it is up to us to make a change. As my own journey continues with the Westwood Historical Society, we hope that our documentary will allow local survivors' stories to live on through the next generation. We must educate and equip ourselves, beginning with survivor testimony and the IHRA definition of antisemitism, to combat the rising storm of hate in our world. The past is resurfacing in our present, and what we see and do today will ultimately form our future. In the words of Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel: "There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest."³¹

Notes

- 1 "Genocide Prevention - Country Case Studies," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/countries>
2. "Genocide Watch - Countries at Risk," Genocide Watch, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://www.genocidewatch.com/countries-at-risk>
3. "US Hate Crime Highest in More than a Decade - FBI," BBC News, November 17, 2020, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-54968498>
4. IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism," International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, May 26, 2016, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definitions-charters/working-definition-antisemitism>
5. IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism," International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, May 26, 2016, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definitions-charters/working-definition-antisemitism>
6. "Audit of Antisemitic Incidents," B'nai Brith Canada, April 26, 2021, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://www.bnaibrith.ca/antisemitic-incidents/>
7. Peter Fast, "Interview with Rev. Peter Fast," interview, April 2020
8. Peter Fast, "Interview with Rev. Peter Fast," interview, April 2020
9. "Anti-Semitism," The British Library, January 06, 2006, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/voices/info/antisemitism/antisemitism.html>
10. "The Symbol of the Jew Conquest," The Canadian Nationalist (Winnipeg), August 1937
11. Gloria Henriquez, "Montreal Synagogue Vandalism 'one of the Worst Incidents in Canada,' Says B'nai Brith," Global News, May 28, 2020, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://globalnews.ca/news/6999433/montreal-synagogue-anti-semitism/>
12. Campbell Robertson, Christopher Mele, and Sabrina Tavernise, "11 Killed in Synagogue Massacre; Suspect Charged With 29 Counts," The New York Times, October 27, 2018, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/27/us/active-shooter-pittsburgh-synagogue-shooting.html>

13. "Audit of Antisemitic Incidents," B'nai Brith Canada, April 26, 2021, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://www.bnaibrith.ca/antisemitic-incidents/>
14. Andre Oboler, *Measuring the Hate: The State of Antisemitism in Social Media* (Melbourne: Online Hate Prevention Institute, 2016)
15. "The Symbol of the Jew Conquest," *The Canadian Nationalist* (Winnipeg), August 1937
16. "The Symbol of the Jew Conquest," *The Canadian Nationalist* (Winnipeg), August 1937
17. "What Is Holocaust Distortion and Why Is It a Problem?" International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, June 08, 2020, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/news-archive/what-holocaust-distortion-and-why-it-problem>
18. "What Is Holocaust Distortion and Why Is It a Problem?" International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, June 08, 2020, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/news-archive/what-holocaust-distortion-and-why-it-problem>
19. Andre Oboler, *Measuring the Hate: The State of Antisemitism in Social Media* (Melbourne: Online Hate Prevention Institute, 2016)
20. Andre Oboler, *Measuring the Hate: The State of Antisemitism in Social Media* (Melbourne: Online Hate Prevention Institute, 2016)
21. Andre Oboler, *Measuring the Hate: The State of Antisemitism in Social Media* (Melbourne: Online Hate Prevention Institute, 2016)
22. Karsten Muller and Carlo Schwarz, "Fanning the Flames of Hate: Social Media and Hate Crime," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, June 8, 2020, doi:10.2139/ssrn.3082972
23. Luca Caruso-Moro, "Police Investigating after Montreal Woman Calls out Anti-Semitic Video Posted to TikTok," Montreal, February 04, 2021, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://montreal.ctvnews.ca/police-investigating-after-montreal-woman-calls-out-anti-semitic-video-posted-to-tiktok-1.5294427>
24. "Canadian Holocaust Knowledge and Awareness Study," The Azrieli Foundation, January 23, 2020, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://azrielifoundation.org/canadian-holocaust-knowledge-and-awareness-study/>
25. Karsten Muller and Carlo Schwarz, "Fanning the Flames of Hate: Social Media and Hate Crime," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, June 8, 2020, doi:10.2139/ssrn.3082972

26. "The State of Social Media in Canada 2020: A New Survey Report From The Ryerson Social Media Lab," Social Media Lab, July 17, 2020, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://socialmedialab.ca/2020/07/13/the-state-of-social-media-in-canada-2020-a-new-survey-report-from-the-ryerson-social-media-lab/>)

27. Matt Abra, "Incidents of Anti-semitism Increasing Online in Canada, Says B'Nai Brith," Global News, July 18, 2020, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://globalnews.ca/news/7192646/anti-semitism-increase-internet/>

28. Karsten Muller and Carlo Schwarz, "Fanning the Flames of Hate: Social Media and Hate Crime," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, June 8, 2020, doi:10.2139/ssrn.3082972

29. "Canadian Holocaust Knowledge and Awareness Study," The Azrieli Foundation, January 23, 2020, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://azrielifoundation.org/canadian-holocaust-knowledge-and-awareness-study/>

30. IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism," International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, May 26, 2016, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definitions-charters/working-definition-antisemitism>

31. Elie Wiesel, "Elie Wiesel and Our Duty to Humanity," Freedom House, December 11, 1986, accessed May 27, 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/article/elie-wiesel-and-our-duty-humanity#:~:text=December%2011%2C%201986%2C%20on%20our,when%20we%20fail%20to%20protest.%E2%80%9D>

Bibliography

- Abra, Matt. "Incidents of Anti-semitism Increasing Online in Canada, Says B'Nai Brith." Global News. July 18, 2020. Accessed May 24, 2021. <https://globalnews.ca/news/7192646/anti-semitism-increase-internet/>.
- "Anti-Semitism." The British Library. January 06, 2006. Accessed May 24, 2021. <https://www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/voices/info/antisemitism/antisemitism.html>.
- "Audit of Antisemitic Incidents." B'nai Brith Canada, April 26, 2021. Accessed May 24, 2021. <https://www.bnaibrith.ca/antisemitic-incidents/>
- "Canadian Holocaust Knowledge and Awareness Study." The Azrieli Foundation. January 23, 2020. Accessed May 24, 2021. <https://azrielifoundation.org/canadian-holocaust-knowledge-and-awareness-study/>.
- Caruso-Moro, Luca. "Police Investigating after Montreal Woman Calls out Anti-Semitic Video Posted to TikTok." Montreal. February 04, 2021. Accessed May 24, 2021. <https://montreal.ctvnews.ca/police-investigating-after-montreal-woman-calls-out-anti-semitic-video-posted-to-tiktok-1.5294427>.
- Fast, Peter. "Interview with Rev. Peter Fast." Interview. April 2020.
- "Genocide Prevention - Country Case Studies." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed May 24, 2021. <https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/countries>
- "Genocide Watch - Countries at Risk." Genocide Watch. Accessed May 24, 2021. <https://www.genocidewatch.com/countries-at-risk>.
- Henriquez, Gloria. "Montreal Synagogue Vandalism 'one of the Worst Incidents in Canada,' Says B'nai Brith." Global News, May 28, 2020. Accessed May 24, 2021, <https://globalnews.ca/news/6999433/montreal-synagogue-anti-semitism/>
- IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism." International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, May 26, 2016. Accessed May 24, 2021. <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definitions-charters/working-definition-antisemitism>
- Muller, Karsten, and Carlo Schwarz. "Fanning the Flames of Hate: Social Media and Hate Crime." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, June 8, 2020. doi:10.2139/ssrn.3082972.
- Oboler, Andre. *Measuring the Hate: The State of Antisemitism in Social Media*. Melbourne: Online Hate Prevention Institute, 2016. Accessed May 24, 2021. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/292140978_Measuring_the_Hate_The_State_of_Antisemitism_in_Social_Media.

- Robertson, Campbell, Christopher Mele, and Sabrina Tavernise. "11 Killed in Synagogue Massacre; Suspect Charged with 29 Counts." *The New York Times*. October 27, 2018. Accessed May 24, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/27/us/active-shooter-pittsburgh-synagogue-shooting.html>.
- "The State of Social Media in Canada 2020: A New Survey Report From The Ryerson Social Media Lab." Social Media Lab. July 17, 2020. Accessed May 24, 2021. <https://socialmedialab.ca/2020/07/13/the-state-of-social-media-in-canada-2020-a-new-survey-report-from-the-ryerson-social-media-lab/>.
- "The Symbol of the Jew Conquest." *The Canadian Nationalist* (Winnipeg), August 1937.
- "US Hate Crime Highest in More than a Decade - FBI." BBC News. November 17, 2020. Accessed May 24, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-54968498>.
- "What Is Holocaust Distortion and Why Is It a Problem?" International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. June 08, 2020. Accessed May 24, 2021. <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/news-archive/what-holocaust-distortion-and-why-it-problem>.
- Wiesel, Elie. "Elie Wiesel and Our Duty to Humanity." Freedom House. December 11, 1986. Accessed May 27, 2021. <https://freedomhouse.org/article/elie-wiesel-and-our-duty-humanity#:~:text=December%2011%2C%201986%2C%20on%20our,when%20we%20fail%20to%20protest.%E2%80%9D>