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## Holocaust education bill should be expanded to include other atrocities

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By Robert F. Lyons, Opinion guest contributor • May 2, 2019



Richard Messina | Hartford Courant | MCT. Quinnipiac University opened the Ireland's Great Hunger Museum, or, in Irish, Museum An Ghorta Mor, in Hamden, Connecticut in 2012.

The Holocaust bill, An Act To Require Education about the Holocaust, which Sen. Louis Luchini, D-Ellsworth, is shepherding through the Maine Legislature would require public school students to learn about the extermination of 6 million European Jews during World War II. [LD 1050](#) would require Maine's education commissioner to develop a Holocaust curriculum about the "discriminatory and genocidal laws, policies or actions targeted against groups of individuals based on race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation ... from January 1, 1933 to December 31, 1945, in Nazi Germany or in any European country allied with or occupied by Nazi Germany."

Ellsworth high school teacher, Heidi Omlor, who teaches a course on the Holocaust recommended this legislation because education about the Holocaust and genocide is “ *often severely lacking*.”

However, this bill should follow the example of New York, New Jersey and other states and be expanded to include the study of the Irish Famine in the 19th century so that students might “ [grasp the consequences of ignoring those who hate](#)” as the [New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education](#) stated in January 1996.

The linking of these two searing episodes in the life histories of 6 million European Jews who died as victims of Nazi persecution, and 1 million Irish who died during the Great Hunger with an estimated 2 million forced to emigrate as result of England’s 19th-century laissez-faire economic policy will always stimulate great debate and heat.

Scholars, politicians and educators might argue who is entitled to brand a particular systematic killing of millions of people as a “Holocaust.” But few would argue that “the hunger-stricken exodus of people from the island [Ireland], speaks of the odour of racial hatred surrounding the emigrant’s treatment ... [It] ... bears more resemblance to the slave trade or the boxcars of the Holocaust than to the routine crossings of a later age,” according to Robert Scally in “[The End of Hidden Ireland](#).”

The Holocaust curriculum bill should be expanded to mandate the study of other horrific episodes of national policies which deliberately and systematically strip people of even the least semblance of basic human freedom and dignity and life itself. The [New York Human Rights curriculum](#), along with the study of the European Holocaust in the World War II period, includes a study of “the mass starvation of Ireland from 1845 to 1850” and, [slavery in the Americas](#) and the Atlantic slave trade.

The profile of Maine includes the imprint of famine Irish who fled from starvation and oppression. Michael C. Connolly describes how most of the post-famine immigrants came to Portland through “chain migration,” one family member arrived and paved the way for others to join in his book: “[They Change Their Sky: The Irish in Maine](#).” Most were from County Galway, with its strong and surviving Irish language tradition.

In today’s upsurge of assaults on many segments of our tempest tossed huddled society, students in Maine’s schools can profit enormously from a study of the social, political, and economic conditions that create a climate of fear and repression and death. The teaching of the Holocaust and genocide and the Irish Famine will help our students form a conscience that affirms that our state’s ethnic, religious and cultural diversity remains one of its strengths.

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