

Holocaust Remembrance Day – 27th January

What was the Holocaust?

The **Holocaust**, also referred to as the “**Shoah**” – the Hebrew word for “catastrophe” - was the systematic, state-sponsored murder of six million European Jews by the Nazi German regime and its allies and collaborators. The Holocaust era began in January 1933 when Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party came to power in Germany. It ended in May 1945, when the Allied Powers defeated Nazi Germany in World War II.



Figure 1 Fototeca Gilardi / AGF

When they came to power in Germany, the Nazis quickly began to target and exclude Jews from German society. The Nazi regime enacted discriminatory laws and organised violence targeting Germany's Jews. Between 1933 and 1945 Nazi persecution of the Jews became more radical, culminating in a plan that Nazi leaders referred to as the “Final Solution to the Jewish Question.” The “Final Solution” was the organized and systematic mass murder of European Jews. The Nazi German regime implemented this genocide between 1941 and 1945.

Death squads called *Einsatzgruppen* swept Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, killing Jews by firing squad. By the end of 1941 the first of several “concentration camps”, Chelmno in Poland, had been established, giving the Nazis their method to continue murdering on a giant scale between 1941 and 1945.

By the end of the Holocaust, six million Jewish men, women and children had been murdered in ghettos, mass-shootings, in concentration camps and extermination camps.

As the Second World War neared its end, on 27th January 1945 Soviet troops entered the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, recently abandoned by fleeing German SS guards, and liberated the 9,000 surviving prisoners.



Reaction and comments

Important reflections on the horror of the Holocaust and the urgent need to learn lessons from history are found in the many moving quotations provided by survivors, witnesses, writers and political figures.

Immediately after the war, in 1946, the **German Pastor Martin Niemöller** expresses the sense of guilt of (non-Nazi) Germans who failed to speak out against the criminal, inhuman action of the regime:

*They came first for the Communists,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist.
Then they came for the Jews,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew.
Then they came for the trade unionists,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist.
Then they came for the Catholics,
and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant.
Then they came for me,*

and by that time no one was left to speak up.

Another important quotation, generally (but perhaps falsely) attributed to Edmund Burke, likewise expresses the perils of indifference and the moral responsibility of those who fail to act against evil:

“The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”

The Romanian-born American writer, professor, political activist, and Holocaust survivor **Elie Wiesel** (1928-2016) expressed this idea with vigour and clarity in his acceptance speech for the **Nobel Peace Prize** in 1986:

“I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.”

(You can find an extract from Wiesel’s famous lecture *The Perils of Indifference*, given at the White House in April 1999 on pages 80-81 of *Amazing Minds New Generation Vol 1* or on pages 62-63 of the Compact Edition.)

Finally, **Yehuda Bauer** (1926-), Israeli Professor of History at the University of Jerusalem, expresses a similar message in a speech given at the German Bundestag on 27th January 1998:

“I come from a people who gave the Ten Commandments to the world. Time has come to strengthen them by three additional ones, which we ought to adopt and commit ourselves to: thou shall not [you must not] be a perpetrator; thou shall not be a victim; and thou shall never, but never, be a bystander.”

Commemoration and Remembrance



On 1st November 2005, sixty years later, the United Nations resolution 60/7 designated 27th January as an annual **International Holocaust Remembrance Day** in memory of the victims of the Holocaust.

The UN resolution affirms that “that the Holocaust, which resulted in the murder of one third of the Jewish people, along with countless members of other minorities, will forever be a warning to all

people of the dangers of hatred, bigotry, racism and prejudice”, and urges member states to develop educational programmes so that the lessons of the Holocaust may help to prevent future acts of genocide. The Resolution further “condemns without reserve all manifestations of religious intolerance, incitement, harassment or violence against persons or communities based on ethnic origin or religious belief, wherever they occur.”

The two aspects of the UN Resolution – **remembrance** of past horror and **education** of future generations are expressed in the message of Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon for the third observance of the commemoration in 2008, the year of the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

“The International Day in memory of the victims of the Holocaust is thus a day on which we must reassert our commitment to human rights. [...]

We must also go beyond remembrance, and make sure that new generations know this history. We must apply the lessons of the Holocaust to today’s world. And we must do our utmost so that all peoples may enjoy the protection and rights for which the United Nations stands.”

Many countries have instituted their own Holocaust Memorial Days. Many, such as the UK’s **Holocaust Memorial Day** and Italy’s **Giorno della Memoria**, also fall on 27 January, while others, such as Israel’s **Yom HaShoah**, are observed at other times of the year.



In 2022, the theme guiding the United Nations Holocaust remembrance and education is “Memory, Dignity and Justice”. Holocaust commemoration and education is a global imperative in the third decade of the 21st century. The writing of history and the act of remembering brings dignity and justice to those whom the perpetrators of the Holocaust intended to obliterate. Safeguarding the historical record, remembering the victims, challenging the distortion of history often expressed in contemporary antisemitism, are critical aspects of claiming justice after atrocity crimes. The theme encompasses these concerns.

Read the text and answer the following questions:

1. What does the word “Shoah” mean? – It is a Hebrew word meaning “catastrophe”
2. In what years was the “final solution” enacted? – between 1941 and 1945
3. What does the quotation by Wiesel seek to communicate? – that we cannot be silent or neutral when human beings are persecuted
4. When did 27th January officially become International Holocaust Remembrance Day? – on 1st November 2005
5. What two aspects of the UN Resolution did former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon express in his 2008 message? – Remembrance of past horror and education for future generations
6. What is the theme of this year’s UN Holocaust Remembrance Day? – Memory, Dignity and Justice