

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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The Ongoing Importance of the Holocaust

The twentieth century witnessed harsh anti-Semitism, vicious pogroms, and the unimaginable Holocaust. Over a third of the world's Jews were killed. The unspeakable horror of the Holocaust cannot be forgotten and each generation must comprehend this genocide's magnitude and vow "never again." I have visited the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. once and Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem, annually for many years. Each time I go there, I am aghast at the horror of what Nazi Germany did. Along with the Wailing Wall and Masada, Yad Vashem defines modern Jewish identity.

Permit me a brief review of the key elements of the Holocaust:

1. The Holocaust began in 1933 when Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany. It ended with the defeat of the Nazis in 1945.
2. Jewish people were excluded from public life on 15 September 1935 when the Nuremberg Laws were issued. The laws also stripped German Jews of their citizenship and their right to marry Germans.
3. As the war began, Nazis ordered all Jews to wear the yellow Star of David on their clothing so they could be targeted.
4. Jews were forced to live in specific areas of the city called ghettos. In the larger ghettos, over 1,000 people a day were taken to either concentration camps or death camps.
5. *Kristallnacht* occurred on 9-10 November 1938 when Nazis pillaged and burned synagogues, broke windows of Jewish-owned businesses and attacked Jewish people in Austria and Germany. About 30,000 Jews were arrested and sent to concentration camps.
6. In the camps, Jews were forced to do hard physical labor, with torture and death the end result.
7. Over 11 million people were killed during the Holocaust (about 1.5 million of them children). Over 6 million of those killed were Jews.
8. About 2/3rds of the Jews in Europe at the beginning of World War II were killed.
9. Yad Vashem in Jerusalem connects the horrors of the Holocaust with the birth of the nation state of Israel in 1948. The Nazis' inexpressible terror created the world consensus to create a homeland for the Jewish people in Palestine where they would be safe and secure. No state could ever again seek to systematically destroy them.

The Holocaust changed the course of history and its horrors cannot be forgotten.

Columnist Michael Gerson cites several examples of the diminishing memories of the Nazis and their brutality during the Holocaust. He cites a global survey of the Anti-Defamation League in which two-thirds of the respondents either had never heard of the Holocaust or believed historical accounts were exaggerated. Further, during this school year, in California's Rialto Unified School District, eight-grade students were asked to write an essay on whether the

Holocaust “was an actual event in history, or merely a political scheme created to influence public emotion and gain wealth.” Gerson draws attention to the terms “scheme” and “wealth,” words that have an anti-Semitic ring to them. Thankfully, public uproar forced the district to cancel the assignment. There are not two sides to the discussion of the Holocaust question. Gerson correctly observes that “the assumption of two-sidedness when considering the Holocaust is positively dangerous . . . [because] Holocaust denialists crave academic validation above all else, hoping to gain legitimacy for [their] pseudo-history.” Education must have a moral/ethical dimension to it. Education must teach what is good and create disdain for what is evil. My own opinion is that American students should be required to visit the Holocaust museum in Washington, D.C. There they learn the reality of evil on a massive scale. Gerson: “Instead of asking children what they make of the Holocaust, it is worth teaching eighth-graders what the Nazis made of children . . . It is one of the most solemn responsibilities of educators to make a new generation see what was done.”

The nation of Israel is committed to the proposition that such barbarity will never again happen. It seeks to keep the horror of this brutality before the eyes of the world and of its citizenry. It also seeks to foster the lessons to be learned from such horror. To that end, in 1982 the education ministry made teaching about the Holocaust compulsory for all children in Israel. Coverage in history textbooks increased from 20 pages in the 1960s to 450 in the 1990s. Today, every Israeli schoolchild spends a semester studying the history of what they call the *Shoah*, along with further coursework in literature, music and art classes. Some 200,000 students and soldiers tour Yad Vashem annually. In addition, Yad Vashem trains 10,000 domestic and foreign teachers about the Holocaust every year. Other nations are following suit: Membership of the Association of Holocaust Organizations (AHO) has increased from 25 in the late 1980s to over 300 today. Commemorative museums have opened from Germany and France to Brazil and Japan. The AHO sponsored the first international conference in China on the Holocaust in the northeastern Chinese city of Harbin—the city where the Japanese conducted experiments on human beings (killing an estimated 400,000 people). But in the Arab world, there is little interest in the Holocaust. Many view such remembrance as an effort to gain sympathy for Jews who seek to grab more Arab land. The Palestinian Authority, including President Mahmoud Abbas, has acknowledged the Holocaust terror and has sought to teach it in the schools, but has been blocked by Hamas.

As *The Economist* recently observed, “Perhaps the biggest threat to remembrance of the 6 million Jews killed by the Nazis is trivialization. ‘The Holocaust has lost its specificity,’ says Eckhardt Fuchs, a German academic preparing a study of textbook coverage worldwide. Politicians in America and elsewhere routinely employ the Holocaust as a rhetorical device to denote evil. The term has cropped up in comic books and heavy-metal music.”

But the Holocaust was a monstrous evil that killed real people. One of the most haunting parts of Yad Vashem is the museum dedicated to children. You walk into the dark building punctuated by 1.5 million “stars” of light, each one representing a child that the Nazis killed. This is one of the most effective ways to prevent trivialization; it keeps the focus on the horror of what happened when the Nazis employed industrialized slaughter of an entire race—they killed real people. It must never be forgotten.

See *The Economist*, “Bearing Witness Ever More” (24 August 2013), pp. 55-56 and Michael Gerson in www.washingtonpost.com (20 May 2014).