

International Conference: Brussels: The Prevention of Genocides

Obligations for the International Community in the prevention of Genocide–Civil Society

Symptoms and Root Causes: What does the Holocaust Tell Us?

IHRA

- The International Forum on the Holocaust in 2000 reminded the world that the Holocaust was such a catastrophe, such a collapse of civilization, that it should never be allowed to fade into history but must remain at the front of our minds. I speak not just of the height of the killing in 1942–45, but the whole Holocaust Era from 1933 to 1945.
- The resultant Stockholm Declaration of 2000, accepted by 46 Governments, committed governments to promote Holocaust education, remembrance and research and to fight Holocaust denial and antisemitism. Out of that Declaration has grown the 31–state International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) of which I have just taken over the Chairmanship from Canada.
- The Stockholm Declaration accepted a solemn responsibility to fight genocide and ethnic cleansing as well as racism, antisemitism and xenophobia. All these governments, whether now members of IHRA or not, acknowledged the political and moral obligations involved.
- IHRA is an inter–governmental body which is unusual in that it is a forum in which government policy–makers discuss with the experts of civil society what study of the Holocaust tells us and what needs to be done to ensure that nothing comparable ever happens again. When I say experts from civil society I mean survivors, academics, educators, curators, administrators and other non–governmental experts. Its impact and visibility is growing, as its membership.
- The concept of a crime of genocide grew out of the Holocaust experience. Revulsion against the Holocaust has been a major impulse behind the ever strengthening drive since 1945 to protect and promote human rights under international law. One feature of recent years has been the growth and sophistication of the number of Holocaust Museums and places of remembrance, often initiated by civil society itself.
- The physical prevention of genocide must largely be the responsibility of governments working through established international institutions and in accordance with a strong growing public consensus behind the Responsibility 2 Protect. Ordinary people around the world look to their own governments to protect them, not to persecute and kill them. But they are rightly concerned too that timely action is taken to prevent mass atrocities in other countries. They look to all governments to understand the pain and horror of mass violence and to take a stand against genocidal tendencies wherever and to whomever they occur.
- It is not for IHRA to duplicate what other bodies are doing, but there are important lessons to be drawn from the Holocaust experience which are relevant to current efforts to prevent genocides recurring.

- The problem always seems to be that, when we look back at savage events, we ask: why did we not act sooner? Why are we always too late? How can we erect fire-breaks to prevent the spread and escalation of random violence into something altogether more calculated and extreme? This is a universal challenge.
- It is a privilege to share this session with the Aegis Trust which has done so much important and pioneering work in this field and which has shown what an impact private initiatives can have.
- I should like to highlight two conclusions and four lessons.
- The first conclusion is that the strongest barrier against prejudice is the ethical strength of a society. Values of tolerance and mutual understanding need to be inculcated into the young and reinforced throughout life. They have to be based on a good understanding of history, which is where education and a culture of remembrance are so important. Civil society has a key role to play.
- Holocaust research is providing an ever sounder basis for understanding how societies can descend into mass violence against the very people among whom they live. Holocaust remembrance reminds us of how fragile our societies can be and that progress, modernity, intellectual achievement, technological advance and good intentions are no guarantee that darker instincts will not ultimately prevail. Holocaust education should give our societies the confidence to move forward in a more humane and enlightened way.
- Material progress does not guarantee ethical progress. Hence the wisdom of constantly remembering and teaching the events of 70 years ago which sought to destroy a whole people wherever and wherever they were. For IHRA education is the key. We have supported hundreds of projects all over the world. Our experts have developed comprehensive guidelines for teaching about the Holocaust.
- Central to this work is for societies and governments to think hard about why they want the Holocaust should be taught and how best to do it. I shall return to this point.
- The second conclusion is that we have to pay close attention to what is happening and recognise dangerous signs when we see them. You would have thought that modern communications would ensure that we can no longer hide behind professions of ignorance as so many did in the past when Armenians or Jews were being murdered, or Bosnians or Rwandans. We have been reminded today of how much preparation takes place before each atrocity. We know more than ever about the economic and historical origins of communal strife or the persecution of minorities in the Middle East or West Africa, but yet too often we still cannot prevent the violence taking place.
- In particular we all have a duty to watch the trends and the opinion polls within our own societies, honestly and with a practical determination to take action against antisemitism, Holocaust or genocide denial, historical revisionism or other worrisome trends sooner rather than later. Civil society and parliamentary representatives must play a major part in monitoring changes in societal attitudes and giving early warning signals of trouble ahead. Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.
- And the four lessons?
- First all societies should recognise the imperative need to combat hate speech and hate crimes in all their forms at the earliest possible moment before racial, religious and ethnic abuse becomes so

frequent, loud and mainstream that it coarsens political discourse and threatens the safety and well-being of a country's inhabitants, whether citizens or not. This imperative need becomes an urgent obligation when inflammatory speech and hate crimes threaten to turn into incitement to violence. Material progress does not necessarily mean ethical progress.

- To take an example from the UK, the Community Security Trust (CST) has played a leading role in bringing rigour to the recording and analysis of hate speech and hate crimes, work that has been picked up by government and police and copied across Europe.
- Second societies must understand, protect and promote the central importance of the rule of law and the duty of judges to uphold the law against populist pressures. Citizens and non-citizens alike must be able to trust the legal system, and those empowered to enforce the laws, to stand up for the democratic and constitutional rights of all citizens and all those within the protection of the state. This is just as true at the international level where states must not be allowed to think they can break established laws or codes of conduct with impunity.
- Thirdly a heavy responsibility rests on the press and media to report impartially, fearlessly and frankly, neither fanning the flames of prejudice nor buckling under to threats from political or societal forces intent on whipping up prejudice.
- Fourthly it is vital to remember. In all genocides the perpetrators try to hide the evidence. The Nazis certainly did. As time passes trees and shopping malls grow over the mass graves. Other atrocities get in the way. The historical memory in us all gets confused and fuzzy. But the Holocaust of the Jews was unprecedented in its cold-blooded single-mindedness. It is the paradigm, as Professor Yehuda Bauer says. It is the most extreme version of genocide ever known. It must be remembered not forgotten.

- So let me conclude by stressing Holocaust Education. The Holocaust is essential to our understanding of genocide and mass violence. The Holocaust is the most extensively documented, best researched and well understood example of genocide in the long history of man's inhumanity to man. So it offers us important insights into why and how societies can descend into mass violence.
- Studying the Holocaust reveals the full range of human behaviour – from the most appalling acts of violence, to behaviour of extraordinary resilience, courage and altruism; from the moral complexities of collaboration, collusion and complicity to the dangers of bowing to peer pressure or apathy, The profound questions it raises about the human condition makes Holocaust education ideal for stimulating independent enquiry in our schools, across a wide range of key ages and subjects.
- How was it possible that not long ago, and not far from where many of us live, people in Europe collaborated in the murder of their Jewish neighbours? Why didn't people do more to save them? How does the genocide of European Jewry relate to the other atrocities committed by the Nazis: the genocide of the Roma and Sinti; the mass murder of disabled people; the genocide of Poles and Slavs; the persecution and murder of political opponents, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals and

others? How did the victims respond to, and how far did they resist, the unfolding genocide? How did the bystanders react?

- By comparing the Holocaust to other genocides we can more sharply understand the differences and the similarities, what leads some societies to enter into orgies of destruction, what are the most effective preventative measures and how best to recognise the risks of future genocides.

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