



The International Day of commemoration in memory of the victim of the Holocaust:

Why it matters?

Tracey Petersen*

The Holocaust, as United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres observes, reverberates through the United Nations.¹ It can be traced in the founding documents of the Organization in the commitment to multinational action to protect future generations from the scourge of war and atrocity crimes such as those committed by the Nazis and their collaborators, that found genocidal expression against Jewish children, women, and men, as well as the Roma and Sinti.²

We see the impact of the Holocaust reflected in the priorities and actions of United Nations agencies and bodies to address the factors that facilitate genocide – poverty, inequity and inequality, racism, war. The Organization’s aim to achieve a sustainable peace, where all can live with dignity and thrive, is also an expression of the reaction to the horrors of the Holocaust.

The significance of the Holocaust to the United Nations is evident in the outreach activities organized by the Holocaust and the United Nations Outreach Programme and the network of United Nations Information Centres whose efforts the Outreach Programme supports. Further evidence of the importance of the Holocaust to the Organization and its member states, lies in the designation in 2005 of the 27 Januarys as the International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust.

* Manager of The Holocaust and the United Nations Outreach Programme.

¹ Secretary-General Antonio Guterres Video message for the International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust, 27 January 2022

² <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/preamble>, accessed January 15, 2022

On the morning of 1 November 2005, the 42nd plenary meeting of the General Assembly of the United Nations passed by consensus Resolution 60/7, sponsored by 104 countries. The resolution designated 27 January as an annual International Day of Commemoration to Honour Holocaust Victims. The 27 January was chosen to mark the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the Nazi German concentration and death camp (1941-1945), by Soviet armed forces. Resolution 60/7 also rejected Holocaust denial and condemned “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”.³

Article 2 of Resolution 60/7 urged Member States to “develop education programmes to instill the memory of the tragedy in future generations to prevent genocide from happening again.”⁴ The resolution also requested the establishment of an Outreach Programme and “measures to mobilize civil society for Holocaust remembrance and education.” The rationale given for Holocaust remembrance and education was that it would “help prevent further acts of genocide ...” by reminding “the world of the lessons to be learnt from the Holocaust.”⁵

The resolution made no mention of other genocides that had taken place before or after the Holocaust, a point of concern raised by several members. Muhammad Anshor, the representative of Indonesia, summed up the reservations shared by Maged Abdelfattah Abdelaziz, Egypt's Permanent Representative and Ms. Ismail, Malaysia's representative, in saying,

“There are numerous [tragedies] that send an equally strong message and warning to all people of the dangers of hatred, bigotry, racism and prejudice. ...we would have preferred it if the sponsors, in formalizing and institutionalizing Holocaust

³ UN General Assembly, Resolution 60/7, “Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 1 November 2005, accessed January 20, 2022, <https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/A/res/60/7>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

remembrance and education within the United Nations system through the resolution, had given equal attention to other human tragedies.”⁶

The concerns raised by the members appeared to have prompted the closing comment of Jan Eliasson, President of the 60th Session of the General Assembly:

“In view of the explanations of vote after the vote and the statements in right of reply, I just want to repeat portions of my remarks at the 41st meeting, on the introduction of the resolution ...

‘The Holocaust also reminds us of the crimes of genocide committed since the Second World War. It must therefore be a unifying historic warning around which we rally, not only to recall the grievous crimes committed in human history but also to reaffirm our unfaltering resolve to prevent the recurrence of such crimes. We cannot, after the horrors in Cambodia, Rwanda and Srebrenica, continue to repeat, ‘Never again’.’

It is in the spirit both of remembering the crimes of the past and preventing their recurrence in the future that we must consider the resolution on Holocaust remembrance.”⁷

⁶ UN General Assembly, Resolution 60/PV.42, “Agenda Item 72,” November 1, 2005, accessed 8 October 2015, <http://research.un.org/en/docs/ga/quick/regular/60>

⁷ UN General Assembly, Resolution 60/PV.42, “Agenda Item 72,” November 1, 2005, accessed 8 October 2015, <http://research.un.org/en/docs/ga/quick/regular/60> On 23 December 2005, the General Assembly passed Resolution A/Res/60/225: “Assistance to survivors of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, particularly orphans, widows and victims of sexual violence”. Article 4 urged Member States to “develop educational programmes that will inculcate future generations with the lessons of the genocide in Rwanda in order to help to prevent future acts of genocide”. Article 5 requested that the Secretary-General establish an outreach programme entitled “The Rwanda Genocide and the United Nations” as well as “measures to mobilize civil society for Rwanda genocide victim remembrance and education, in order to help to prevent future acts of genocide, and to report to the General Assembly on the establishment of the programme within six months from the date of the adoption of the present resolution.” UN www.kas.de

Subsequently, the General Assembly has passed two resolutions related to the Holocaust, most recently Resolution [A/76/L.30](#) on 20 January 2022⁸. Both resolutions focused on combatting Holocaust denial and distortion. The conferring of the status of an International Day hold continuing significance.

On its public website, the United Nations explains that International Days provide “opportunities for public education about issues of concern, to mobilize political will and resources to address global problems, and to celebrate and reinforce achievements of humanity.”⁹

The designation of an International Day is a multilateral and multinational acknowledgment of an event or an issue of global concern. The designation of an International Day by member states confers a status of global import. The International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust stands as an annual global reminder that the significance of the Holocaust extends beyond any one single community: the status of International Day signals that the Holocaust matters to all, that the Holocaust is a tragedy for all humanity. The International Day of commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust creates an international commemorative community that comes together, unified in acknowledgement of what was perpetrated and what was lost. The power of the designation as an International Day lies in its potential to strengthen human bonds. The International Day brings awareness of the historical example of a grave unravelling and rupture of humanity. But, in bringing so many together in witness to the history, the International Day proposes a new weaving of humanity.

Historian Jay Winter writes movingly of the extraordinary response of grieving families in the aftermath of the First World War, to memorial installations such as the cenotaph in Whitehall, and memorials erected in towns and villages across the land. These memorials

General Assembly Resolution 60/225, “Assistance to survivors of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, particularly orphans, widows and victims of sexual violence,” 23 December 2005, accessed October 8, 2015, <http://research.un.org/en/docs/ga/quick/regular/60>.

⁸ A/RES/61/255 -<https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/61/255> Accessed January 12, 2022

⁹ <https://www.un.org/en/observances> Accessed January 20, 2022

were designated public spaces where the dead could be mourned as a community.¹⁰ We should not underestimate the power of public acknowledgement of catastrophe. International Days can serve as potent symbolic communal places that hold the potential for the development of solidarity and activism.

However, we must guard against complacency that our job is done by the naming of an international day. International Days of commemoration can also serve to stall action, and gesture can come to supplant justice. Pledges to take action to prevent future atrocities may not survive beyond the ceremonies on an International Day, and catharsis and good intention may not lead to action. The International Day can become a box into which all sadness and grief, righteous indignation and respectful listening to the voices of survivors, can be poured, and then closed shut until the next year.

However, we should also guard against a cynical dismissal of the value of an International Day. While it is true that an International Day alone cannot sustain action it engenders, it is a foundation on which to build powerful initiatives that lead to action. International Days support the promises to protect human rights made in response to the shared experience of listening to the testimonies of survivors, or the histories of those who resisted and rescued. This is a vital first step to what will sustain commitment and lead to action. It is thus significant that the 2005 Resolution coupled the designation of an International Day with the establishment of an Outreach Programme.

Since its establishment over a decade and a half ago, the Holocaust and the United Nations Outreach Programme has grown its partners, supported Holocaust education and remembrance around the world through the network of United Nations Information Centres, and expanded beyond an event-driven focus to a thematic one, developing outreach materials and activities across the year. The Outreach Programme has initiated a joint discussion series with the Outreach Programme on the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda to develop a deeper understanding of the legacies of these painful histories – and through examining the past, consider how best to build a world that is just,

¹⁰ Jay Winter. *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Croydon: Canto Classics, 2014)

where all can live in dignity and peace. The Outreach Programme supports the work of the Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect in challenging hate speech.

In 2022, the theme guiding the United Nations ceremony to mark the International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust, is “Memory, Dignity and Justice”. The theme will inform the Holocaust and the United Nations Outreach Programme throughout 2022. 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.

In 2022, Holocaust commemorative and educational activities will draw attention to the actions taken by Holocaust survivors in the immediate years following the devastation and brutality of the Holocaust, to reclaim their rights, their history, their cultural heritage and traditions, and their dignity. The role played by institutions and individuals in supporting survivors, the long-reaching impact of the Holocaust on survivors’ families, and the impact of the Holocaust on the shaping of human rights policy and interventions will be explored. The theme encourages action to challenge hatred, strengthen solidarity and champion compassion. The Holocaust and its place in the United Nations Outreach Programme is an expression of the unwavering commitment of the United Nations to promoting human rights, to countering antisemitism and racism, and to preventing future genocide.

The International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust is a symbol of global acknowledgement of the horror of the Holocaust, of the immense suffering it wrought on the human fabric. It also provides an opportunity to remember the ties that bind our human family and to strengthen these ties as we express our collective desire to end prejudice. The significance of an international call to action cannot be

dismissed, especially as antisemitism continues to grow. It should concern us all that the antisemitic tropes used before and during the Holocaust to deadly effect, are still being harnessed to fuel bigotry, prejudice, and violence. Holocaust distortion continues to be recruited to spread misinformation, and to dispute science. The International Day was always intended to be but one part of the response to the Holocaust – an opportunity to reflect, pause, take stock, and to remember why remembrance matters. And then to begin the work of putting words into action.

The International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust is now observed worldwide. The International Day stands as a reminder of a multinational expression of solidarity against prejudice, against genocide, against the factors that facilitate gross human rights violations, and as an expression of hope in humanity's ability to DO right by all. The International Day is an action. It is a concrete expression of the resolution that established it, and supports the words of the Secretary-General:

“The problems we face were created by humanity. That means humanity can solve them. But solving them requires solidarity. Solidarity is a part of human nature.”¹¹

The International Day allows us the opportunity to remember our humanity, and to prepare for action in solidarity with those who remain the most vulnerable.

¹¹ The Secretary-General Remarks to the Press, 21 January 2022, 13:30