International Holocaust Remembrance Day

The fragility of freedom

SUMMARY

'Auschwitz didn't appear from nowhere', remarked Marian Turski, Holocaust survivor and child prisoner in the Auschwitz death camp, in January 2020 at the solemn ceremony on International Holocaust Remembrance Day. The former Auschwitz prisoner described the path from tiny hardships in everyday life and growing discrimination and persecution laws, to the genocide of Jews, the Holocaust. The consecutive stages of shrinking freedom can be summarised as 10 stages of genocide, in a process that could happen anywhere, with perpetrators potentially from all walks of life and ethnicities. However, anyone with enough courage can stop it at any stage.

Every year in January, the EU institutions honour the memory of the victims of the Holocaust and pay tribute to the survivors, of whom fewer and fewer remain to bear witness to the horrors of the Nazi persecutions. The EU bears a responsibility to keep the painful memory of those darkest days in Europe's history alive. Repeating 'Never again' is not enough, and that is why the EU, which emerged from the ashes of World War Two, and is based on the principles of peace, freedom, human dignity and fundamental rights, has a duty to protect minorities, the Jewish minority in particular, from discrimination, hate speech and violence.

The EU strategy on combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish life, the nomination of the coordinator on combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish life, European Parliament resolutions condemning growing antisemitism and warning against neo-Nazi organisations making their come back across the EU, all demonstrate the EU's awareness of these dangerous phenomena and its determination to halt them.

Jude
International
HOLOCAUST
Remembrance Day

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PE 757.610 – January 2024

EN

Historical background: Shrinking freedoms

First steps of the Nazi government

Nazism emerged during the Weimar Republic, which faced several political and economic crises until it collapsed when Hitler came to power. This background was fertile soil for further tragic developments. As Marian Turski, Holocaust survivor and child prisoner in the Auschwitz death camp, put it on Holocaust Remembrance Day in Auschwitz on 27 January 2020: 'Auschwitz didn't appear from nowhere'. He went on to describe the tiny steps, minor everyday inconveniences that accumulated and removed more and more freedom. Gregory H. Stanton has analysed such situations and condensed them into 10 stages of genocide, noting that it is possible to stop the process at every stage, thus preventing the worst. The 10 stages of genocide are the following.

- **Classification** – The differences between people are not respected. There is an 'us and them', applied by using stereotypes or by excluding those perceived as different.
- **Symbolisation** – This is a visual manifestation of hatred. Jews in Nazi Europe were forced to wear yellow stars to show that they were 'different'.
- **Discrimination** – The dominant group denies civil rights or even citizenship to identified groups. The 1935 Nuremberg Laws stripped Jews of their German citizenship and made it illegal for them to do many jobs or to marry German non-Jews.
- **Dehumanisation** – Those perceived as 'different' are treated with no form of human rights or personal dignity. During the genocide against the Tutsis in Rwanda, Tutsis were referred to as 'cockroaches'; the Nazis referred to Jews as 'vermin'.
- **Organisation** – Genocides are always planned. Regimes of hatred often train those who go on to carry out the destruction of a people.
- **Polarisation** – Propaganda begins to be spread by hate groups. The Nazis used the newspaper *Der Stürmer* to spread and incite messages of hate about Jewish people.
- **Preparation** – Perpetrators plan the genocide. They often use euphemisms such as the Nazis' phrase 'The Final Solution' to cloak their intentions. They create fear of the victim group, building up armies and weapons.
- **Persecution** – Victims are identified on the basis of their ethnicity or religion and death lists are drawn up. People are sometimes segregated into ghettos, deported or starved, and property is often expropriated. Genocidal massacres begin.
- **Extermination** – The hate group murders their identified victims in a deliberate and systematic campaign of violence. Millions of lives have been destroyed or changed beyond recognition through genocide.
- **Denial** – The perpetrators or later generations deny the existence of any crime.

The situation of Jews from 1933 to 1939

Before 1933, Jews in Germany – who were predominantly secular, with a few Orthodox among them – had experienced over 60 years of growing emancipation in education, economics, culture and politics. They were very much part of German society when antisemitism began to grow as a result of the political and economic instability of the Weimar Republic. It is estimated that around 600 000 Jews were living in Germany when Hitler seized power in March 1933 with the *Ermächtigungsgesetz* (Enabling Act). Already by April 1933 a law was passed forbidding Jews, social democrats, communists and other political opponents from working in the civil service. The list soon included Jewish veterans from the First World War. Quotas for numbers of Jews and other political opponents were then introduced in schools and universities, More than 850 000 people, including many Jews, were affected by these exclusions. On 1 April 1933, the Nazis put a boycott on Jewish shops, to destroy Jewish businesses, but this was cancelled a day later owing to mixed reactions. The boycott reappeared unofficially several times, until Jews were eventually officially forbidden from running a business, causing unemployment among Jews to rise quickly.

Other laws, passed before the 1935 Nuremberg Race Laws prohibited Jews from using Yiddish in public, prevented Jews from changing their names to non-Jewish names and prohibited the listing of Jewish holidays on official calendars. In 1934, the Ministry of Propaganda prohibited Jews from appearing on stage. With the implementation of the Race Laws in September 1935, people who were perceived as 'non-German' lost their civil rights. Marriages between Germans and Jews were forbidden, and people were labelled as Jews if they had Jewish grandparents or practiced the Jewish religion at the time the law was passed.

On the 75th Holocaust Remembrance Day, in Auschwitz in 2020, Auschwitz survivor Marian Turski described other examples of daily discrimination against Jews. He gave the example of Berlin, where from one day to the next, Jews were no longer allowed to sit on park benches, use public swimming pools or join German choirs. This pattern continued, with orders such as 'Jewish children may not play with German children', or shops only being allowed to sell bread to Jews after 5 pm.

Laws targeting people with disabilities

Between 1933 and 1939, 400 000 people who had or were perceived to have a physical or mental disability were sterilised in Nazi Germany under the 'Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring', passed on 25 July 1933. In most cases, the victims had schizophrenia, epilepsy, hereditary blindness or deafness or other forms of physical or mental disability. However, other groups were also victims of these laws, for instance alcoholics, prostitutes and petty criminals, as well as Sinti and Roma, who were branded 'racial enemies' of the Germans.

As of January 1940, teams of doctors were selecting victims without even seeing them, to send them by bus or train to gas chambers (T4 programme). Both steps, the sterilisation and the mass murder, had their roots in the eugenics movement of the late 19th century, which promoted an ideology of producing better and more efficient human beings through breeding. Enforced sterilisation continued – with various motivations – in other European countries, such as Sweden and Czechoslovakia, long after 1945.

Book burning and press censorship

Directly after Hitler came to power, press censorship became a crucial part of the regime. At first, communist and social democratic newspapers and magazines were forbidden, and the same happened to newspapers of trade unions and Jewish printing companies. The first state-led book burnings in the period of the Nazi regime happened in March 1933. Before the book burnings, books were confiscated from public and private libraries and from book shops because they were rejected and forbidden on the grounds of the ideas expressed in them or the Jewish origin of their authors. Examples of forbidden authors included: Karl Marx, Heinrich Mann, Erich Kästner, Sigmund Freud, Erich Maria Remarque, Kurt Tucholsky and Carl von Ossietzky. The regime wanted 'the people' to read books written by Aryan authors, to make sure the youth shared their 'ideals'.

Persecution of homosexuals

Lesbian, gay and trans people had gained more freedoms in Germany prior to the Nazi era. Berlin was one of the most liberal cities in the world, and 'paragraph 175', a law criminalising homosexual acts, was used infrequently in courts. Within days of Hitler becoming Chancellor, and despite the fact that some leading Nazis were themselves secretly homosexual, the repression of sexual minorities – labelled 'antisocials' – began. Between 10 000 and 15 000 men were deported to concentration camps, where many of them were castrated, were used for cruel experiments, or died.

Berlin Olympic Games 1936

The 11th Olympic Games, held in Berlin in 1936, led to some controversies concerning the Nuremberg Laws. There was a potential boycott by the international community; but when the boycott failed, the Games had the potential for a huge propaganda success. In an effort to secure this public relations success, both for the Winter and Summer Games, public signs of discrimination against Jews were publicly removed and Jewish athletes were officially given the opportunity to take part in the Olympic Games. However, Jews were forbidden from training with Aryan athletes forbidden in spring 1933, when they were forced to resign from sports clubs. The establishment of the Central Organisation of Jewish Athlete Clubs and the publication of guidelines for Jewish athletes on 5 October 1934 stirred false confidence among Jewish athletes. Nevertheless, in June 1934, it was announced that a small number of Jews would be invited to the Olympic training courses, but only one athlete would be allowed to take part in the Winter and Summer Games. While a good number of Jewish and non-Jewish athletes boycotted the Games, the IOC failed to intervene when other German Jewish athletes were prohibited from joining Germany's Olympic team.

After the Pogrom Night, Jewish sports clubs in Germany were forbidden by the regime and their property confiscated.

From the Pogrom Night to Auschwitz

On 9 November 1938, the Pogrom Night – euphemistically referred to by the Nazis as '*Reichskristallnacht*' – the Nazis destroyed more than 260 synagoges and many Jewish shops; in total, 91 Jews were murdered and 30 000 Jews deported to concentration camps. More and more anti-Jewish laws had been passed in 1938, prior to the Pogrom Night. Jews were forced to register their assets and had to add the names 'Sara' or 'Israel' to their given names. Their passports were also invalidated by a red 'J' stamp.

The Jewish population in Germany fell in the period between 1938 and 1939 from 300 000 to 185 000, in part because many Jews fled Nazi Germany. Paying dearly for their freedom, they were forced to overcome endless administrative hurdles and leave behind their property, which was effectively confiscated.

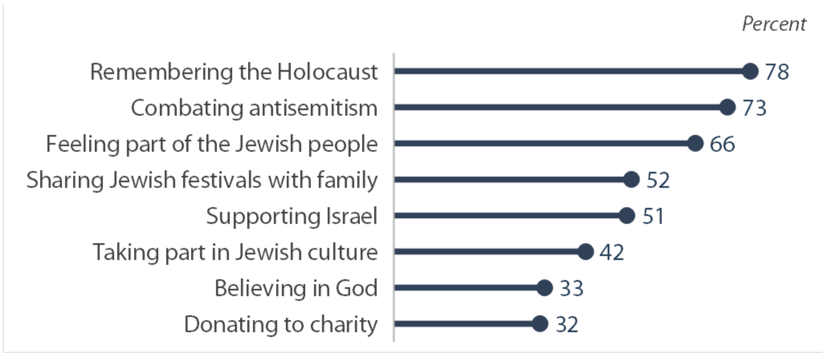
After Germany invaded Poland on 1 September 1939, Nazi Germany stopped its attempts at forced emigration. Instead, it set up a system of ghettos in Polish towns and cities to isolate the Jewish population. The Warsaw ghetto was the largest with 400 000 Jews. Jews were forbidden from leaving the ghettos and hundreds of thousands died there because of disease, starvation or executions carried out by the Nazis. Jews had to wear the yellow star and were used as forced labour outside the ghettos.

At the Wannsee Conference of 1942, high Nazi authorities eventually decided on a 'final solution', to deport Jews to death camps (also referred to as extermination camps), which they established in occupied Poland. Over 40 000 camps were set up by the Nazis between 1933 and 1945 in Germany and its occupied territories, ranging from labour camps to death camps. The gas chambers in death camps, such as Sobibor and Treblinka, were introduced to commit mass murder on an industrial scale. Auschwitz-Birkenau was the most infamous camp. Over 1.1 million people were murdered there, 90 % of whom were Jews. In the final phase of the war, prisoners of concentration and death camps in Poland were forced to go on death marches further west, on which thousands of victims died or were killed.

The European Union in the face of growing antisemitism

Intolerance, hate speech and crime, and incitement to violence rooted in various forms of prejudice based on race, religion, gender and sex, are the first of the 10 stages of genocide. The more stages are passed, the more difficult it is to stop these dangerous developments. The Holocaust did not appear from nowhere, it took root in the fertile soil of antisemitism, and went through all the stages before resulting in the deaths of more than two-thirds of Europe's Jews and 90 % of some countries' Jewish populations, as was the case in Poland. The Holocaust is a tragic memory for Jewish people but antisemitism has been their experience for more than a thousand years. That is why Holocaust remembrance and action to combat antisemitism are essential to Jewish identity, according to research conducted in 2021 (Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Essential aspects of Jewish identity



Source: The Jewish identities of European Jews. What, why and how, The Institute for Jewish Policy Research, December 2021.

The EU Treaties and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union attached to the Lisbon Treaty are the building blocks underpinning the EU and what it stands for. The Treaty on European Union clearly states among its common provisions (Article 2) that: 'The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail'.

The Charter specifies the freedoms and rights of citizens, among them the right to liberty and security, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and freedom of expression and information. It guarantees equality before the law and non-discrimination, as well as respect for cultural, religious and linguistic diversity.

In order to help safeguard the rights, values and freedoms enshrined in the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights, in 2007, the EU founded the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) as an independent body. Its mission is to provide independent and evidence-based advice on rights, identify trends by collecting and analysing comparable data, support rights-compliant policy responses, and help better law making and implementation.

The FRA regularly monitors and reports on antisemitism across the EU, and on the situation of other minorities such as the Roma population and the LGBTQ+ communities. When one minority is discriminated against, other minorities are in danger as well. While Jews were the first to be targeted by Nazi discrimination laws and to face violent persecution and extermination policies, in the context of a very long history of the deeply rooted discrimination against them, persecution of other groups followed, on the basis of similar grounds of well-rooted hatred and contempt.

In his statement at the International Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony on 27 January 2020, the FRA Director stated that: '27 January in any year is one of the saddest days in the calendar – International Holocaust Remembrance Day. … But tragically, it's not just about memorialisation – it's also about today. It's about the rise in antisemitism right across our societies. It's about the issue that if we fail our Jewish communities today, we fail the entire European project. As we push back against antisemitism, let's confront and repudiate all hate, including the hate against Roma, who themselves were subject to genocide. The hate against LGBTI people'.

European Commission initiatives to counter intolerance and prejudice

In 2015, drawing conclusions from the FRA reports on antisemitism, the Commission appointed its first ever Coordinator on combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish life. The coordinator collaborates closely with Jewish communities and organisations, and contributes to the development of the European Commission's overarching strategy to prevent and combat racism, intolerance and discrimination.

In further steps, in the light of the FRA reports on antisemitism and other forms of discrimination or non-respect of rights, the Commission proposed strategies to combat dangerous trends threatening citizens' rights and even European democracies. It is of crucial importance to monitor the situation of the Jewish minority across the EU and introduce the necessary tools to tackle the rising numbers of antisemitic acts. However, the FRA noted in its 2022 report on antisemitism that, in many EU Member States, 'the number of officially recorded incidents is very low and does not allow any assessment of trends'. The number of recorded incidents is not a true reflection of the level of antisemitism, given that the overwhelming majority of antisemitic incidents go unreported.

In the context of worrying levels of antisemitism, both traditional and in its modern expressions in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Commission proposed a first ever EU strategy on combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish life. It was adopted in September 2021. Its three pillars cover three important aspects needed to address antisemitism properly.

They seek to:

- prevent all forms of antisemitism;
- protect and foster Jewish life;
- promote research, education and Holocaust remembrance.

The strategy includes measures to: establish cooperation with online companies to curb antisemitism online; better protect public spaces and places of worship; and set up a European research hub on contemporary antisemitism and create a network of sites where the Holocaust happened. The strategy's international dimension focuses on the EU's ambition to lead the global fight against antisemitism. Member States are expected to prepare national strategies on preventing all forms of antisemitism, racism, xenophobia, radicalisation and violent extremism.

Table 1 – Evolution of religious and philosophical affiliation from 1900 to 2020 in Europe

Religious or philosophical affiliation % / Year	Religious	Religious: Christian	Religious: Jewish	Religious: Muslim	Non-religious
1900	99.6	94.5	2.4	2.3	0.4
2020	84.4	76.1	0.2	7.2	15.6

Source: G.Davie and L. N. Leustean, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Europe*, Oxford University Press, 2021.

The issue of addressing antisemitism in the EU appears all the more urgent when looking at the statistics on the evolution of religious and philosophical affiliation in Europe between 1900 and 2020 (Table 1), in the light of the fact that the Holocaust decimated the Jewish population across the continent. It should also be noted that in 1900 many Jews emigrated, mostly from eastern and central Europe, fleeing pogroms. After the end of World War Two in May 1945, many Holocaust survivors also left Europe, which had become a huge cemetery of Jewish victims of Nazi persecution and extermination. The current situation is alarming, as with persistent and growing antisemitism across Europe, in May 2023, 38 % of Jews in Europe were considering leaving Europe. Some predict that by 2050 Jewry will disappear from Europe, where systemic discrimination has taken root in some countries, and debates on animal welfare focus on religious slaughter and result in bans on shechita, an important element of Jewish identity. Historically, a total ban on shechita was among the first antisemitic laws introduced in Nazi Germany.

European Parliament efforts to honour the memory of Holocaust victims and protect freedom

In 1995, Parliament adopted a resolution calling for the establishment of a European Holocaust Remembrance Day in all Member States. In 2005, in parallel with a United Nations General Assembly resolution designating 27 January as an annual international day of commemoration to honour Holocaust victims, Parliament adopted a resolution proposing 27 January as European Day of Remembrance of the Holocaust in the EU. The European Parliament has marked International Holocaust Remembrance Day every year since.

In another resolution on combating antisemitism, adopted on 1 June 2017, Parliament called on Member States to adopt and apply the working definition of antisemitism employed by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, in order to identify and prosecute antisemitic attacks more efficiently and effectively.

Later the same year, in an October 2017 resolution on the fundamental rights aspects of Roma integration, Parliament called on the Member States to mark 2 August as the date for commemorating the victims of the Roma Holocaust, to include this community in the annual Holocaust Remembrance Day on 27 January, and to conduct an awareness-raising campaign. Parliament highlighted the need for clear condemnation and sanctions for denial of the Roma Holocaust, hate speech, and scapegoating by politicians and public officials at all levels, and in all types of media, directly reinforcing anti-Gypsyism in society, as important steps in fighting stereotypes.

Parliament regularly adopts resolutions on the situation of fundamental rights in the European Union, focusing on a wide range of issues pertaining to respect for human dignity, freedom, minority rights and antisemitism. Parliament's September 2022 resolution on the situation of fundamental rights in the European Union in 2020 and 2021, for instance, painted a general picture on antisemitism, racism, anti-LGBTIQ, anti-Gypsyism and xenophobia; the list of hate speech, violence and discrimination on various grounds is long in the EU.

Cross-party efforts to counter antisemitism

The European Parliament's Working Group against Antisemitism, composed of more than 80 cross-party Members, cooperates with all EU institutions, other European Parliament intergroups, national parliaments, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). It is active in countering and preventing antisemitic acts and behaviours, and protecting those affected.

The Working Group has condemned the ever-rising antisemitism in the EU, which intensifies with every stage of the Middle East conflict, feeding anti-Jewish 'hatred targeting of Jewish institutions and individual Jews on the streets of Europe'. According to a recent statement 'antisemitic tropes, statements and threats across social and mainstream media have translated into violent attacks against Jews'.

In 2023, Parliament's Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs initiated work to extend the list of EU crimes to hate speech and hate crime in Article 83 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. The report was a reaction to the 2021 Commission communication 'A more inclusive and protective Europe: extending the list of EU crimes to hate speech and hate crime', 'whether because of race, religion, gender or sexuality'. In this framework, Parliament and the Council may establish minimum rules concerning the definition of criminal offences and sanctions, to be applicable in all EU Member States. Parliament voted in support of the report on 18 January 2024 in plenary.

Parliament's resolution of October 2018 pointed to the rise of neo-fascist violence in Europe, and political and media discourse trivialising the truth about the Holocaust. Calling on Member States to condemn and counter all forms of Holocaust denial, including the trivialisation of the crimes of the Nazis and their collaborators, it also pointed to the need to promote education on the diversity of our societies and our common history, including on the Holocaust. In this vein, Parliament's 2017 resolution on combating antisemitism had already encouraged Member States to promote teaching about the Holocaust (also referred to as the Shoah) in schools. It also suggested reviewing school textbooks to ensure that Jewish history and contemporary Jewish life are presented in a comprehensive and balanced way, to prevent all forms of antisemitism.

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