

This paper is based on remarks delivered by Ms. Sara J. Bloomfield at the at United Nations Headquarters on 28 January 2019, at the Holocaust memorial ceremony marking the International Day of commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust. Ms. Bloomfield served as keynote speaker at the memorial ceremony.

## **Holocaust History is Relevant to Our Lives Today**

**by Ms. Sara J. Bloomfield, Director, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum<sup>1</sup>**

At the dedication ceremony marking the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1993, Elie Wiesel said, “This museum is not an answer; it is a question mark”.<sup>2</sup> The Holocaust raises many big questions such as why it happened and what made it possible. Germany was an advanced, educated country with a democratic constitution, free speech and rule of law. By 1933, Germans had won more Nobel prizes than any other country. It would be comforting to think that Nazism was a sudden aberration. It was not. It was not a meteorite that one day simply fell from the sky. Nazism had deep roots in German and European history.<sup>3</sup> That history has much to teach us for our own times.

### **The Nazi Rise to Power**

In the late 19th Century, Europe was undergoing enormous economic, political and social changes. New technologies led to rapid industrialization, urbanization and globalization, which resulted in vast increases in poverty, disease and crime and new questions about identity, community and how to organize societies. Significant social dislocation led to a perception of winners and losers; to pervasive uncertainty, fear and resentment; and to desperate searches for easy answers to complex questions. In Germany, the First World War, the Russian Revolution, the Great Depression and widespread disillusionment with democracy created a perfect climate in which nationalism, racism and antisemitism flourished. Exploiting centuries of antisemitism and the more modern eugenics’ movement, Adolf Hitler combined hatred of Jews and racial ideology with national pride and unity. Central to Hitler’s beliefs was race - antisemitic racism, and the promotion of Germany as a proudly ethnic state for the “Aryan people”.<sup>4</sup>

Weimar Germany experienced a chaotic period of clashing extremes between communism and Nazism, creating backlash upon backlash, as the center hollowed out. Nazis instinctively understood that we are emotional creatures and that we respond well to simplistic solutions that address our basic fears. The Nazis provoked fear, but they also offered hope and a new future - a “racially pure” future. They skillfully created an inverted universe and redefined morality. Protection of the “Aryan” race became a moral act. The Golden Rule was rewritten as, “do unto your ethnic comrade as you would have him do unto you”. The notion of universal human dignity was considered a weakness, a reflection of so-called Old Testament Jewish values. Carl Schmitt, a political theorist and Nazi supporter, condemned the idea of universal human rights saying, “Not every being with a human face is human”.<sup>5</sup>

It might be comforting to think that all Germans were, like Schmitt, fervent Nazis. But by the time Hitler assumed power, 55 per cent of Germans had never voted for him. The 1920 Nazi party platform had 23 points. Only four were explicitly antisemitic. Other points included goals such as outlawing child labour; education of gifted children; old age welfare, and land reform.

Clearly, some Germans were rabid antisemites, but hardly all. Many thought Nazi antisemitism was too violent, yet they also saw that the Nazis offered an answer to years of multiple crises. That answer rested on the Nazis’ promotion of ethnic revival, the creation of the racial state and the elimination of what and who they considered to be existential threats to the “biological community”, namely the Jews. Most

Germans were indifferent to the escalating persecution of their Jewish co-workers, neighbours, even friends. All perpetrators count on indifference. Without the indifference of most, and the collaboration of many, the Holocaust would not have been possible.

It is sobering to realize that the Nazis were in power for eight years before they began the genocidal killings of the Jews. During these eight years Germans, Europeans and the international community knew about the growing antisemitic persecution inside the ever-expanding Third Reich.

### **The Relevance of Holocaust History**

We need to reflect on what this history means for our times. The obvious conclusion is that after 2,000 years of various forms of antisemitism, we know that antisemitism is not an eradicable disease. Nor is hate, nor indifference. Knowing this, we must ask whether we can tackle the problem of indifference, or whether it is ineradicable. We are all susceptible to indifference.

We live in an era of unprecedented change. The last century began with war, revolution and an economic crisis. The current century began with war waged by Al Qaeda, a technological revolution and a severe recession. Holocaust history reminds us of the vulnerabilities of human societies in times of rapid change. We face an ever-accelerating rate of change that we cannot begin to comprehend. In 2001, futurist Ray Kurzweil predicted our society would effectively experience 20,000 years of technological progress in the twenty-first century.<sup>6</sup> The Nazis were skilled in deploying the latest technologies along with a dangerous mix of propaganda, terror and the law. The Holocaust is a warning that technological progress is not moral progress.

One must ask how, with all this change, we will face unprecedented moral questions when social trust is so low. Consider the difficult questions we face now about free speech and hate speech in the context of the internet. Tom Friedman observed that while everybody lives in cyberspace, no one is in charge.<sup>7</sup>

Imagine the questions we will confront about what it means to be human considering the advancements in bio-engineering and artificial intelligence. The Nazis invoked so-called racial science as a modern idea that would redefine humanity and morality. We need to consider what can help us navigate the perilous road ahead. We will need historical perspective, critical thinking and moral anchors. We will need constructive ways to have difficult conversations. That is why Holocaust history is uniquely suited to this moment.

But first, we need a relentless fidelity to historical truth, which means the politicization of the Holocaust must end. It must stop being exploited as a propaganda tool for extreme nationalists as well as antisemites on both the right and the left. The United Nations General Assembly has rightly condemned Holocaust denial. It must continue to be relentless in its condemnation of Holocaust denial as one of many dangerous forms of antisemitism, especially in today's perilous climate.<sup>8</sup> The politicization of certain United Nations bodies by some member states to delegitimize the State of Israel must also end.

The Holocaust seems incomprehensible, but that is precisely why we must comprehend it. It was a watershed in our understanding of humanity. At the beginning of the twentieth century, we assumed education and democracy could protect us. The Holocaust revealed enduring truths about human capabilities and about good and evil. New scholarship reveals that other motivations such as peer approval, greed and career advancement led ordinary people to become complicit in acts of hate, antisemitism, even genocide.

History helps us look back, but life is lived forward. The citizens of the Weimar Republic did not understand that they were sitting on the edge of an abyss of evil. Today we realize just how susceptible

they were. The Weimar Republic could not withstand multiple crises and rapid change. There was no strong foundation of democratic practice and values. Social trust was lacking, as was a robust civil society. Jews, a longstanding and effective scapegoat throughout European history, became one again, and ordinary Germans found ways to rationalize this.

### **The Power of the Individual**

Elie Wiesel reminded us that the Holocaust is a timely cautionary tale. The unthinkable is always possible. That all societies are fragile should provoke many questions for us. Possibly the most critical question the history of the Holocaust challenges us to consider, is the role we choose to play in events. It is easy to blame or categorize others, but the Holocaust reminds us that individuals — for better or worse — have more power than they realize.

Elie Wiesel challenged us to continue asking of the world and ourselves what makes us susceptible to antisemitism, hate or indifference. We need to consider how we can avoid simple answers to complex problems. We need to ask how we can become better at listening to each other with empathy and humility, especially with those who look, pray and think differently from ourselves. We need to promote social cohesion by advancing the common good and searching for shared values that transcend differences. Ultimately, we need to consider our responsibility for the future.

The study of Holocaust history helps us look back and see where warning signs were missed; where unintended consequences were ignored; where wishful thinking prevailed. This looking back is what we owe the victims. We need to remember their lives; to remember the horror of their deaths; and to remember most of all that the world failed them. We cannot fail them again by forgetting. We cannot fail them again by ignoring rising antisemitism and distortion and politicization of the Holocaust. We cannot fail them again by not learning from our failures.

When we look back in history, it must be to see who was lost. It must be to see what happened, and what failed to happen. And it must be to see ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on remarks delivered at the United Nations Holocaust memorial ceremony in January 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Elie Wiesel, Remarks at the Dedication Ceremonies for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 22 April 1993 (accessed 1 April 2019).

<sup>3</sup> See for example, David M. Crowe, *The Holocaust – Roots, History, and Aftermath*. (New York, Routledge: 2008); *A Companion to Nazi Germany*. Editors: Shelley Baranowski, Armin Nolzen and Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann (John Wiley & Sons, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> The Nazis believed in the myth of the “Aryan race” and referred to so-called “racially pure” Germans as “Aryans”. This invented community excluded anyone who the Nazis believed had so-called “impure blood” and were, according to the Nazis, inferior. The Nazis furthermore believed that Jewish people were, “not a religious denomination, but a dangerous non-European “race”. (<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nazi-racism-an-overview>). Nazi racism facilitated murder on an unprecedented scale.

<sup>5</sup> As quoted in Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience*. (Cambridge MA., Harvard University Press: 2003, page 2). Koonz illustrates how central this orientation was to Nazi ideology.

<sup>6</sup> Ray Kurzweil, “The Law of Accelerating Returns” (Published on 7 March 2001, accessed 13 March 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Friedman, *Thank You for Being Late*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> See for example, United Nations Resolution (A/RES/60/7); <https://news.un.org/en/story/2007/01/207002-un-assembly-condemns-holocaust-denial-consensus-iran-disassociates-itself>; <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/01/1031442>; <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2017-01-27/secretary-generals-remarks-observance-international-day>

### Discussion Questions:

1. Ms. Bloomfield states that, “Holocaust history reminds us of the vulnerabilities of human societies in times of rapid change.” What are the vulnerabilities that arise in times of change? How do economic, political and social changes in society encourage extremism? During the rise of Nazism, what “solutions” did the Nazis offer a struggling people? What are some of the reasons that made these “solutions” so attractive?
2. Fear is a powerful force. Consider how fear can bind people together and pit people against each other. How did the Nazis use fear as a tactic to mobilize society to support Nazi racism and antisemitism? Consider how any leader or government could use fear to their political advantage.
3. Ms. Bloomfield says, “We will need historical perspective, critical thinking and moral anchors. We will need constructive ways to have difficult conversations. That’s why Holocaust history is uniquely suited to this moment.” What makes Holocaust history “uniquely suited” to helping us?
4. Ms. Bloomfield poses the question, “What is my role?” What do you consider your role to be in building a society that respects and protects human freedoms and human rights?

**Ms. Sara J. Bloomfield** joined the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1986 when it was a project in development and served in a variety of roles before being appointed Director in 1999. She serves on the International Auschwitz Council and is a former member of the board of the International Council of Museums/USA. She is the recipient of the Officers Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland and four honorary doctorates. She holds a Master’s degree in Education from John Carroll University.

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The discussion papers series provides a forum for individual scholars on the Holocaust and the averting of genocide to raise issues for debate and further study. These writers, representing a variety of cultures and backgrounds, have been asked to draft papers based on their own perspective and particular experiences.

The views expressed by the individual scholars do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations.