

This paper by United Nations Information Center (UNIC) in Moscow, published in August 2019, outlines the contribution that UNIC has made to Holocaust education and remembrance in Russia, in cooperation with the Holocaust and the United Nations Outreach Programme.

UNIC Moscow: Holocaust Education and Outreach in the Russian Federation

by Vladimir S. Pavinsky, National Information Officer, United Nations Information Centre in Moscow

In its outreach efforts related to Holocaust Remembrance, the staff of United Nations Information Centre (UNIC) Moscow have always proceeded from the assumption that ignorance about the Holocaust facilitates a breeding ground for several interrelated and disturbing phenomena. The problem is that while interest in the Holocaust continues to grow, misinformation about the Holocaust, whether deliberate or out of ignorance, is increasingly problematic. When people know little about an event, it is easy to trivialize it, manipulate it, distort it or even deny it.

The Holocaust, while targeting Jews, has universal significance for the community of nations. It represents a time when the values that underpin our joint civilization collapsed. The Holocaust forces us to contend with how such an event was at all possible. Had the Nazis and those allied with them succeeded in their genocidal aim, the years 1933-1945 would have realized the death of the entire European Jewish population. Six million men, women, and children were murdered.

For some people, the Holocaust is not a warning but rather a model to be imitated. It remains an ongoing tragedy of our world that there will always be those whose own insecurities will lead them to denigrate others, be they individuals or groups, not only in times of economic downturn but in times of prosperity as well. For economic, military, political, religious, or other reasons, throughout history the seeming necessity of scapegoating has occupied a central place in the cultural landscape of pre-Second-World-War Europe, with the dominant recipients of such escalating hatred being the Jews. This remains the case well into the twenty-first century.

The growth of the Internet and social media have mainstreamed hate and made all sorts of canards and unsubstantiated accusations available to millions of people around the world. Not surprisingly, as a result of this trend, various right-wing extremists have embraced the digital world as a powerful way to spread their message across borders and to an ever-widening circle of readers.

The online audience is often composed of teenagers and even children. What is available online has an unprecedented influence in shaping their ideas and opinions and helping to shape the future of society. Moreover, information on the Internet can be posted by anybody to anybody. There are problems that come along with this opportunity to gain knowledge offered by the Internet, since even false or misleading information can be presented in a visually attractive and convincing manner. In such an environment, the unsuspecting reader has no way of discerning lies from truths. That is how the Internet becomes ample breeding ground for extremists, including Holocaust deniers. And that is where our work as proponents of United Nations values on Holocaust remembrance begins.

Our small UNIC team is confident that we must teach the horrors of the past and present - the Holocaust and other examples of genocide - not only to young people, but to adults, and not only at school, but in other settings as well, in order to break the cycle of violence associated with hatred and prejudice.

It goes without saying that ignorance can be battled only with knowledge, and only with knowledge is there some chance of attaining wisdom to appreciate the need to preserve the memory of our past, own up to responsibility for crimes committed and prevent future genocides, ethnic cleansings and terror from claiming innocent victims. If memory is truly the beginning of redemption, then the time is now to begin the process.

We at UNIC Moscow know only too well that education has an important role to play in genocide prevention, and it is a core element of The Holocaust and the United Nations Outreach Programme. As follow-up to General Assembly resolutions 60/7 and 61/255, we have spared no effort to reach out to interested parties and, where appropriate, arrange discussions with non-governmental organization, educational institutions, veteran groups, and other members of civil society.

The “International Forum on Holocaust Awareness and Genocide Prevention”, which took place from 26 October to 1 November 2007 at Yad Vashem - The World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem, had a significant impact on UNIC Moscow’s programme of Holocaust outreach. Conducted by Yad Vashem’s International School for Holocaust Studies, in co-operation with The Holocaust and the United Nations Outreach Programme, the programme outlined the circumstances that had led to the Holocaust and examined the individual and collective responsibility in preventing genocide.

The International Forum provided my colleagues from the global network of UNICs and me with a unique opportunity to receive tools and knowledge to disseminate accurate information on the Holocaust in a relevant and effective manner. During the workshop, we listened to lecturers on various topic, including the history of the Holocaust and the role of the United Nations in helping to promote Holocaust awareness and prevent genocide. We also toured the museums and monuments of Yad Vashem’s campus.

In discussion sessions, we learnt and shared guidelines on best practices on Holocaust remembrance activities and preparations for special observances such as the International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust. In addition, we exchanged ideas on how to combat the underlying causes of genocide, such as hatred, bigotry, racism and prejudice, and explored ways to promote tolerance and human rights in our countries. We also had the opportunity to discuss the meaning of memory with Holocaust survivors.

As a result of the 2007 Forum in Jerusalem, UNIC Moscow has greatly enhanced its ability to organize meaningful and impactful observances with youth and to make their voices heard on the subject of shaping Holocaust remembrance and its significance for the future. Through enriching their knowledge in Holocaust history, many young Russians have become better equipped to demonstrate their commitment to preserving the memory and importance of the Holocaust in the twenty-first century.

Since 2007, UNIC Moscow has organized many Holocaust remembrance and education activities. For example, in April 2011 UNIC Moscow joined the Jewish Cultural Centre (JCC) in Moscow in organizing a poster exhibit titled *The Holocaust - Keeping the Memory Alive*. The exhibit featured 16 posters created by design students from the Czech Republic, Israel and France as part of the contest held by the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research, Yad Vashem - The World Holocaust Remembrance Center, Mémorial de la Shoah, the European Shoah Legacy Institute and The Holocaust and the United Nations Outreach Programme.

Another example of a Holocaust-related exhibit was organized in the city of Kazan in March 2014. Similar to all the former exhibitions of this kind, this one was organized in collaboration with the Russian Jewish Congress (RJC) and the Embassy of Israel in Moscow. This again was a “sequel” to the Russian segment of the ITF International Poster Competition “Keeping the Memory Alive”.

The ceremony included organizers' remarks, distribution of certificates to the participants in the competition and letters of gratitude to several Kazan University professors, as well as a small but symbolic concert. Each student's appearance on stage was accompanied by the screening of his/her work on a large white wall behind, which added to the event's visibility. Then the guests, professors and students were invited to a foyer where the exhibit featuring some 40 posters was on display.

In April 2015, three interlinked Holocaust-related events were held in the city of Nizhny Novgorod with support from UNIC Moscow. Two interactive "open lessons" were held at the Hessed Sara Charity Foundation and the Nizhny Novgorod State University while the third event featuring an exhibit of students' posters, was organized at Nizhny Novgorod Pedagogical University. The events were again held in collaboration with the Russian Jewish Congress (RJC).

The projects listed above brought home to young Russian audiences the point that the past must never be forgotten. It helped the young people to apprehend the scope of the Holocaust tragedy, pay tribute to its victims and survivors - and voice their views through interactive dialogues.

One of the more recent examples that illustrates how Holocaust outreach initiatives organised by UNIC Moscow to engage young people, was a series of Holocaust-related events organized by UNIC Moscow together with the Embassy of Israel from 27 to 29 January 2019 in the Russian city of Yekaterinburg, Russia's major industrial, education and research hub in the Urals.

The idea behind the project was to promote the joint agenda of the United Nations team across the country's major Federal District, through engaging the regional authorities, academic circles and civil society in a variety of high-level initiatives led by UNIC Moscow. In addition, it was intended to engage further young audiences in United Nations-led activities through continued awareness-raising and education activities. In so doing, UNIC Moscow partnered with the Yeltsin Center, a non-profit organization that promotes the institution of the Russian presidency and the development of civil society, democratic institutions and the rule of law.

As a co-organizer, UNIC Moscow contributed to an exhibit titled, "Shoah: How Was It Humanly Possible?" on the premises of the Yeltsin Center. The exhibit, co-hosted by Yad Vashem - The World Holocaust Remembrance Center and the Embassy of Israel in Moscow, exhaustively documented through text and photos European antisemitism and the history of the Holocaust. .

Opening the exhibit, UNIC Moscow's Director Vladimir Kuznetsov said that, "the unprecedented character of the Holocaust has universal implications for the future. By learning about the Holocaust and also about other genocides, through this exhibit or otherwise, people develop awareness that such crimes should never happen again. They learn about the responsibility of civil societies to speak up, prevent and stop genocide wherever it takes place in the world".

UNIC Director Kuznetsov emphasized that the International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust had become the personification of the general memory and mourning for all who gave their lives to free the world from the Nazis: "No matter how many years have passed, it is impossible to fathom the terrible scale of these evil deeds. According to materials from the Nuremberg Trials, six million Jews were victims of the Nazi machinery of annihilation. Among them were hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens. Around three million Soviet prisoners of war perished in the death camps. People of the most varied ages and nationalities were tortured, burned and ravaged. We mourn all those who gave their lives to free the world from the Nazis, from their barbarism and rage," he said.

Turning to the exhibit, Vladimir Kuznetsov noted that, "placing an emphasis on the faces, names and daily lives of Holocaust victims restores dignity to all those who were murdered. By preserving victims as

human beings from long-established communities, rather than as statistics in gas chambers and mass graves, people can better grasp the essence of the tragedy”. The keynote speakers included the Governor of Sverdlovsk Region, Yevgeny Kuivashev; Minister Plenipotentiary Keren Cohen Gat of the Embassy of Israel, and other guests.

Yevgeny Kuivashev said in particular that, “remembering those who perished and appreciating those who liberated – requires us to take an unequivocal stand here. Those who saw, knew, and did nothing – also bear their share of responsibility, even if they do not have blood on their hands”.

“27 January, the day that the Auschwitz¹ death camp was liberated by Soviet forces, proclaimed as the Holocaust Remembrance Day, commemorates the memory of everyone who gave their life at the hands of Nazi Germany and fought to rid the world from fascists and their ideology. The generations who did not witness the horrors of war should know about them. And we all should remember the terrible price that humanity paid for turning a blind eye to xenophobia and chauvinism. Remember, that six million people were killed only for being Jews,” Yevgeny Kuivashev said.

The opening ceremony was the first in a series of events, dedicated to Holocaust Remembrance. These included *The Last Flight of Petr Ginz* documentary screening, thematic panel discussions and lectures for students and young audiences. UNIC Moscow also distributed Russian language copies of The Holocaust and the United Nations Outreach Programme’s Discussion Papers Journal.

Overall, the Holocaust Remembrance Week in the city of Yekaterinburg, initiated by UNIC Moscow and the Embassy of Israel, with support from the Russian Jewish Congress and the Holocaust Foundation, was in line with a well-established tradition of annual commemorative events, which the regional authorities, academics and the Jewish community have confirmed they would be willing to carry on in the future.

It is beyond any doubt that the Holocaust Remembrance Week in Yekaterinburg helped the general public of all backgrounds, who are otherwise not fully conversant with all the facts surrounding the Holocaust and are therefore seeking to refresh or enrich their knowledge of this tragedy, to learn more about the contemporary relevance of the Holocaust and its universal lessons.

¹ Auschwitz-Birkenau: German Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp (1940-1945). The World Heritage Committee agreed to change the name of the camp on UNESCO’s World Heritage List in June 2007.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why according to Vladimir S. Pavinsky is it important to teach about the Holocaust?
2. Why are the Internet and social media widely used by various extremists and Holocaust deniers? What do you think can be done to challenge the misinformation about the Holocaust that they spread?
3. How does UNIC Moscow engage young people in learning about the Holocaust and Holocaust remembrance?
4. Do you know if there is United Nations Information Centre in your country/town? If yes, are you familiar with the activities they organize?

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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.