

# INTERNATIONAL HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE DAY

By Cherolyn Amery



[United Nations] Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned on Monday [28 January] that hatred of Jews is getting worse, saying that "we must rise up against rising anti-Semitism." He told the UN's annual commemoration of International Holocaust Remembrance Day that anti-Semitic incidents in the United States increased 57 percent in 2017, according to the Anti-Defamation League. He said the European Union's Fundamental Rights Agency reported last year that 28 percent of Jews experienced some form of harassment just for being Jewish. The UN chief also pointed to attempts to rewrite the history of the Holocaust, during which 6 million Jews and many others were murdered by Adolf Hitler's forces

during the Nazi occupation of Europe in World War II. (*Associated Press*)

## ***The need to remember***

The annual International Holocaust Remembrance Day is a relatively 'new' event on the global calendar – it was officially designated by the United Nations General Assembly in 2005, the year in which the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II and the liberation of Nazi concentration camps was marked. 27 January was chosen as International Holocaust Remembrance Day, as that was the day on which Auschwitz (one of the most infamous concentration camps) was liberated.

Germany, in particular, has a high 'culture of remembrance' – the state has been actively maintaining this, but Christoph Hasselbach of *DW (Deutsche Welle)* says that there is still much public interest in such matters, and "former concentration camps and other memorial sites are registering record visitor numbers". This was not always the case in Germany – Hasselbach describes a "general silence" on such matters until the 1960s. The change is attributed to the start of questioning by younger generations in Germany, and critical thinking about the actions of their elders. It is also interesting to note that before the screening of a miniseries called "Holocaust" in 1979, the word "holocaust" was unknown to many Germans.

While the Holocaust is mainly associated with the murder of an estimated six million Jews, there was a wide range of other groups targeted as well, including Slavs, Poles, Roma, Serbs, other ethnic minorities, mentally and physically disabled people, Jehovah's Witnesses, and 'asocials' (homosexuals and political dissidents). And while genocide has not occurred on the same scale since the Holocaust, this year's Day of Remembrance also marked 40 years since the genocide in Cambodia and 25 years since the Rwandan genocide.

## ***Recent trends***

Studies about attitudes, knowledge and anti-Semitic trends are carried out with some regularity, and much was written about the most recent results around the time of the International Holocaust Remembrance Day. *BBC News* reported that one such study – a poll of more than 2,000 people carried out by Opinion Matters for the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust – found that 5% of UK adults do not believe that the Holocaust took place at all, while one in 12 believe that its scale was exaggerated. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, in his Remembrance Day speech, spoke of a recent European poll that showed one-third of the surveyed populace knowing "little or nothing" about the Holocaust.

*RT (Russia Today)* reported on another study (conducted by the Holocaust Remembrance Project) that pointed to some trends of denial and revision, especially in Eastern Europe. 'Revisionism' refers to attempts to "minimise governments' complicity, downplaying the number of victims, or claiming that the events of the Holocaust never occurred at all". In the study, Poland, Hungary, Croatia and Lithuania all showed tendencies that the project categorised as problematic. Romania, in contrast, was praised for its government's implementation of mandatory Holocaust training for military staff.

In terms of practical experience, a survey conducted by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights found that 41% of Jews in Germany reported having been affected by anti-Semitic hostility, compared to the average of 28% in the other countries that were polled. A report by Israel's Ministry of Diaspora Affairs pointed to record high levels of anti-Semitism around the world, both in real life and online. That report also said that Jews in the US, who represent 2% of the population, were victims of 58% of religion-based 'hate crimes' in 2017. Both France and the UK also saw an increase in anti-Semitic attitudes and incidents in 2018, according to the report. Guterres addressed these global trends in his Remembrance Day speech, as well as the increased persecution of other people groups too, saying that "across the world, we are seeing a disturbing rise in other forms of bigotry".

### **FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE**

As there are fewer and fewer Holocaust survivors and as more time passes, remembering will be an intentional act. Some are critical of a 'remembrance culture' – German author Martin Walser spoke of the Holocaust being used as a "moral cudgel". And it is true that, sometimes, remembering can be used to stir anger and hatred. Regardless, there is a need for historical memory of events such as the Holocaust to be passed on to upcoming generations, so that people can know what mankind is capable of. Guterres spoke of education being crucial – "about the Holocaust, about genocide and crimes against humanity, about racism and the history of slavery".

Active remembering is also a Biblical principle – the people of Israel were instructed to remember how God had led them out of Egypt, Old Testament men of God set up stones as memorials of God's speaking and working, and the Psalms speak numerous times of calling to mind what has gone before. These acts of remembering were not just for personal encouragement – they were also intended to be used to teach younger generations. For Christians around the world, remembering the Holocaust can be motivation to ask where there is need to get involved today, on behalf of those who need a voice.

### **PRAY**

- **For times of remembrance to be opportunities for greater understanding and compassion**
- **For people to remember the hard and tragic lessons of the past, so that they will not be repeated**
- **For believers to lead the way in actively pursuing opportunities for reconciliation between polarised communities**

### **IMAGE SOURCE:**

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