

The European Union and Holocaust remembrance

SUMMARY

The *Holocaust* was the state-sponsored, systematic persecution and mass murder of Jews, whom the Nazi regime and its collaborators sought to annihilate along with other persecuted groups, such as Roma and Sinti. The expropriation, state-sponsored discrimination and persecution of the Jews by the Nazi regime began in 1933, followed by *pogroms* and their mass incarceration in concentration camps. Ultimately, this policy was extended to all Nazi-controlled European territories and countries during World War II, culminating in mass summary executions ('Holocaust by Bullets') and extermination in death camps. The perpetrators were prosecuted at the Nuremberg trials in 1945-1946; however, the tribunal preferred to indict them on charges of crimes against humanity rather than genocide.

It was not until 2005, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz that a United Nations resolution designated 27 January the day for international commemoration of the Holocaust, to be known as 'International Holocaust Remembrance Day'.

In the European Union, numerous programmes seek to preserve the memory of these tragic events in the history of the continent. Since 1995, the European Parliament has adopted resolutions drawing attention to the obligation to remember not only through commemorations but also through education. In November 2018, the EU became a permanent international partner of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA).

This is a further updated version of a briefing from January 2018.



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The Holocaust tragedy of World War II

Holocaust is a word of Greek origin meaning 'sacrifice by fire'. It is the word generally [used](#) to describe the state-sponsored persecution and subsequent mass murder of 6 million European Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators.

The run up to World War II

Anti-Semitism was already one of the core elements of Nazi ideology before the Nazis seized power in Germany. From 1933, the Nazis began implementing a state policy of repression against the Jews, which consisted of plundering their property, depriving them of their rights and stripping them of their citizenship. [Making up](#) 0.8 % of Germany's pre-war population, most Jews considered themselves loyal patriots. However, little by little they were banished from public life, prevented from working as officials and subjected to economic boycotts. The Nazis' intention was to expel as many Jews as possible. In 1935, the [Nuremberg Laws](#) stripped Jews of their German citizenship and banned marriage and relationships between Jews and non-Jews. In the *Kristallnacht* pogroms of 9 and 10 November 1938, which were aided by elements of the state, 91 Jews were killed, 1 400 synagogues burned and 30 000 Jews incarcerated in concentration camps. A few weeks later, Polish Jews were expelled. By 1942, some 300 000 of Germany's 500 000 Jews had fled the country.

The war and the 'Final Solution'

From the beginning of the war in 1939, the Nazi authorities instigated systematic repression of Jews in the territories they conquered. In areas under Berlin's control, the Nazis created a [thousand](#) ghettos in which they forced Jews to live. The methods used by the Nazis and their allies in central Europe differed from those used in western Europe, but the [objectives](#) were essentially the same: dehumanisation, beginning with the removal of economic and civil rights, and ultimately the denial of all rights to dignity, before finally implementing a policy of extermination.

With the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, the policy of exterminating Jews was applied in the conquered territories. This still little-known aspect of the tragedy has been called the 'Holocaust by Bullets'. In Ukraine, for example, half a million Jews were murdered by *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile execution units), *Waffen-SS* units, German police and local collaborators. Only a minority were deported; most were executed on the spot and thrown into mass graves. Devised at the [Wannsee Conference](#) in 1942, the 'Final Solution' envisaged the killing of 11 million Jews, including those in neutral countries and the United Kingdom. Throughout Europe, Jews and non-Jews (who would later come to be termed 'the Righteous') resisted this policy, most notably in the [Warsaw Ghetto Uprising](#). The concentration and extermination camps enabled the systematic murder of 6 million European Jews before the camps were liberated by the Allies in 1944 and 1945. At the Nuremberg trials, the perpetrators were tried for crimes against humanity, but the tribunal did not specifically recognise the crimes against Jews and Roma as genocide. In 1953, Israel established the [Yad Vashem](#) museum, which has become one of the main sources of Holocaust knowledge and remembrance.

Genocide and crimes against humanity

Historical research conducted since WWII has shown that entire [categories](#) of people were to be exterminated because of their origin (Jews, Roma), disability, religion (e.g. Jehovah's Witnesses), sexual orientation or political opinions.

International recognition

United Nations

While the term [genocide](#) was not used in the final judgment of the Nuremberg Tribunal, the UN General Assembly did address the issue, pushing for the adoption of the [International Convention](#)

[on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide](#) (1948). In 2005, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, the UN General Assembly adopted a [resolution](#) on Holocaust Remembrance, which recalled 'the murder of one third of the Jewish people along with countless members of other minorities'. It designated 27 January – the date on which Auschwitz was liberated in 1945 – International Holocaust Remembrance Day, and called for establishing an outreach programme on the subject of the Holocaust. In 2007, the UN General Assembly adopted a [resolution](#) on Holocaust denial.

Council of Europe

The Council of Europe established [Holocaust Remembrance Day in 2002](#). While France and Germany had themselves chosen 27 January, Holocaust Day varies in other countries according to their respective historical experience. The Council of Europe furthermore [encourages](#) teachers in its member states to develop awareness of the history of the Holocaust. To this end, it has also been organising [workshops](#) for trainers and teachers to deepen their knowledge of Holocaust history and prevention of crimes against humanity.

International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA)

The [IHRA](#) brings together [34 countries](#) (including 25 EU countries) aspiring to preserve the memory of the Holocaust to prevent it from being repeated. The EU became a permanent [IHRA](#) international partner in November 2018, as a way to establish closer cooperation in combatting Holocaust denial and preventing racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism with other members. The current working groups within the alliance deal with education, museums and academic research. The [Stockholm Declaration on the Holocaust](#) issued by the IHRA in 2000 confirms its commitment to commemorating the Holocaust victims, promoting education about the Holocaust and facilitating archival research into still obscure areas of this period.

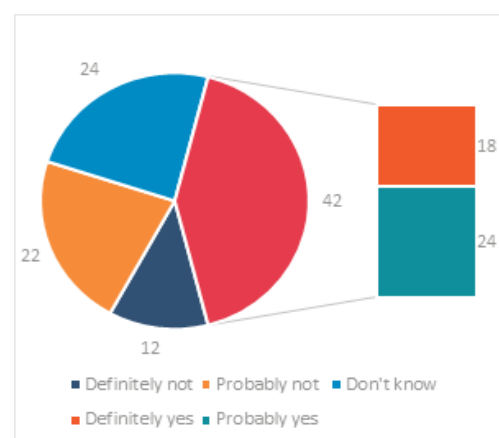
In 2013, the IHRA provided a working definition of [Holocaust denial](#) and distortion, also qualifying it as a form of anti-Semitism. This definition has been endorsed by 31 IHRA member countries. In May 2016, the IHRA provided a non-legally binding [definition](#) of anti-Semitism: 'Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities'. Examples of anti-Semitism given in the definition include Holocaust denial. The definition has been endorsed by [14 member countries](#); its endorsement has raised some controversies in France.

Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism in the EU

In line with the 2008 [Council Framework decision](#) on racism and xenophobia, Member States had to make the following acts punishable as a criminal offence by November 2010: 'publicly condoning, denying or grossly trivialising crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes ... when the conduct is carried out in a manner likely to incite violence or hatred against such a group or a member of such a group'. This provision applies to the Holocaust; consequently, Holocaust denial has been punishable as a criminal offence in the whole EU since then.

In November 2018, the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) published a [report](#) analysing data on anti-Semitism in the

Figure 1. Awareness that Holocaust denial is criminalised in the EU, %

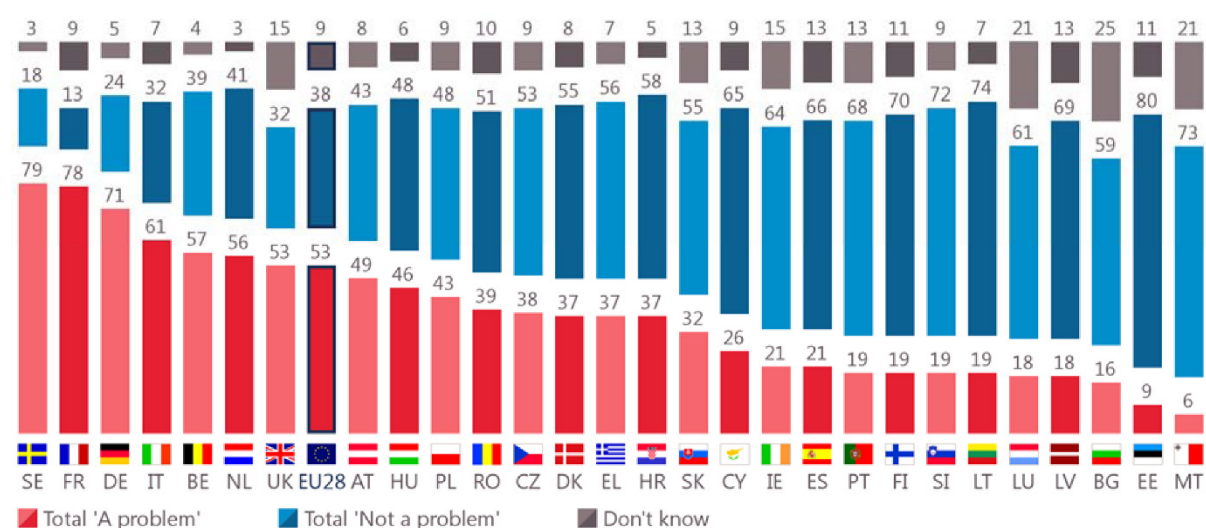


Source: Special [Eurobarometer](#) 484, December 2018.

EU between 2007 and 2017. The report established that there were large gaps in Member States' data collection and disparities in the data they collect. It also showed that Holocaust denial is on the rise in the EU: in 2017, the FRA reported 12 such cases, as compared to 4 in 2007.

The European Commission's December 2018 [Eurobarometer 484](#) on perceptions of anti-Semitism analysed three aspects of Holocaust denial: the awareness of legislation penalising Holocaust denial (Figure 1), Holocaust denial as a major problem and a manifestation of anti-Semitism (Figure 2), and teaching about the Holocaust in schools (Map 1). Figure 1 shows that fewer than half of respondents are aware that Holocaust denial is criminalised. Only one in five is sure about it.

Figure 2. The perception that Holocaust denial is a problem



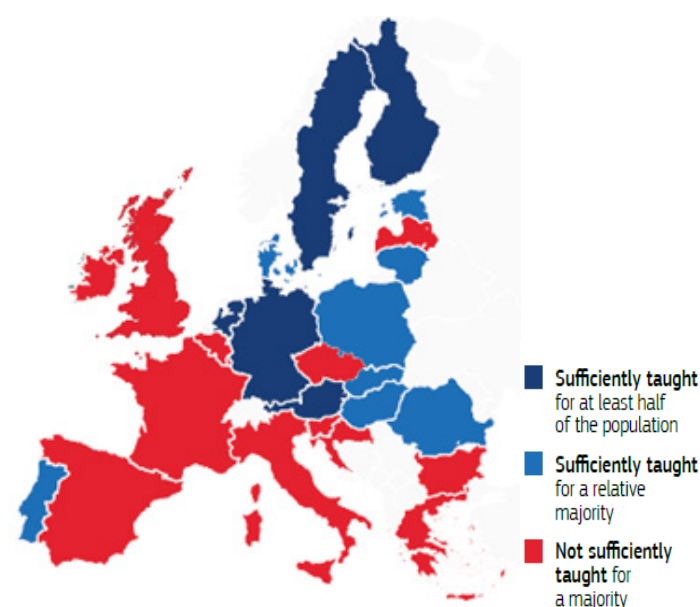
Source: Special [Eurobarometer](#) 484, December 2018.

More than half of respondents find that Holocaust denial is a problem; 42% are aware that it is punishable. Cypriots, Bulgarians, Swedes and Finns are least aware that denying the Holocaust is a crime. On the other hand, more than a majority of Swedes believe that Holocaust denial is a problem (79%), with French (78 %) and Germans (71 %) following closely behind.

In Germany, this issue is of particular concern. In December 2019, during her visit to the Nazi extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland, [Angela Merkel](#), only the third German chancellor to have visited the site, warned of growing anti-Semitism and revisionism in Europe. As part of a study, the

'[Holocaust remembrance project](#)', sponsored by Yale University, Grinnell College and the European

Map 1. Perception of Holocaust teaching in schools



Source: Special [Eurobarometer](#) 484, December 2018.

Union of Progressive Judaism, research was carried out in all EU Member States except Sweden, Portugal, Spain, UK, Ireland, Malta and Cyprus. It concluded that Holocaust revisionism is alive in the EU, particularly in central Europe, with the exception of Czechia and Romania. However, some western European democracies, such as Italy, face this problem as well, while France has progressed significantly in accepting responsibility for its Vichy government's collaboration with the Nazis. The report study grades the situation in particular Member States with a yellow mark meaning 'caution, watch out' (Bulgaria, Denmark, Italy, Latvia, Slovakia and Slovenia), and a red one meaning 'tough work ahead' (Croatia, Hungary, Lithuania and Poland).

Holocaust education is essential for preventing Holocaust denial. A 2018 publication by Unesco and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) on 'Addressing Anti-Semitism through Education. Guidelines for Policymakers', highlights education about the Holocaust as a part of [education about anti-Semitism](#), but also stresses the need to include lessons about anti-Semitism in curricula on the Holocaust. The above-mentioned Eurobarometer 484 analyses the perception in all 28 EU Member States concerning this issue.

EU contribution to Holocaust remembrance

Testimonies and the duty of remembrance

Simone Veil, who became European Parliament President following the first direct elections in 1979 and the first woman to hold that office, was one of the rare survivors of Auschwitz. The [space](#) in front of the Parliament's central building in Brussels is named in her honour, in tribute to a great woman who was 'firmly convinced that teaching the Holocaust is an absolute necessity' for Holocaust remembrance.¹ In her [speech](#) to the [Council of Europe](#) in October 2002, she also spoke about the Roma victims of Nazism and deplored the 'widespread ignorance of their tragic fate'. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum estimates the number of the [Roma victims of the Holocaust](#) at up to [250 000](#), but according to most experts, the Roma genocide took [half a million](#) lives.

European Union support

The EU [Europe for Citizens](#) programme aims, among other things, to raise awareness of European remembrance and to promote projects dedicated to [European remembrance](#) through research, exhibitions, debates and education. The 2007-2013 programme, drawn up after the commemorations marking the 60th anniversary of the end of the Nazi regime, included a strand for activities inviting reflection on totalitarian regimes and their victims, including Holocaust remembrance. Holocaust remembrance projects in recent years include one carried out in cooperation with schoolchildren in [Ireland](#), another in Latvia on Western Jews transferred to the [Riga ghetto](#), and an Italian one on [Roma victims](#) as a part of the project [RECALL](#).

The EU Framework Programme for Research ([Horizon 2020](#)) supports the integration of regional and national research infrastructure into a European infrastructure, including on the Holocaust, an example of which is the [EHRI](#) (European Holocaust Research Infrastructure). With regard to the Holocaust, the aim is to [facilitate cooperation](#) between research centres, museums and the [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#) through their archives, focusing in particular on small-scale infrastructure that is still little known. The [House of European History](#), a European Parliament initiative in Brussels, has devoted part of its exhibition to the Holocaust.

Europeana, the EU digital platform for European cultural resources, includes a section called [Judaica Europeana](#), which is a network of archives, libraries and museums working together to integrate and

Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum

EU grants have helped, among other things, to [preserve](#) the barracks at Auschwitz II-Birkenau and Auschwitz I, refit the international theatre at the Holocaust education centre, buy equipment for digitising documents and modernise the archiving infrastructure.

expand access to their digitised collections, thereby keeping alive the memory of a people who have disappeared from certain parts of Europe.

In 2010, 10 years after the [Stockholm Declaration](#), the EU Fundamental Rights Agency published a multilingual [handbook for teachers](#) entitled 'Excursion to the past – teaching for the future', which highlights the links between Holocaust education and human rights, as well as the role of historical sites and museums in education and remembrance.

European Parliament

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 the UN General Assembly resolution, it adopted a resolution proposing 27 January as [European Day of Remembrance of the Holocaust](#) in the EU. In its October 2017 resolution, Parliament called on the Member States to mark 2 August as the date for commemoration of the [victims of the Roma Holocaust](#) and to include this community in the annual Holocaust Remembrance Day on 27 January. In the same year, in another [resolution](#) adopted on 1 June, on anti-Semitism, Parliament called on the Member States to adopt and apply the working definition of anti-Semitism employed by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, in order to identify and prosecute anti-Semitic attacks more efficiently and effectively. An October 2018 [resolution](#) on the rise of neo-fascist violence in Europe draws attention to the rise of violence against Jews and calls on the Member States to counter Holocaust denial and trivialisation, and to mainstream the issue in education.

ENDNOTE

¹ S. Veil, *Mes Combats*, Bayard Éditions, Montrouge, 2016.

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