Holocaust, Shoah, Hurban: Naming and commemorating the unspeakable

SUMMARY

The words and names used to refer to events are important; they shape people’s understanding of the notions they refer to, fix events in the collective memory, and define the necessary acts of commemoration and remembrance. This process is particularly sensitive when it comes to the Nazi regime and the antisemitic atrocities it perpetrated.

The Nazis’ obsession with race had many dimensions and applied to a wide range of people whom they considered detrimental to racial purity, in terms of both ethnicity and physical and moral standards. These ideas found fertile soil in the age-old racial prejudices of antisemitism, and well-rooted discrimination against various minorities, such as Roma and Sinti, and homosexuals. When they came to power, the Nazis immediately put various measures in place, all aimed at the physical annihilation of all Jews, whether assimilated or not, practising or not, and wherever they were, even bringing them from the most remote areas to their purpose-built extermination camps. Their goal was the total destruction of Jewish culture and Judaism as a religion, and any trace of their existence.

Various groups of Jews and non-Jews have designated this dark period in Jewish and European history by different names, evoking differing underlying notions and understandings of the conditions in which the events happened. It took a long time to decide how best to commemorate the victims. In today’s Europe, antisemitism and Holocaust denial, distortion and trivialisation have grown exponentially, amplified by digital technologies and social media, as well as foreign interference and propaganda. The European Union (EU) therefore has a duty to step up its efforts to counter these toxic trends. It must make sure that its strategy on combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish life and its efforts to promote Holocaust education are implemented across the Member States, so that Jewish communities can live in safety, and not be subjected to hatred, including through the distortion of history.

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Introduction

When Hitler came to power in Germany in January 1933, antisemitism was already widespread in the country and across the continent, along with commonplace discrimination against Roma and Sinti (also referred to as gypsies, Bohemians, nomads, etc.). The implementation of Hitler’s racist policies did not take much time or meet any hurdles. At least 18 centuries of antisemitism and several hundred years of Roma and Sinti persecution constituted fertile soil for individual citizens to collaborate with this evil as indifferent bystanders, if not active participants, across the German Reich and later, across annexed and conquered territories.

Hitler’s obsession with race and belief in ‘Aryan’ racial superiority, with Germans considered the finest representatives of an Aryan race, resulted in a rapidly expanding body of racist legislation. The objective was for a purely Aryan population to inhabit the country and future conquered territories. Germany’s citizens should meet not only precise racial requirements in terms of ancestry, but also display personal characteristics of strong physical and psychological traits, moral discipline and devotion to the dominant ideology.

Despite rare and alarming reports of brutal racial violence in the conquered territories, it was long after the war was over before the scale of this brutality was fully understood. This understanding came first from the investigations surrounding the military tribunal in Nuremberg and successive trials of war criminals. Then, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, historians gained access to more victim testimonies and new archives. Research into this difficult historical period has forced Europeans to face uncomfortable facts.

It took until the 1980s (with films made by Claude Lanzmann) to achieve global recognition of the importance of commemorating the victims of the Nazi extermination policies, of identifying them, of naming the events, victims and perpetrators, and of choosing a date for remembrance.

Short historical background

The Nuremberg Race Laws passed in the early days of the Nazi regime targeted about half a million assimilated Jews (0.75% of the German population in 1933), together with approximately 60 thousand Roma and Sinti, against an ideological backdrop that went back a long way. The laws progressively and swiftly limited their targets’ individual freedoms, in a short time banning Jews from participation in professional, public and political life, schools and cultural and sporting life, and enforcing racial segregation. To general public indifference, Jews were forced to abandon their property and search for a way to emigrate. In parallel, the initial persecution of Roma and Sinti took another form – forced sterilisation of women to stop the growth of their population.

The Nazis’ political opponents (mostly communists) and homosexuals – all of whom were considered asocial like the Roma and Sinti but who according to racial laws were Aryans – were sent to concentration camps. Jehovah’s Witnesses who stood by their faith and values and refused to surrender to Nazi violence and hatred were also qualified people to be removed from the ‘healthy fabric of German society’. People with various types of disabilities were declared a burden, bringing shame on Aryan German society, and were destined to be killed in the ‘Aktion T4’ involuntary euthanasia programme. This was the only group targeted by Nazi racial purification policy for whom ordinary Germans spoke out, forcing the Nazis to abandon the programme.

As the Nazis expanded their power, annexing Austria and then the Sudetenland, forming the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, and then invading Poland in September 1939 and the Soviet Union in June 1941, they imposed their racial policies and ideologies. In occupied or annexed territories, Jews were immediately required to register and to wear a yellow star to separate them from the rest of the local population. This was reminiscent of distinguishing clothing or badges Jews had been forced to wear in previous times. They were forced to move to ghettos where they suffered from overpopulation, hunger, violence and typhus before being transported by cargo trains to the gas chambers the Nazis built in occupied Poland, or they were killed in extermination camps and
buried in mass graves across Eastern Europe. Roma and Sinti, communists, Soviet prisoners of war, homosexuals, and Jehovah’s Witnesses were sent to forced work and concentration camps where many of them were killed or died from exhaustion. Various other groups, such as intellectuals and cultural elites and members of underground anti-Nazi resistance groups, suffered a similar fate in conquered territories, where people were randomly caught in round-ups, and sent to labour or concentration camps or executed.

On the outbreak of World War II, Jews accounted for between 1.7% and 2.4% of the continent’s population, while currently they make up just 0.2%. The Nazis, their allies and collaborators exterminated the majority (66%) of Europe’s Jews (around 6 million of a total of 9.5 million), representing 40% of world’s Jewish population, estimated at 15.3 million. They looted property, burnt synagogues, and destroyed Jewish sacred and prayer books and Yiddish libraries, as they sought the physical and cultural annihilation of Jews. The Nazi obsession with Jews reached absurdity when they sent a boat to the Greek island of Leros to collect the only Jew living there so that he would join deportation transport to Auschwitz. The German army’s retreat and likely defeat actually accelerated Nazi Germany’s efforts to bring as many Jews as possible to extermination sites and kill them.

It is estimated that between 250,000 and 500,000 Roma and Sinti were killed by the Nazis, accounting for between 25% and 60% of their pre-war population in Germany. According to the International Romani Union, it is difficult to define the number, as the registers of the Roma and Sinti populations were not precise, meaning that some Roma and Sinti could feature in the statistics under other categories. Moreover, Roma and Sinti traditions do not allow them to invoke memories of their dead openly, so their sufferings and victims were not spoken about. As a result, it was only in 1979 that West Germany admitted that Nazi crimes against Roma and Sinti were racially motivated.

Naming the un-nameable

Holocaust definitions

**Imperial War Museum**, London: The Holocaust was the systematic murder of Europe’s Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators during the Second World War. This programme of targeted mass murder was a central part of the Nazis’ broader plans to create a new world order based on their ideology.

**Yad Vashem – The World Holocaust Remembrance Center**, Jerusalem: The Holocaust was an unprecedented genocide, total and systematic, perpetrated by Nazi Germany and its collaborators, with the aim of annihilating the Jewish people. The primary motivation was the Nazis’ antisemitic racist ideology.

**United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**, Washington DC: The Holocaust (1933–1945) was the systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million European Jews by the Nazi German regime and its allies and collaborators.

**International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA)**: The Holocaust was the systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million European Jews by Nazi Germany and those fascist and extreme nationalist partners and other collaborators who participated in those crimes.

Source: **IWM, Yadvashem, USHMM, IHRA**.

Historians of the Nazi dictatorship and the extermination of Jews, Roma and Sinti, and other victims, are still investigating and uncovering the ever broader scope of the regime’s discrimination and extermination policies across Europe but also in former North African colonies. The question arises of how to name the crimes perpetrated against so many people, and so many different population groups, in so many territories on so many different grounds, all in the name of racial purity and superiority. Is it possible or desirable that a single word designate these crimes and all the victims?
From the onset of Nazi antisemitic policies, Jews felt that they were a serious threat and qualified the situation using various terms referring to their martyrdom such as 'tèva'h' (massacre) 'hareyga' (murder) but rare were those conscious of the unprecedented scale of what was happening to them. Among themselves, Jews spoke of a catastrophe, and used a Biblical Hebrew word 'Hurban' or its Yiddish version 'Hurbn', meaning 'to destroy'. The word refers to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, first by the Mesopotamians and then by the Romans. Putting the Nazis' extermination policy in the Biblical context of the historical tragic fate of Jews and the many catastrophes they had faced, has been intrinsic to the Jews' interpretation of the history of the annihilation of European Judaism by Nazi Germany.

In the 1960s, secular Jews distanced themselves from this perception and put the extermination of Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators in a new perspective, that of a massacre on an unprecedented industrial scale, and one that should not be placed in the Biblical context of Jewish martyrdom. They chose another Hebrew term 'Shoah' ('shoah u-meshoah' – waste and desolation, תועם in Hebrew). In parallel, the Greek Biblical word Holocaust, sporadically used by Jews already during the war, re-emerged in this new meaning in the late 1960s. It is generally understood that the original term refers to a sacrifice by fire of an animal, as defined for example in Webster dictionaries of English at the turn of the 20th century. François Mauriac, a French Catholic thinker, used the word 'holocaust' in his introduction to Elie Wiesel's novel 'The Night', giving it a Catholic theological context and interpretation. Until the 1970s, the term 'Jewish holocaust' was used, later a US series 'Holocaust', popular in the Western world, promoted the term in the English-speaking world in particular.

In his 1985 documentary film Shoah, director Claude Lanzmann filmed places where Jews were exterminated, and recorded nine hours of interviews with survivors and local populations. The film was highly acclaimed and raised general interest, while causing controversy in Poland. It popularised the term 'Shoah', which is largely used by Jewish communities in France and in Israel, where the term Holocaust is perceived as foreign and offensive to Jews.

Poland was home to the largest Jewish community in Europe before World War Two (WWII) and lost up to 90% of its Jewish citizens (Poland's pre-WWII Jewish population numbered 3 million, representing 9.5% of the Polish population). In Poland the word 'Zagłada' or 'Zagłada Żydów' (extermination / extermination of Jews) is used.

In 1944, as the extermination of Jews, Roma and Sinti was well under way across Europe, a Jewish-Polish lawyer, Rafał Lemkin, coined the legal term 'genocide'. He had been already working on this concept before the outbreak of the World War II, having in mind pogroms of Jews and other ethnic and religious minorities. Lemkin created a distinct category in international law. The term appeared for the first time in the indictment against prominent Nazi war criminals at the International War Tribunal in Nuremberg in October 1945. All the prosecutors except the American one accepted the new term; the sentence referred to crimes against humanity.

The new term made its way to international legal system with the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, adopted in December 1948 and applied in further proceedings against Nazi war criminals. Under the Convention 'genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- killing members of the group;
- causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

Roma and Sinti, who were targeted by Nazi racial laws and deported to extermination camps, also felt the need to name what had happened to them. They used two terms: Samudaripen and
Parajmos. The former was first used in the 1970s in Yugoslavia in reference to the Auschwitz and Jasenovac concentration camps operating in Croatia between 1941 and 1945, where Jews, Serbs, Roma and other non-Catholic minorities, as well as Croatian political and religious opponents of the regime were imprisoned and murdered. This Romani neologism meaning ‘murder of all’ or ‘mass murder’ (‘sa’ is Romani for ‘all’ and ‘mudaripen’ means ‘murder’) is neutral, respectful and conveys a feeling of grief. The International Romani Union accepts this term. Porajmos (destruction, devouring) is emotionally charged emphasising the intent to murder on the part of the Nazis.

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance operates a specific distinction in its mission statement, where it states it was founded to ‘address issues related to the Holocaust and genocide of the Roma’. This statement implies that the term ‘Holocaust’ refers only to Jews.

From stigmatisation to denial

The theory of the ten stages of genocide describes the complex and long process leading to a genocide. The initial stage of focusing negative emotions on differences between various population groups, their stigmatisation and dehumanisation, opens the doors for the introduction of legal instruments of discrimination and persecution. Then the genocidal authoritarian or dictatorial regime plans and organises mass murders while local communities are ready or even eager to participate, having already been stirred up by propaganda and supported by the regime. As the eventual extermination stage, the genocide, takes place, the perpetrators deny its existence and any wrongdoing. There have been many genocides since the extermination of Jews across Europe by the Nazis and their collaborators, such as those perpetrated in Bosnia and Rwanda. Nevertheless, the industrial scale, state-sponsored management, and popular indifference or participation in the massacres conducted under the Nazi regime make them stand out among other atrocities. This genocide is certainly the most significant to have taken place in Europe.

Until relatively recently, historical research defined the timeframe for this genocide as beginning in the period starting with the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, accelerating with the ‘Final Solution of the Jewish Question’ in January 1942 and ending in May 1945 with German capitulation. However, given the strong antisemitic motivation of the Nazi regime, the timeline for the Holocaust/Shoah is now considered to start at the point Hitler came to power in Germany, in early 1933. The ten stages of genocide give a broader perspective to the historical process, which began with stigmatisation and systemic discrimination and led to recurring pogroms, such as the November 1938 pogroms across Germany and Austria, violence, and eventually ruthless mass murders, and ethnic and cultural cleansing. The last stage, the denial, is of particular importance as Holocaust denial has been intensifying for some time already, while there are ever fewer witnesses and survivors to testify to the historic truth of gas chambers, Shoah by bullets, extermination sites and mass graves.

The capitulation of Nazi Germany did not mean the end of suffering for the oppressed, however. The post-war picture is disturbing: pogroms of Jewish survivors coming back home, the confinement of those wishing to leave Europe in displaced persons camps across Germany, the last of which closed in 1957, and various hurdles preventing survivors from reaching where they wanted to go. In some countries, Roma sterilisation programmes continued well into the 1970s or even the early 2000s. After the liberation of the Nazi camps, homosexuals were sent to prisons; West Germany decriminalised homosexuality only in 1994. It took decades to remove the harmful and discriminatory laws that had been introduced and implemented instantaneously when the Nazis came to power, or extended their power across their annexed or conquered territories.

Remembrance and commemoration

It was only during the trial of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann, a pivotal figure both in the pre-war persecution of Jews and in their mass deportation to the extermination sites and implementation of the ‘Final Solution’, that the focus of public attention turned specifically to the genocide
perpetrated against the Jews. Between 1961 and 1962, Eichmann was brought before an Israeli tribunal in Jerusalem, which charged him among other crimes with ‘crimes against the Jewish people’, ‘crimes against humanity’ and ‘war crimes’. The indictment also included crimes such as the mass expulsions of Poles and Slovenes, and the seizure, deportation to extermination camps, and murder of Roma and Sinti. The trial demonstrated Eichmann’s obsession with the extermination of Jews, such as the case of the Hungarian Jews, whose deportation he supervised personally.

The **Eichmann Trial** was broadcast around the world and was a turning point in raising awareness of the importance of recognising the unprecedented, industrial scale of the extermination of Jews by the Nazi regime, and their denial of any responsibility or wrongdoing.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Nazi archives in eastern Europe – the scene of many atrocities – became available for historic investigation. It also became obvious that communist regimes had done everything to hide the numbers of Jewish victims and their participation in either the resistance or regular army. Similarly, these regimes had denied the Jews’ efforts to protect their own communities despite extremely dangerous and difficult conditions, a hostile environment and practically no access to arms to defend themselves. According to officially sanctioned propaganda, the Communists and the Soviet Red Army were to be presented as the only forces to have opposed Nazi occupation in Eastern Europe. It was also at the end of the 1990s that support for the idea of a European or international commemoration of victims started growing.

### Council of Europe

In October 2001, the Council of Europe (CoE) adopted a recommendation on history teaching in twenty-first-century Europe. The part devoted to teaching and remembrance states that education ministers needed ‘to designate a day in schools, chosen in the light of each country’s history, for Holocaust remembrance and for the prevention of crimes against humanity’. The document mentions also a ‘Task Force for International Co-operation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research’ that the CoE would support. A year later, the ministers of education agreed upon a Day of **Holocaust Remembrance** and Prevention of Crimes against Humanity and left the decision on the particular day to education ministers from the member states. The majority, including Germany and France, opted for 27 January, the day the Soviet Army liberated the Auschwitz-Birkenau Nazi death camp and discovered the remaining emaciated prisoners.

Since 2001, an annual ceremony has taken place in Strasbourg, home to the CoE. The focus is on the Holocaust ‘as a paradigm for every kind of human rights violation and crime against humanity; all the victims (Jews, Roma, Resistance members, politicians, homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, disabled persons) of the Nazi regime’. More than a simple commemoration of victims, the ceremony is about education on crimes against humanity perpetrated against groups ‘persecuted for their perceived racial and biological inferiority’, and about prevention. In this context, the CoE has warned against the misuse of history to justify xenophobia, racism, antisemitism and intolerance.

### United Nations

Five years later, on 1 November 2005, recalling, among other documents, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide introduced in 1948 on the initiative of Rafał Lemkin, to avoid repetition of genocides such as those committed by the Nazi regime, the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) adopted a resolution on Holocaust Remembrance.

Warning ‘all people of the dangers of hatred, bigotry, racism and prejudice’, the Assembly called for countries to designate 27 January an annual ‘International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust’. Preservation of sites that ‘served as Nazi death camps, concentration camps, forced labour camps and prisons during the Holocaust’ and educational programmes should accompany commemorations. Part of the work of the **United Nations Outreach Programme on the Holocaust** is to mobilise civil society for Holocaust remembrance and education to prevent future genocides. The UN Outreach Programme organises a Holocaust Remembrance Day programme every year on January 27, and offers educational programmes the whole year long, offering
resources translated into the six official UN languages. Holocaust education and remembrance activities have reached over 70 countries around the world contributing to global awareness of the Holocaust, genocides and the dangers of intolerance, xenophobia and prejudice. The UN Outreach Programme cooperates with the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), an international forum devoted to research on Holocaust and remembrance. The IHRA participates in Holocaust Remembrance commemorations sharing its knowledge, and keeps record of Holocaust Remembrance Day commemorations dates across the world.

European Parliament

The July 1995 European Parliament resolution on a day to commemorate the Holocaust warned of the danger for peace in Europe if 'the totalitarian and racist ideologies of the Nazis which led to the Holocaust of the Jews, the genocide of the gypsies, the mass murder of millions of others and to the Second World War are not prevented from spreading their pernicious influence'. Almost 10 years later, on 27 January 2005, on the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Nazi death camp, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on 'remembrance of the Holocaust, antisemitism and racism', calling for European Holocaust Memorial Day be marked annually across the whole of the EU on 27 January. The document included references to previous Parliament resolutions on xenophobia and antisemitism, showing the roots of the extermination of the Jews and Roma. It also stated that: 'The Holocaust has been seared on the consciousness of Europe, especially for its murderous hatred of Jews and Roma on the basis of their racial or religious identity'. It condemned Holocaust denial and historic revisionism, which undermine democracy in Europe.

A separate resolution on Roma Holocaust Memorial Day was adopted on 15 April 2015. It put the commemoration of the Roma genocide in the context of fighting anti-gypsyism. It called for the inclusion of the Roma genocide in Holocaust Remembrance Day on 27 January, as called for by Simone Veil, first President of the directly elected European Parliament and Auschwitz survivor. A distinct Roma Holocaust Memorial Day was also established on 2 August. On that day in 1944, the Auschwitz SS troops moved 3 000 Roma and Sinti from the 'Gypsy family camp' to its Auschwitz-Birkenau Nazi death camp. They feared that the Roma prisoners might rise up against their Nazi oppressors as they had done on 16 May, in what is now referred to as Romani Resistance Day.

Israel

Following the end of WWII, the State of Israel was established in 1948 on part of the territory of the former British Mandate for Palestine. The newly independent state was made up in large part of Holocaust survivors, and held commemorations from early on. Israel spoke out regularly about the need to raise global awareness of the Nazis' racial crimes against Jews. Already on 12 April 1951, the Knesset (Israeli Parliament) adopted a resolution on Yom Ha-Shoah (Hebrew: הַשּׁוֹאָה יוֹם – 'Day of the Catastrophe') – Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day.

It is a solemn day of national commemoration, beginning at sunset on the 14th of the month of Nissan (March or April, depending on the Jewish calendar) and ending the following evening, and devoted to the 6 million Jews murdered in the Shoah. It commemorates the heroic uprising of Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto, when on 19 April 1943, they realised they would be sent immediately to the death camps and decided to fight back. The Warsaw ghetto uprising date was chosen to highlight that, contrary to common belief, Jews resisted the Nazi oppression despite the desperate conditions they endured and their lack of arms.

Archival research proves that the narrative of passive Jewish communities unable to oppose Nazi oppression was forged by Communist regimes in eastern Europe to conform to official doctrine, which wanted Communism to be presented as the only force opposing Nazism and fighting for freedom in the region. Historians did not therefore investigate the rebellions against Nazi oppression that happened in areas under Soviet control, or acknowledge the numerous Jews fighting in Allied forces or resistance movements as testimony to their heroism.
Israel has celebrated International Holocaust Remembrance Day officially on 27 January since 2005.

Remembrance in certain EU countries

27 January is the most commonly chosen day for Holocaust Remembrance. The United Kingdom, United States and Australia observe Yom Ha-Shoah as well, while Argentina has declared 19 April the national Day for Cultural Diversity.

Table 1 – Remembrance dates other than or additional to 27 January in certain EU countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Historical background</th>
<th>Name and date of establishment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>5 May</td>
<td>Liberation of the Mauthausen concentration camp in 1944</td>
<td>Annual Day of Remembrance against Violence and Racism in Memory of the Victims of National Socialism, since 1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>10 March</td>
<td>March 1943, successful prevention of the pro-Nazi regime's plans for the deportation of Bulgarian Jews to death camps*</td>
<td>Day of the Rescue of the Bulgarian Jews and of the Victims of the Holocaust and of the Crimes Against Humanity, since 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>9 November</td>
<td>The 1938 'Night of the Broken Glass', the mass pogrom of German and Austrian Jews – 30 000 arrested, Jewish property and synagogues burned and vandalised throughout the territory</td>
<td>Pogrom Night ('Kristallnacht')</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>16 July</td>
<td>German-ordered mass arrest and expulsion of the Jews in Paris by French police in 1942</td>
<td>La rafle du Vél' d'Hiv / The Vel' d'Hiv Roundup, since 1993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>4 July</td>
<td>In 1941, the Choral Synagogue on Gogola Street in Riga was burned to the ground with Jewish people locked inside.</td>
<td>Holocaust Memorial Day, since 1990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>23 September</td>
<td>Destruction of the Jewish Ghetto in Vilnius in 1943</td>
<td>National Holocaust Remembrance Day, since 1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>16 April</td>
<td>Date of the establishment of the first Jewish ghetto in Munkács, then under Hungarian control</td>
<td>National Holocaust Memorial Day, since 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>19 April</td>
<td>Outbreak of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising</td>
<td>Anniversary of the outbreak of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>9 October</td>
<td>In 1941, Romanian authorities deported the first Jews from Northern Romania to Transnistria</td>
<td>National Holocaust Remembrance Day, since 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>9 September</td>
<td>1941 introduction of the Jewish Code</td>
<td>Day of Victims of the Holocaust and Racial Violence, since 2001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data source: IHRA. *Bulgaria's claim about its efforts to protect Jews from the genocide is controversial.

Controversies about names, dates and scope

Bulgaria chose a commemoration date with a positive dimension – the rescue of Jews from transportation to death camps. However, according to a body of documents from that time, Bulgaria sent 11 343 Jews from the territories annexed from Yugoslavia and Greece, then under Bulgarian occupation, to their deaths in Treblinki/Treblinka.

Israel's perspective on Holocaust remembrance is not uniform and reflects religious and political differences among the population relating to difficult issues; the Jewish diaspora is similarly divided.
It is often highlighted in Israel that the extremely broad definition of Holocaust victims by international bodies, such as the Council of Europe, diverts public opinion from the main and most numerous victims. The Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research meanwhile 'unequivocally stresses that Holocaust describes the deportation and mass murder of Jews'. Some Jewish researchers conclude, 'The Holocaust has undergone a transformation from a crime empirically committed by Germans, Austrians, and other Europeans against the Jews to a paradigm for innocent suffering and victimhood'.

Choice of commemoration date can also be controversial. Not all Auschwitz-Birkenau victims were freed on 27 January 1945. There were also weeks-long death marches, when under extreme winter conditions, thousands of extermination camp prisoners, mostly Jews, were forced by the Germans to go barefoot from one camp to another, escaping the advancing Red Army, in order to conceal the truth of the extermination machine.

Israeli author Elisabeth Kuebler argues that 'the Jewish perspective is regularly hijacked in two ways: by de-Judaizing it, that is, by lumping together historically different experiences of persecution and murder during Nazism; or be re-Judaizing, which means that real or perceived forms of victimhood on the part of non-Jews are falsely but deliberately equated with the Holocaust'. She also points out that research on the Holocaust often lacks deeper reflection on the perpetrators, the indifferent bystanders, the collaborators, and the cheering supporters.

The controversy also relates to the choice of term itself. The meaning of the Greek term ολοκαύτωμα (holocaust), featuring in early 20th century dictionaries, can be and often is perceived in Israel as 'somewhat blurred' and offensive; the Hebrew term 'Shoah' is preferred and widely used there. 'Shoah' better reflects the uniqueness of the extermination of Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators. Moreover, Jews believe that 'using the term Shoah, one is able to show respect and solidarity to the victims and to the manner in which they themselves express their memory in their own Hebrew language'.

EU efforts to counter Holocaust denial and distortion

The plurality of terms referring to the Nazis' racial obsession, discrimination and persecution and the tragic consequences reflects the complexity of this human tragedy and related controversies. The question is whether lessons can be learned from it, and if it has resulted in a deep understanding of how to prevent such a tragedy from ever happening again. What exactly does the expression 'never again' refer to: extermination camps, mass executions, persecution, or discrimination?

Holocaust remembrance is usually accompanied by Holocaust education aimed at teaching the lessons of the Holocaust. This effort to transfer historical knowledge and ensure that young Europeans understand the most brutal moments in the continent's history was expected to reverse antisemitism, strengthen empathy with victims, and stop xenophobia, racism, incitement to hatred, and Holocaust denial and distortion, behaviours that are now addressed in criminal law.

Public condoning, denial, distortion or gross trivialisation of the Holocaust in a manner likely to incite violence or hatred is illegal in line with EU Framework Decision 2008/913/JHA on combating certain forms and expressions of racism and xenophobia by means of criminal law. The European Commission is ensuring the law's full and correct transposition by EU Member States, including by launching infringement procedures.

Holocaust denial and distortion

Holocaust denial seeks to erase the history of the Holocaust. In doing so, it seeks to legitimize Nazism and antisemitism.

Holocaust distortion acknowledges aspects of the Holocaust as factual. It nevertheless excuses, minimizes, or misrepresents the Holocaust in a variety of ways and through various media.

Holocaust distortion has however been on the rise in recent years. Since the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Kremlin propaganda has falsely described the Ukrainian government and its president as a ‘Nazi regime’, claiming that Russia is seeking to ‘de-Nazify’ Ukraine.

EU institutions' response to antisemitism more generally

Monitoring the situation

The European Union Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) monitors the situation of the rule of law and respect for human and fundamental rights across the EU closely. It publishes regular reports on antisemitism, homophobia and the situation of the Roma population in the EU. These reports do not show a clear long-term reduction in the number of antisemitic incidents. The FRA gathers data and relies on country reports, which are not uniform and apply changing definitions, making comparisons difficult. The data show fluctuating tendencies, with numbers of antisemitic incidents growing at some moments, and then falling again. Some countries, such as the Baltic States, Slovenia, Slovakia, Cyprus, Bulgaria and Hungary report zero or close to zero antisemitic incidents.

Table 2 below shows the change over time in the number of variously defined antisemitic incidents in selected EU countries, including: politically motivated crimes, crimes under investigation, antisemitic crimes and offences committed by extremists, etc. Countries also change their definitions and data collection methodologies over time, further complicating matters. This does not allow any meaningful comparison between countries, but the data does show to some extent the evolution of trends within specific countries.

Table 2 – Antisemitic incidents in selected EU Member States between 2012 and 2022

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Member State</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>Highest/year</th>
<th>Lowest/year</th>
<th>2022</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>93/2021</td>
<td>10/2015</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>1374</td>
<td>3,027/2021</td>
<td>1,275/2013</td>
<td>2,641</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>101/2020 + 2021</td>
<td>28/2012</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>859</td>
<td>859/2012</td>
<td>275/2018</td>
<td>549</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>179/2018</td>
<td>21/2012</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>278/2018</td>
<td>170/2020</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N.A.: not available.

Data source: FRA, 2022.

EU strategies and projects for remembrance

The EU has introduced a number of strategies seeking to address antisemitism. The 2021 EU strategy on combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish life in Europe consists of three pillars, one of which is devoted to education, research and remembrance of the Holocaust (Shoah). One measure envisaged by the EU strategy is a European Network of Places where the Holocaust Happened. This would include killing sites, camps and mass graves; deportation places and ghettoes; hiding places, escape routes and points of arrival; unmarked sites and graves; and smaller sites. Another of the strategy’s flagship measures is to develop a Network of Young European Ambassadors to promote Holocaust remembrance. The Commission also intends to foster public debate on the significance of the Holocaust in a diverse EU and create a participatory European Holocaust Monument in Brussels, linked with pieces of art in all EU capitals. The Commission has increased its funding for projects on Holocaust remembrance and education through the European Remembrance strand of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV) programme (€14 million in 2024).

The European Holocaust Research Infrastructure (EHRI) is a research project on the Holocaust funded from the Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe programmes. Its aim is to make available
expertise and archival sources dispersed across countries and continents, and across many institutions; archives that operated in isolation until the fall of the Iron Curtain. The objective is to connect these dispersed sources so as to enhance the research and broaden the knowledge of the Holocaust.

The European Union is also a permanent international partner of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). IHRA’s stated objective is to provide international political coordination for research on the stated issues, considering that it is 'essential to combating growing Holocaust distortion and antisemitism, and antigypsyism/anti-Roma discrimination'. The Alliance supports the research by 'connecting and making available across Europe and beyond dispersed sources related to the Holocaust'. Together with the European Commission, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the United Nations, and UNESCO, IHRA launched an awareness campaign to counter Holocaust distortion, entitled #ProtectTheFacts.

The CERV programme provides grants for Remembrance projects on the history of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. In spring 2024, the Commission launched a project entitled 'Strengthening the remembrance of the Holocaust, genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity to reinforce democracy in the EU'.

Other EU-funded projects, such as NeDiPa (Negotiating Difficult Pasts), address the difficult history of the Holocaust and the destroyed Jewish heritage, particularly in eastern Europe, home to the majority of Jews pre-WWII. The NeDiPa project involves training courses, conferences, commemorations, consultations, and artistic initiatives, combining the efforts of local communities and experts to produce guidelines and recommendations on how to address difficult pasts and find ways to a future free from antisemitism.

Conclusion

Despite the roll-out of the Commission’s 2021 strategy, the worrying trends remain. At the starting point, 5% of EU citizens had never heard of the Holocaust, while 43% considered that schools provided sufficient knowledge on the subject. Almost 70% are ignorant about Jewish history and religion. The centuries-old antisemitism rooted in old religious prejudices has not abated in a highly-secularised Europe and continues to provide fertile soil on which to grow anti-Jewish sentiment.

The choice of the name and the date for the commemoration of Jewish victims of Nazis may contribute to the persistence of anti-Jewish stereotypes, such as denying them any role in opposing their persecutors, misrepresenting their isolation in death-threatening circumstances, their history and various identities. Nevertheless, there has been some progress in terms of Holocaust education becoming mandatory in several EU Member States, notably as part of national strategies to combat antisemitism, with many practical measures being taken at national level in this field. Visits to places of Holocaust that include the history of Jewish resistance in death camps can help to change people's perspective. The strategy to combat antisemitism in France envisages such visits, and they are mandatory in Germany, as an important element of Holocaust education.

Holocaust denial has been spreading across the EU, with prominent figures, not only political, skilfully using it as a tool to attract public attention. Antisemitism and Holocaust denial are among the favourite themes chosen by populists at both extremes of the political spectrum – far-right and far-left – to polarise society and weaken the established political balance and international order.

Efforts to eradicate Holocaust denial and antisemitism have so far failed. Although modern technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI) are useful for detecting and reporting antisemitism online, the same technologies help to generate and disseminate antisemitic content, such as deepfakes and various AI-generated visual and audio content, while chatbots generate Holocaust denial content. Governments and online platforms find it difficult to set up sufficient safeguards to prevent or investigate these crimes. The Commission is enforcing the EU Digital Services Act, and
has opened formal proceedings against X (formerly known as Twitter), TikTok and AliExpress to assess possible breaches linked to risk management and content moderation. In autumn 2023 and spring 2024, the Commission meanwhile devoted additional funds to protecting Jewish places of worship against antisemitic acts.

Naming events and choosing remembrance dates has an impact on people’s understanding of those events and their meaning for future generations. As the IHRA puts it: 'The use of inadequate terms may result in distorting both the Holocaust and the mass atrocity crime to which the Holocaust is being compared. Along with the Holocaust, each mass atrocity crime has particular features that deserve respect and understanding. Making reflective and respectful terminology choices fosters helpful public dialogue around the Holocaust and other mass atrocity crimes in our changing societies'.

MAIN REFERENCES
Libionka D., Zagłada Żydów w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie, Państwowe Muzeum w Majdanku, 2017.

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