What can we learn from the Holocaust?

January 2023

By Maiken Umbach, Professor of Modern History, University of Nottingham

This year, I was honoured to speak at the joint Holocaust Memorial Day event of the two universities of Nottingham. My presentation was entitled “Jewish victims of the Holocaust”. In many ways, what I said should go without saying. Surely, everybody is aware that the Nazi regime and its collaborators murdered 6 million Jews. They did not just target an ethnic minority in one country. They wanted to exterminate what they perceived as an all-powerful global enemy: world Jewry. Hatred of the Jewish religion was central to this effort. It is no coincidence that synagogues were the prime target of *Kristallnacht*. Before the buildings were set on fire, Torah Scrolls were removed and publicly desecrated. At Auschwitz, SS guards posed in fancy dress outfits, which they had forced inmates to tailor from Torah Scrolls. The same Scrolls were also used as lining for handbags and lampshades. This manic obsession with performing symbolic violence against Judaism was integral to the psychology of mass murder. It was not just about hatred of a racial ‘Other’. It was also about a desire to ‘cleanse’ one's own culture from its deep entanglement with the Jewish religion and a 2000 -year history of European-Jewish culture.

In view of the continuing history of genocides after 1945, it is understandable and apposite to seek to include in Holocaust Memorial Day all victims of prejudice, persecution, violence, war and colonialism. And yet, I worry that efforts to universalize lessons from the Holocaust run the danger of minimising the specific and enduring danger of antisemitism. The Holocaust may be over. The history of antisemitism is not. Nor did it start in 1933. When Hitler wrote ‘Mein Kampf’, long passages quoted from everything that was deemed good and respectable in European culture: from ancient Roman texts via St Augustine to a range of early modern and modern thinkers and artists from across the political spectrum, whose common denominator was their tendency to paint Jews as the villains. This tradition has not disappeared. Nor is it un-British. To this day, a shrine to ‘Little St. Hugh’ in Lincoln Cathedral commemorates the antisemitic ‘blood libel’ accusation (the false claim that Jews abduct and slaughter Christian babies to use their blood for making Passover food). We find antisemitic tropes in Shakespeare and Dickens. We have antisemitism masquerading as solidarity with the Palestinian cause on our streets. Anti-Jewish hate is a staple of British culture and British school curricula to the present day.

The effects are everywhere. Together with Hugo Drochon and Annemarie Walters in our School of Politics, I am currently conducting research to measure antisemitic sentiment in the UK. Provisional findings suggest that about 20% of those surveyed agreed with statements such as ‘Jews control the media’, ‘ Jews control world affairs through secret networks’, ‘Jews deliberately disguise their identities’. The prevalence of conspiracy theory beliefs, which are core to the repertoire of antisemitism, is even more worrying: over 50% of the UK population subscribe to at least one conspiracy theory. And believing in one conspiracy theory makes people more predisposed to believing in others, too.

How do we change this? History can help. Factually correcting conspiracy theories is pedagogically ineffective. Exposing the historical genealogy of these ideas is not. Showing how antisemitic slogans and images of the present recycle an old arsenal of anti-Jewish tropes is more likely to encourage people to question seemingly ‘natural’ assumptions. We have focused our efforts particularly on young people. At the National Holocaust Centre and Museum, where I currently work as a chief academic advisor, we have worked with Outwood Grange Academies Trust on transforming the secondary school curriculum, and alert students to the dangers of antisemitism in many different subjects. We are also running training sessions to ‘Stand up to Antisemitism on University campuses’. Our first trials show that exposing the historical origins of antisemitic fantasies is highly effective in transforming attitudes and behaviours.

The challenge is huge. Social media have become transmission belts for antisemitic conspiracy theories. Algorithms exacerbate the problem. And yet, the ways we teach about and commemorate the Holocaust can make a real difference. The problem is not just Holocaust denial. Too often, the history of the Holocaust is taught through a perpetrator lens. Holocaust survivor testimony has become well established as a powerful educational tool. But for a generation of primarily ‘visual learners’, the almost exclusive reliance in museums, films and computer games on perpetrator-made images of the Holocaust continues to distort the way we imagine this past. Nazis took countless photos of their crimes. These photos were designed to denigrate and de-humanise the victims. We can contextualise them differently now. But images have psychological effects that are difficult to counter with words alone. Much of my own research has been concerned with the problems of photography as a historical source. The touring exhibition ‘The Eye as Witness: Recording the Holocaust”, which I co-created with the National Holocaust Centre and Museum, sought to correct this visual bias, and place Jewish photography at the heart of the story. Such photography did not just document events: it was also an assertion of Jewish identity and a form of resistance.
Engaging with it brings forth a different historical imagination, which challenges antisemitism more directly than generic exhortations such as ‘All hate is bad’.

We ignore the specificity of antisemitism in motivating the Holocaust at our peril. It is true that the Nazis defined Jews as ‘racially alien’. But this racism was fuelled by a hatred of Jewish religion and culture that did not end in 1945. Only if we challenge antisemitism in our own thinking, heritage and identity can we truly hope to learn lessons from the Holocaust.