

# The European Union and Holocaust remembrance

## SUMMARY

The term *Holocaust* refers to the mass murder of 6 million European Jews, Roma and other persecuted groups whom the Nazi regime and its collaborators sought to annihilate.

The expropriation of property, state discrimination and persecution of the Jews by the Nazi regime began in 1933, followed by pogroms and incarceration in concentration camps. Ultimately, the policy was extended to all the European territories and countries controlled by the Nazis during the Second World War. It was a policy that would culminate in mass summary executions ('Holocaust by Bullets') and extermination camps. The perpetrators were prosecuted at the Nuremberg trials in 1945-1946, but the charge of crimes against humanity was preferred over genocide.

It was not until 2005, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, that a United Nations resolution on Holocaust remembrance designated 27 January as the day of commemoration.

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 (AIH).

*This is an updated version of a briefing from January 2018.*



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## The Holocaust tragedy of the Second World War

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.

### Before the Second World War

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 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 were burned and 30 000 Jews were incarcerated in concentration camps. A few weeks later, Polish Jews were forcibly 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 the war has shown that entire [categories](#) of people were 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 conclusions of the Nuremberg Tribunal, the United Nations (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 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 as International Holocaust Remembrance Day (27 January is the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz) and called for a specific UN programme to be established on this issue. In 2007, the UN General Assembly adopted a [resolution](#) on Holocaust denial.

### Council of Europe

In 2002, the Council of Europe established a [Holocaust Remembrance Day](#). France and Germany had themselves chosen 27 January. The Council of Europe also [encourages](#) teachers in its member states to develop awareness of the history of the Holocaust.

### International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (AIH)

This [alliance](#) today brings together [32 countries](#) (including 25 EU countries) around the need to preserve the memory of the Holocaust in order to prevent it from being repeated. The EU became a [permanent international partner](#) in November 2018, to cooperate closely on combatting Holocaust denial and preventing racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism. Its current working groups deal with education, museums and academic research. The [Stockholm Declaration on the Holocaust](#) issued by AIH in 2000 confirms the commitment to commemorate the Holocaust victims, promote education about the Holocaust and facilitate archival research into still obscure areas of this period.

## EU contribution to Holocaust remembrance

### Testimonies and the duty of remembrance

Simone Veil, who became the President of the European Parliament 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 European Parliament 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 [Roma victims of Holocaust](#) number between 196 000 and 220 000.

### European Union support

The EU's [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

#### 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.

include one carried out in cooperation with schoolchildren in [Ireland](#), a Latvian project on Western Jews transferred to the [Riga ghetto](#), and in an Italian project on [Roma victims](#).

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, such as the [EHRI](#) (European Holocaust Research Infrastructure), with the aim of [facilitating cooperation](#) between research centres, museums and the [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#) through their archives, in particular the small-scale infrastructure which 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's 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 expand access to their digitised collections, thereby keeping alive the memory of a people who have disappeared from certain parts of Europe.

Ten years after the [Stockholm Declaration](#), in 2010, 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 mainstream the issue in education.

## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> S. Veil, *Mes Combats*, Bayard Éditions, Montrouge, 2016.

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