

Britain, the Holocaust and its Legacy: the theme for Holocaust Memorial Day, 2002.

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Why Britain and the Holocaust?

The persecution and mass murder of the Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators, along with the cold-blooded application of murderous racial-biological policies to millions upon millions of Europeans, may have happened over 60 years ago on the continent but it is a part of British history and it has disturbing implications for us today.

The Holocaust is a part of British History.

The Holocaust is a part of our national story because it impinges directly on the history of these islands and its peoples. Thousands of Jews found refuge in Britain during the 1930s and several hundred survivors of the death camps came to Britain after the war. The refugees and survivors eventually became British citizens and built families in this country. Many ordinary British people helped the refugees and some were subsequently recognised as Righteous Gentiles for saving Jews from danger.

Britain fought Nazi Germany for six years and, thanks to their courage and sacrifice, British service personnel helped to save the remnant of European Jewry from annihilation. British troops liberated the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp and rescued tens of thousands of Jews from death.

However, questions remain over whether more could have been done, and sooner, to succour the victims of Nazi persecution. The British Government and the public knew about the Nazi persecution of Jews, homosexuals, Sinti and Roma, and political opponents of the regime, yet it maintained normal diplomatic and trade relations with the Third Reich.

Why the Holocaust matters today.

But why should anyone worry about that now? Last year the Government inaugurated an annual Holocaust Memorial Day because it is right to remember the victims and the liberators, but also because of the evidence that the Holocaust is terribly relevant today.

Nazi ideology was founded on anti-semitism, racism, bigotry, and prejudice. The Nazis were politically intolerant, crushed democracy, and created a political system that trampled on human and civil rights. The Third Reich persecuted German Jews, Sinti and Roma, Black Germans, and homosexuals. Using 'racial science' and race-based eugenics as a justification, they launched a genocide against the Jews, systematically murdered the physically and mentally 'handicapped', and killed tens of thousands of Roma. Nazi racism was responsible for the repression and mass murder of Poles, and the mass death of Russian prisoners of war.

Racism, anti-semitism, bigotry and prejudice exist in British society. There are political groups that want to eliminate democracy. Eugenic theory with a racist and homophobic tinge is gaining ground. Racially aggravated crimes and the votes for extremist parties that preach race hate are stark evidence of this. It would be reassuring to think that we need only look at the perpetrators to draw lessons about the origins of evil-doing. But, sadly, we can learn a lot from British responses to the Nazi rampage against civil liberties, human rights, and the lives of millions of innocents.

During the 1930s a large section of the British public frequently expressed its antipathy towards Nazi policies, but the British government pursued a policy of normal relations with Germany and later sought to appease Hitler. The attempt to mollify and buy off Hitler only encouraged him and legitimated Nazi racism - a harsh lesson in dealing with tyrants.

Britain took in approximately 70,000 Jewish refugees, and more were admitted to Palestine, which was under British control. But the Government had no refugee policy as such, and because it maintained very restrictive immigration controls it drastically limited the number of refugees who made it here. The Government preferred to accept fit and strong refugees who, after a brief while, would get employment in other countries. The old rarely got in; children were saved, but their parents were rejected. In 1938 the gates of Palestine were closed and more Jews were allowed into Britain, instead. Most were young and arrived in a chaotic rush.

At international meetings in Evian in 1938 and Bermuda in 1943 the British Government, like those of other countries, avoided taking in refugees. Throughout this period, Britain had no refugee policy. Except for a brief period in 1938-39, immigration policy was framed in terms of the national interest rather than humanitarianism. Mainstream public opinion was hospitable to the refugees even though several professions, sections of the press, and the British Union of Fascists led by Sir Oswald Mosley were viciously hostile. The hostility of a vociferous, bigoted minority led the Government to justify limitations on refugee immigration by talking up the fear of an anti-semitic backlash. The Government never tried to mobilise the public against intolerance or in support of the refugees. In Britain and throughout Europe, when governments face a similar dilemma, too often the fear of prejudice and the agenda of right-wing parties is allowed to influence policy to the detriment of those seeking a haven from extreme poverty or persecution.

You might think that we have nothing to learn from the extreme and unusual circumstances of war and occupation, but even here we need to engage in reflection, if only because the British people tend to have a rather self-satisfied perception of the Second World War as unambiguously a 'good' war from which this country emerged triumphant and morally vindicated. As always, the historical record is more complicated than that. While there is more to be proud of than to regret, there were shameful episodes which have tended to be swept under the carpet of historical forgetting.

In June 1940, panicked by the Nazis' lightning conquest of France and rumours of the part played by pro-German spies and 'Fifth Columnists', the Government ordered the internment of so-called 'enemy aliens' and male refugees. Around 27,000 Jews were interned, of whom 9,000 were deported to Canada or Australia. Hundreds of Italians and anti-fascist exiles who had lived in Britain for decades were scooped up. For many internees the experience was terrifying, and the deportations were harshly executed. Over 700 'enemy aliens' and refugees died when a German u-boat sank a deportation ship.

The British mainland heroically defied the Nazi war machine, but the German army occupied the Channel Islands. Nazi racial laws were implemented there with the compliance of the Island authorities, and a small number of Jews were deported to concentration camps. There were some 'righteous gentiles' on the Channel Islands who protected Jews, but many more islanders, who felt they had little choice in the matter, collaborated with the Germans. Would the mainlanders have acted differently? We can never know, so we should be wary of now laying claim to some special, ingrained tolerance. We can only give thanks that Britain escaped occupation and try to understand the quandary of those condemned to live under a ruthless occupier.

Yet precisely because Britain evaded occupation it was in a position to respond to Nazi measures imposed on the peoples of Europe. What does the record show here? The Royal Navy turned away ships carrying Jewish refugees to Palestine. Jewish immigrants who reached there were interned in camps or deported. Hundreds died when unseaworthy boats, denied passage to Palestine, sank.

Documents show that the British Government knew about the slaughter the Jews from the moment it began, but did not issue any official condemnation of the genocide until very late. There was no attempt to prevent the genocide, even when counter measures were feasible. Nor were restrictions on refugee immigration to Britain or Palestine eased. British policy was to defeat the Nazis without paying too much attention to distractions such as the persecution and mass murder of the Jews, or wasting resources on humanitarian initiatives.

International humanitarian law barely existed in the era of the Second World War and for much of the conflict Britain was fighting for survival and in no position to help any cause that did not directly benefit the war effort. Nevertheless, the uncomfortable truth is that Britain failed to respond with urgency to a genocide in progress when it could do something about it.

British troops, medical volunteers and relief teams saved tens of thousands of Jews at Belsen and elsewhere in April-May 1945. Yet, official policy treated survivors just like other people displaced by the Nazis. Britain played a key role in the trial of Nazi leaders at Nuremberg and tried the Nazis who ran Belsen and Auschwitz. At the same time, however, the Government eased the labour shortage by admitting into Britain thousands of East Europeans who had collaborated with the Nazis, many of whom had committed war crimes.

What responsibilities can we learn from the events of the Holocaust?

It is easy once a year to express sympathy with the survivors of Nazi persecution and to mouth slogans such as 'Never Again'. But the point of Holocaust Memorial Day is to turn our abhorrence of racism and intolerance into action, and to honour the memory of the victims and the men and women who gave their lives fighting Nazism, by striving to make this country a better and more humane place.

We are responsible as citizens for how our governments, civil servants, police, and armed forces act in our name. As citizens we must exercise our political and civil rights to block anti-democratic, racist, intolerant individuals, groups, and parties like those in Germany in the 1930s, from achieving any degree of power and influence.

We must take responsibility as citizens for protecting the civil and human rights of other citizens and all people in our society, including refugees and asylum seekers. The British people who welcomed refugees in the 1930s and who took in unaccompanied child refugees are a shining example to us. We should pay tribute to them by redoubling our efforts to do as much today. We need to be responsible for the way the media treat the human and civil rights of other people, to combat stereotypes and demonisation of 'foreigners', social outsiders, and refugees.

In 1938 it was possible for a British prime minister to talk about a central European democracy that was threatened by a powerful neighbour as 'a far away country of which we know little' and to use this as an excuse for letting it fall into Hitler's grasp. The world is a smaller place today, but we should never cease to remind our government that it is responsible for the defence of human and civil rights of the citizens of other countries, and to encourage it to maximise the provision for those fleeing repression and deliberate disadvantage, and to seek justice against those who violate human and civil rights.

A Summing Up.

The Holocaust and the war against Nazism is a part of the British national story. It shaped the lives of millions of British people, including thousands Jews who found refuge here and their descendants who today are British citizens.

Britain's relationship to the Holocaust is part of the legacy of all British citizens, a source of pride and a warning about the role of 'bystanders'. It provokes questions about Britain's contemporary responsibility as a member of the international community and about the responsibility of individual citizens towards members of other ethnic and faith groups, victims of prejudice and bigotry, immigrants, asylum seekers, or the citizens of other countries afflicted by racism or tyranny.

The ambiguity of Britain's response to Nazi tyranny and racism is lodged in our heritage, but it can serve as an inspiration, a warning and a guide to the responsibility of government, as well as the civic duties of groups and individuals. The Holocaust isn't just something that happened in Europe a long time ago with no relevance to us. The issues it raises are as relevant now as they ever were. Nazi racism and prejudice affected everyone, including people like us, black and white, straight and gay, Christian or Muslim or Jewish, those without as much as those with disability: that kind of racism and prejudice, in all the forms and varieties in which it has come down to us today, can't be dismissed as someone else's problem. Just as the Holocaust touched Britain and just as Nazi racism affected everyone, responsibility for fighting racism is ours, and ours alone.

Further information about the theme of Holocaust Memorial Day 2002 can be found in the publications 'Britain and the Holocaust' and 'Teachers' Guide to Holocaust Memorial Day 2002: Britain and the Holocaust', both of which are produced by the [Holocaust Educational Trust](#) and the video 'Britain and the Holocaust' produced by [Beth Shalom Holocaust Centre](#)