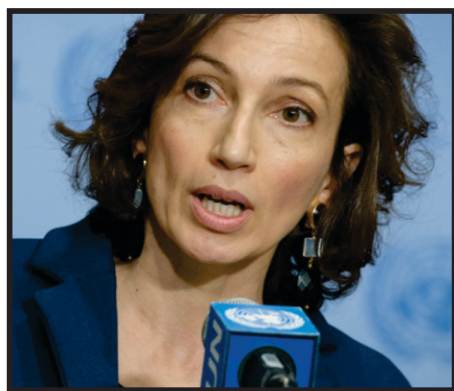


Education About the Holocaust is Key to Combating Conspiracy Theories Today



Audrey Azoulay. Photo: UN Photo

By Audrey Azoulay & Irwin Cotler
On the occasion of the International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust, Audrey Azoulay (Director-General of UNESCO) and Irwin Cotler (Canada's Special Envoy on Preserving Holocaust Remembrance and Combatting Anti-Semitism) publish an article on the importance of holocaust education to combat the rise of anti-Semitism and conspiracy theories today.
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One-third of Europeans have little to no knowledge of the Holocaust. Nearly one-quarter of young people in the United States believe the Holocaust is a myth, and in Canada, 52% of Millennials cannot name even one concentration camp or ghetto, while 22% don't know, or are unsure if they have heard of the Holocaust. As we mark the International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust, unfortunately anti-Semitism is on the rise, just as we witness a disturbing decline in awareness of the Holocaust.

This is not without consequences. In 2019, violent anti-Semitic attacks worldwide rose 18 per cent over the previous year, with the highest number of incidents reported in major Western democracies, including the United States, France, the United Kingdom and Germany.

The motives and hateful narratives that drove such crimes are no longer exceptional. Conspiracy theories, hate speech, and racism have found their way into the mainstream, driving the anti-Semitism that thrives in the online cauldron of disinformation and ignorance of the past. We know of the historical precedent of antisemitic conspiracy theories targeting Jewish populations. In the COVID-19 context, Jews around the world are targeted by new global conspiracy theories alleging that they have manufactured and are spreading the virus to profit from the pandemic.

This has become a global challenge, with the Internet blurring national borders: it is now of a speed and size that are impossible to curate. We need holocaust education and critical thinking skills that are as powerful as the information devices we hold in our hands. Unfortunately, we are not there yet.

In a truly global media landscape, where falsehoods and fake news circulate faster than authoritative content and information, the response cannot just be at the national level. International cooperation is key, along with sharing best practices, monitoring web platforms and taking relevant action.

For decades, the international community elaborated norms and standards, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Genocide Convention. The clear next step is to develop stronger education programs at national, regional



Irwin Cotler. Photo: Wikipedia

and global levels - and support teachers on the frontline of bringing these principles from international summits to local schools.

To tackle Holocaust denial and distortion, UNESCO is developing training tools and studies across the globe - including recently with the Oxford Internet Institute and the World Jewish Congress to assess Holocaust distortion online - to strengthen educational responses. We are building on the role of education, research, culture and information to support policymakers and teachers worldwide in advancing Holocaust education as well as confronting contemporary anti-Semitism and hate speech.

In 2019 alone, UNESCO, along with the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, trained policy-makers from more than 60 countries to develop education initiatives against anti-Semitism. This year, UNESCO will launch a global program with 2 million dollars support from Canada, to develop education programs, in partnership with the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.

Education is the most powerful tool we have, not only to combat antisemitism in all its forms, but also to fight radicalization, which is currently on the rise. Only education can prevent intolerance, bigotry and hatred from taking hold. Twisted truths, disinformation and hateful ideologies masquerading as pathways to salvation always form the backbone of racist and violent regimes.

As we know, a democracy can be destroyed from within. Six million Jews died in the Holocaust; 1.1 million at Auschwitz-Birkenau alone, the worst extermination camp of the 20th century. Jews were murdered in Auschwitz because of antisemitism, but anti-Semitism did not die there. It remains the bloody canary in the mineshaft of evil today. If the Holocaust is a paradigm for radical evil, anti-Semitism is a paradigm of radical hate.

This history must be transmitted, to prevent such atrocities from happening again. We must therefore remember and learn from history; understand how propaganda tools and mass media can weaponize distortions into a killing machine; and strengthen our critical thinking and collective ability to resist disinformation and conspiracy theories. This is not only about knowing the past, it is also about developing skills for democracy today. This vision will certainly be a challenge to implement, but, in the words of the late Nelson Mandela, "It always seems impossible until it's done."
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US Ambassador's Remarks at UN Holocaust Memorial Ceremony



Ambassador Richard Mills, Acting Representative, United States' Mission to the UN: "The United States will never shrink from its commitment to combat anti-Semitism."

Remarks at the United Nations' Memorial Ceremony on the International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust, by Ambassador Richard Mills, Acting Representative, US Mission to the United Nations.
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Mr. Secretary-General, Mr. President, Excellencies, distinguished guests, survivors,

As we gather on this solemn day, it is incumbent upon us to confront the horrors of the Holocaust and resolve never to let its history be denied or its chilling lessons be lost. We commemorate the six million Jews, the Roma, Slavs, persons with disabilities, gays and lesbians, and many other victims targeted for persecution and murder by the Nazi regime. This genocide is a historical fact.

Yet, more than 75 years after liberation of the camps, anti-Semitism and other forms of hatred are an alarming part of our present-day reality. People around the world continue to be vilified, suffer discrimination, and be violently attacked because of their race, religion, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, and gender

identity. We still have much work to do together to ensure that "Never again" truly means never.

Excellencies and very distinguished guests,

This year's theme, "Facing the Aftermath: Recovery and Reconstitution after the Holocaust" demands that we take seriously our obligation to remember, to absorb, and to teach the history of the Holocaust. We must not be silent when others discount or distort the truth of what happened.

All of us must be persistent, intentional, and proactive about ensuring younger generations are fully educated about the Holocaust, so that they recognize not only the perils of permitting anti-Semitism, but also that anti-Semitism, if left unchecked, often portends broader manifestations of hatred and political and social conflict to come.

The United States will never shrink from its commitment to combat anti-Semitism. We honor the sacred memory of those murdered in the Holocaust when together we act to prevent future atrocities and uphold the rights and the dignity of all.

Thank you.