



1. On the Holocaust and Its Implications



Nazis arrest and deport Jews from the Warsaw ghetto in German-occupied Poland, following the uprising in April 1943.

Photo: Courtesy of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum



Photo: Yad Vashem

Professor Yehuda Bauer

Professor Yehuda Bauer was born in Prague and moved with his family to Israel just prior to the outbreak of the Second World War. A world-renowned expert on the Holocaust, he serves as Academic Adviser to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Israel, and Honorary Chairman of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research. Professor Bauer has been a visiting professor at several universities including Yale, Brandeis, University of Hawaii (United States), and the Centre for the Study of anti-Semitism in Berlin (Germany). From 1980 to 1995, he served as permanent Academic Chair of the Institute for Contemporary Jewry in Jerusalem (Israel). He also founded the Vidal Sassoon International Centre for the Study of anti-Semitism in Jerusalem. From 1995 to 2000, Professor Bauer was head of the International Institute for Holocaust Research at Yad Vashem, and in 2001 he was elected to be a member of the Israeli Academy of Science. He is the author of many books on the Holocaust and was the founding editor of the *Journal for Holocaust and Genocide Studies*. Professor Yehuda Bauer delivered the keynote address on "Remembrance and Beyond" at the observance of the first universal International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust that was held in the United Nations General Assembly Hall on 27 January 2006.

On the Holocaust and Its Implications

by Professor Yehuda Bauer

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It was the Second World War, the most terrible conflict in human history so far, that provided the context in which Auschwitz, the symbol of genocide, could happen, and that war had been initiated by Nazi Germany, largely for ideological reasons: one, the desire to rule Europe, and through it, the world, and thus achieve a global racial hierarchy with the Nordic peoples of the Aryan race on top, and everybody else under them. The second major element in Nazi ideology was anti-Semitism. They saw the Jews as the Satan that controlled all of Germany's enemies. At one end, in their eyes, stood Hitler, the new Jesus Christ, who would lead humanity, under Germanic rule, to a glorious future. At the other end was the satanic Jew, who tried to prevent this utopia from achieving its aim of global rule. It was in the name of that utopia of a wonderful new racist world that the vast majority of the German people were persuaded to commit mass murders, including three genocides at least: against the Poles, the Roma ("Gypsies") and the Jews. We should never forget that utopias kill; radical universalist utopias, such as National Socialism, Communism, and today the radicals who support global terrorism, kill radically and universally.

It is no exaggeration to say that the Second World War, and the death of tens of millions, the destruction of countries and cultures, the torture and death of children and adults, was caused in part by hatred against Jews. There are two aspects to the Holocaust. One is the specificity of the Jewish fate, the other the universal implications; they are two sides of the same coin. The Jews were the specific victims of the genocide. But the implications are universal, because who knows who the Jews may be next time.

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The main parallel between the Holocaust and other genocides is that the suffering of the victims is the same. Murder is murder, torture is torture, rape is rape; starvation, disease, and humiliation are the same in all

mass murders. There are no gradations, and no genocide is better or worse than another one, no one is more victim than anyone else.

The other parallel is that every genocide is perpetrated with the best technical and bureaucratic means at the disposal of the perpetrators. Thus, today's genocide in Darfur is perpetrated with the help of air bombardments, use of cellphones, and the government bureaucracy that supports the murderers and prevents effective outside intervention. The Holocaust was perpetrated with the best technical and bureaucratic means at the disposal of Germany. But the difference was that it happened at the very centre of European and world civilization, and that was unprecedented.

During the twentieth century, vast numbers of civilians and unarmed prisoners of war were murdered by

governments and political organizations, and many more civilians than soldiers were killed. Of these, close to six million Jews died in the most extreme case of genocide so far. Why is the Holocaust the most extreme case? Why do more and more people show an interest in this particular tragedy, why is there a flood of fiction, theatre, films, TV series, art, music, and of course historical, sociological, philosophical, psychological, and other academic research, a flood that has rarely, if ever, been equalled in dealing with any other historical event?

I think the reason is that while all the elements of each genocide are repeated in some other genocides, there are elements in the Holocaust that cannot be found in genocides that preceded it. The perpetrators tried to find, register, mark, humiliate, dispossess, concentrate and murder every person with three or four Jewish grandparents for the crime of having been born a Jew. This was to be done, ultimately, everywhere in the world, so that for the first time in history there was an attempt to universalize a genocide. Also, the ideology was totally unpragmatic, not like in all other genocides. In Rwanda, for instance, a Hutu supremacist ideology developed from the pragmatic background of a real power struggle within the Hutu establishment and a real military struggle against an invading force of the persecuted Tutsi minority. But with the Nazis, the pragmatic elements were minor.

They did not kill the Jews because they wanted their property. They robbed their property in the process of getting rid of them, first by emigration, then by expulsion, and in the end by murder. They killed Jewish armament workers when they needed every pair of hands after the defeat at Stalingrad in early 1943; they murdered Jewish slave labourers while they were building roads for the German military. If they had followed modern, capitalistic practice, they would have robbed Jewish property and then utilized Jewish slave labour for their own purposes, as they did with the Poles, for instance. But they murdered the Jews because that was

where their ideology led them, an ideology that had the character of nightmares.

They believed in a Jewish world conspiracy and in the notorious forgery called the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion”, produced in the early part of the twentieth century by the police in Tsarist Russia, which was used and adapted by the Nazis. They believed in the accusation of ritual murder of non-Jewish children by the Jews. The genocide of the Jews, then, was based on nightmares that turned into ideology. Then, there was the utopia of a global racist hierarchy which had one real satanic enemy, the Jews, who had to be eliminated, although there are no races, because we all are originally from Africa. The Nazis very consciously opposed all the values of European civilization such as liberalism, democracy, socialism and humanitarianism, and wanted to destroy them. They saw in the Jews embodiments of the values which they wanted to eliminate, and the destruction of the Jews followed. All this was without a precedent.

The Holocaust was unprecedented, and we had hoped that it would become a warning, not a precedent. But we have been proven wrong. It has become a precedent, and other genocides have followed it. What does this mean for humanity, what does it mean for the United Nations? What shall we do about the United Nations?

When I was five years old, I said to my mother: Mother, pretty you are not, but you are mine. The United Nations is ours; it is the best United Nations we have—we have no other. So, rather than run it down, rather than criticize it out of existence, let us support it, try to improve it, make it more effective in protecting humanity.

Is there any possibility that we may succeed when we try to prevent genocide, using our understanding of the paradigmatic genocide of the Jews, and the comparison with other genocides that must follow from that? I think that humans have in them the instinct to kill, and we are the only mammals that kill our own kind in huge

numbers. This may well be the result of the development of our species, when we defend ourselves, our families, nations, and territory from real or imagined enemies by eliminating them. We all could become mass murderers. But if that is so, is there any realistic way of preventing outbreaks of genocidal murders? The Holocaust can provide an answer to this question: at Yad Vashem we now have over 21,000 names of individuals and groups that rescued Jews. They show that there is another way, that there is in us also the possibility of coming to the rescue of other humans at the risk of our own lives.

It is these stories that show us that there is an alternative, that the attempts made at prevention of genocide, as for instance by the office of the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide, and by various NGOs and governments, are not a hopeless task. But the failure to deal with the ongoing genocide in Darfur shows how tremendously difficult it is. If we do not stop the genocide in Darfur, it will spread, there will be more genocidal massacres, and the price for the world will be heavy indeed.

Politics that are not based on moral basis are, at the end of the day, not practical politics at all. It is out of these considerations that I beg you to permit me to repeat here what I said, exactly eight years ago, in a speech to the German Bundestag: I come from a people that gave the Ten Commandments to the world. Let us agree that we need three more commandments, and they are these: thou shalt not be a perpetrator; thou shalt not be a victim; and thou shalt never, but never, be a bystander.

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Please see the next page for discussion questions

Discussion questions

1. What lessons can be learned from the Holocaust in the midst of the Second World War in terms of:
 - Preventing future genocide?
 - Stopping such killings as they happen?
2. What are the consequences for an individual and for a society of being a bystander?
3. What are the signs that a genocide is being prepared?
Is the study of the Holocaust and the genocide in Rwanda sufficient to warn of an impending genocide?
4. During the World Summit in 2005, world leaders called for the acceptance of a universal principle of the responsibility to protect civilian populations from crimes against humanity when Governments are unwilling or unable to do so. How can this commitment be implemented so that the world does not witness another genocide unfold?
5. How do States and leaders that commit and support genocide come to believe that they could proceed without challenge from the international community?