

Remarks by Ambassador Samantha Power, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, at the International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust
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Mr. Under-Secretary-General, President Ashe, Ambassador Prozor, Mr. Spielberg, Excellencies, and guests, I am honored to participate in this annual ceremony of remembrance, which is centered this year on the theme “Journeys Through the Holocaust.” Today marks the 69th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. In pondering the lessons of the past, it is worth thinking back even further, to January 27, 1939 – exactly three quarters of a century ago, when “Auschwitz” was just the German name of a Polish town.

On that day, the Polish Foreign Minister had just returned from meetings in Germany. He reported that the Nazis were unlikely in 1939 to start a war, an assessment widely shared within the European diplomatic community.

In Prague, Czech officials were also returning from Germany, having been pressured by the Nazi authorities to intensify discrimination against Czech and Slovak Jews.

In Berlin, Hermann Göring had that week established a Central Office for Jewish Emigration, designed to facilitate both the flight of Jews and the theft of their assets.

In London, the British Foreign Office was circulating a memo to friendly governments stating, and I quote, that “there is as yet no reason to suppose Hitler has made up his mind” about attacking his neighbors. The memo referred to Germany’s acute economic problems and to speculation about whether the Nazi dictator could count on his army’s loyalty.

But on January 30, Hitler delivered a speech that revealed more of his intentions. He mocked the West for refusing to accept more Jewish refugees and he predicted that a second world war, if it came, would result “in the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe.” Seven months later, German troops swarmed across the Polish border and the world’s most devastating conflict began.

I cite this history not to illustrate the dubious wisdom of hindsight, but because the evidence is clear that the Holocaust was not inevitable. The Shoah was not set in stone by the terms of the Versailles Treaty, or by Hitler’s rise to power, or by the Anschluss with Austria, or by the Munich Pact. What Hitler wanted was clearer than what Hitler thought he could actually achieve. He was constantly assessing the degree of resistance he might encounter – both domestically and globally. He was probing. He was planning. Early in 1939, had he been confronted by a more united and determined world community; he might well have been stopped before he truly began.

The horrors of the Holocaust have no parallel but the world continues to confront crimes that shock the conscience. In October the Security Council spoke with a united voice about the need for action to address the humanitarian devastation in Syria. There are people who are imprisoned in their own

neighborhoods. They are literally being starved and bombed to death. They need food desperately and yet food cannot reach them because the regime won't allow it.

In 1945, Russian soldiers liberated Auschwitz. Sixty-nine years later, if the United Nations is to live up to the noble purposes for which it was founded, the world again needs Russia to use its influence, this time, to ensure that food reaches the desperate and starving people imprisoned in besieged Homs, Yarmouk, the Damascus suburbs, and elsewhere.

Today, as we recall the unmatched horrors of Auschwitz, the Holocaust, and World War II, we must acknowledge our responsibility to remember with honor both those who died and those who endured great suffering, unimaginable suffering, and who survived. Some of them are with us. We will never ever forget these men and women, mothers, fathers, husbands, wives, sons and daughters. We also must acknowledge as well that remembrance is the beginning – not the end – of our responsibility; and while the world has never seen anything as horrific as the Holocaust, the duty we have is an urgent and active one: to confront evil, to defend truth, to unite in the face of threats to human dignity, and to strive to stop any who would abuse their neighbors. Let us go forward, then, to meet that obligation, recognizing our own fate in that of others, and demanding always the very best of ourselves.

Thank you.

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