

The International Holocaust Remembrance Day

In 2005, on the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, a United Nations resolution designated 27 January as an annual International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust.

The word 'Holocaust' is of Greek origin and means 'sacrifice by fire'. It is used to describe the persecution and subsequent mass murder of 6 million European Jews at the hands of the Nazi regime and its collaborators.

In this podcast, we explore the history of what happened in Europe before and during the Second World War.

Antisemitism was already a core element of Nazi ideology before they came to power. But the Holocaust era began in January 1933 when Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party seized political control in Germany. From that year on, the Nazis began implementing a state policy of repression against the Jews, which consisted of stealing their property, depriving them of their rights and stripping them of their citizenship. In the Kristallnacht pogroms of 9 and 10 November 1938, 91 Jews were killed, at least 1400 synagogues burned and 30 000 Jews arrested and incarcerated in concentration camps. The Second World War broke out less than one year later. During the conflict, Nazi Germany and its allies and collaborators killed nearly two thirds of European Jews by means of deadly living conditions, brutal mistreatment, mass shootings and gassings, and specially designed killing centres known as the concentration camps. 6 million Jews were murdered.

Between 1933 and 1945, other groups were also targeted by the Nazi regime and its allies, including Roma people, disabled people and Slavic people, as well as homosexuals, and members of certain religious and political groups. The history of the Roma and Sinti Holocaust remains widely unknown among the general public. Between 250 000 and 500 000 people fell victim to the Roma genocide, which was between a quarter and half of the pre-World War II Roma and Sinti population. The exact number is unknown, since many victims' families did not report the deaths of their loved ones and the perpetrators erased the records of their killings.

The Holocaust, also referred to as the Shoah, ended in May 1945, when the Allied Powers – including the United Kingdom, the United States, the Soviet Union and France defeated Nazi Germany in World War II. On 27 January 1945, the Red Army liberated the Auschwitz concentration and extermination camp. In a series of offensives, the Allies entered the concentration camps and liberated the surviving prisoners. The Allies also encountered and liberated the survivors of what have become known as 'death marches'. These forced marches consisted of groups of Jewish and non-Jewish concentration camp inmates who were forcibly evacuated on foot from camps under SS guard.

The UN is of the view that education about the Holocaust and genocide is necessary to promote global citizenship education, to help people to become critical thinkers and responsible citizens, who value human dignity and respect for all and reject all forms of prejudice.

The EU wants to preserve the memory of these tragic events in European history and promotes initiatives to raise awareness about Holocaust remembrance. It also funds

programmes to foster research on the Holocaust. In December 2015, the European Commission appointed a Coordinator on combating antisemitism. In 2018, the EU became a permanent international partner of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance and the Council adopted a declaration on the fight against antisemitism, and a common security approach to protect Jewish communities and institutions in Europe. Three years later, in 2021, the European Commission also adopted its first ever EU strategy on combating antisemitism.

The European Parliament marks 'International Holocaust Remembrance Day' every year and has adopted many resolutions on antisemitism, racism, xenophobia and other forms of intolerance, hate crime and hate speech. Let's have a look at some of them.

In 2017, MEPs adopted a resolution on combating antisemitism, encouraging Member States to promote teaching about the Holocaust in schools. Parliament also expressed concerns at the increase in antisemitism, stressing that racism and xenophobia are not opinions, but crimes. An October 2018 resolution, on the rise of neo-fascist violence in Europe, drew attention to the increase in violence against Jews, and called on Member States to counter Holocaust denial, including the trivialisation of the crimes the Nazis and their collaborators committed. In its 2019 resolution on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe, Parliament called for education to promote the diversity of our society and our common history, including education on the Holocaust and on totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, which caused human suffering and violence and divided Europe for half a century.