Antisemitism and the Politics of Holocaust Memorial Day in the UK and Italy

Philip Spencer and Sara Valentina Di Palma

Introduction

Holocaust Memorial Day was established in the aftermath of the conference on Education, Remembrance and Research held in Stockholm in 2000. The Stockholm International Forum On The Holocaust. Some 46 states participated in the event and issued a declaration, affirming the global and enduring significance of the event, the need to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust, to honour those who stood against it and to educate future generations about the Holocaust. Since then, there have been annual memorial days across Europe, held on the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz in January 1945 by the Red Army.

The decision to hold such a day, to remember publicly and officially an event that is now receding into the past, was not an easy or facile one. It came about as the result of considerable discussion not just in one country, drawing on extensive expertise and research among historians and educators. It also had a political dimension, as a common commitment by states (and not just one state but several) to promote the event.

Both of these aspects – the historical and the educational on the one hand, the political on the other – have generated considerable debate. This is probably inevitable. This is not just because anything to do with memory, even at an individual level, is (one might say) almost inherently contestable. When it comes to collective

P. Spencer (6-4)
e-mail: P.Spencer@Kingston.ac.uk

S.V. Di Palma
e-mail: saravalentinapalmz@gmail.com

memory, it is however not just to do with “normal” issues of reliability and accuracy, perhaps particularly the further away in time from the event. Collective memory raises other, more difficult questions – about agency (whose memory are we talking about?); about content (what is it “we” are trying to remember?); about purpose (why are “we” trying to remember?) and method (how and where is this memory to be articulated?). Whose voice then gets heard must at some level then necessarily be a political matter, its outcome reflecting present priorities and preoccupations, including the need to deal with the aftermath of the Holocaust for its main victims, the Jews.

This is even more obviously so because public memorialising is a decision for the state, and in this case for European states, given that the Holocaust took place in that continent. What is at stake for European states is how they want to commemorate a past in which their apparatuses and citizens played a significant role, a past for which historians offer competing accounts. But these accounts are themselves located within conceptual frameworks, which are shaped by and help shape understandings of who is or was included or excluded from the state and Europe itself. This has a particular significance for European Muslims whose place in European states and societies is, currently, not secure on all sides. Their responses to Holocaust Memorial Day are a product both of how these inherently political debates are constructed and by how they themselves contribute to this debate.

Survivors, Perpetrators, Bystanders

In the case of the Holocaust and Holocaust Memorial Day, we can distinguish initially between three groups – survivors, perpetrators and bystanders, the famous triangle proposed by Hilberg (1993). For survivors, the day can be a moment to remember and to be heard in public what they experienced and lost, a moment to be perhaps increasingly valued the further away the event took place and the more limited the time left available to do so. For perpetrators, there is of course likely to be an inverse process, an unwillingness to recall, if not to deny what they did and to obscure what happened. For bystanders, there is the discomfort involved in thinking again about what was not done and what enabled the perpetrators to do what they did.

As time marches on, these problems have in a sense been bequeathed to subsequent generations to address. What place does society (or perhaps more accurately different groups within society) wish to allocate to survivors, what does it want to know from perpetrators, and how should it situate itself in relation to the category of the bystander?

In debates about Holocaust Memorial Day, each of these questions lie in some ways at the heart of the matter. There are arguments about which survivors should be honoured, about who the real perpetrators were, and about who allowed the Holocaust to happen. To each of these questions there can be different answers from different groups. In the case of responses from Muslims, these have been varied both within communities and over times. But they have not been formulated in isolation.
Rather they have been influenced by and connected up with other responses, which have helped or distorted them in various ways.

Before looking more closely at these responses, however, it is worth pausing briefly to consider some of the pre-history to Holocaust Memorial Day. For survivors, there was no immediate audience to their stories, traumatic and devastating though their experiences had been. Survivors had great difficulty at first both in finding their voice but then, more alarmingly still perhaps in finding listeners, in being heard, as Primo Levi famously observed, “I write what I would never dare tell anyone.” (Levi 2000, 126, Levi 2004, 148)1 For some time no one, not only in Europe where the killing took place but also in Israel to where so many survivors fled, wanted to pay much attention. Europeans wanted to rebuild the shattered continent, whilst the young Israeli state was trying to break with what it saw as the also shattered world of the European diaspora. For their part, perpetrators too wanted silence, to draw a veil over their crimes. It was difficult from the outset to find those who were at all prepared to admit to their crimes. Many were rather much readier to push the blame or responsibility elsewhere on to superfices of one kind or another. Indeed, even today we lack much in the way of memories from perpetrators, whose testimony has had to be pieced together from trials and the evidence collected for them, with all the difficulties that poses. In the case of bystanders, memory was in a sense even harder to elicit, because the category itself did not come into use for a long time.2

Universalism and Particularism

These difficulties or evasions were part of what the eminent Holocaust historian Saul Friedlander has called “15–20 years of ‘laziness’,” in which there was a “sustained silence of intellectuals, particularly the historians” (Friedlander 1994, 259). Even when they came to break this silence, historians were particularly reluctant to pay attention to survivors whose memories they regarded as unreliable. Indeed, this was explicitly argued as a methodological premise by Raoul Hilberg, perhaps the dean of early Holocaust historiography. But more generally, if the Holocaust was thought about, it was not primarily in terms of what had happened to Jews. In the immediate aftermath, even or perhaps especially when the camps were discovered, the Jewish identity of the victims was in an important sense hidden or obscured. As Tony Kushner has shown in the British case, films, newspaper reports, radio broadcasts did not draw attention to the fact that it was Jews who had been murdered first and foremost (Kushner 1994). Even the Nuremberg Trials, organised jointly by

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1 Many others made similar observations. “He who has Auschwitz as devastating a mark inside of himself, will never give birth to it either writing or talking about it but, on the contrary, he tends to it”, Edith Brack confessed (Bruck 1959, 16).

2 Some sense of the long-term obstacles in the way of eliciting such memories can be found in the recent book by Father Desbois on the killings in the Ukraine (Desbois 2008).
the Western Allies and the Soviet Union, did not focus, as Donald Bloch has shown, to any significant extent on what happened to the Jews (Bloch 2001). What was emphasised much more was the universal significance of the event, as if all the victims of the Nazis were somehow the same and indistinguishable. It was to take over a decade before the specifically Jewish dimension came to the fore, first in the Eichmann trial in Israel [the first time that survivors’ voices had really been heard in public to any significant extent (Yablonska 2004)] and then more generally.

The shift was then from an abstract universalism to something which included at its centre something more particular and specific. But that specificity, as Jeffrey Alexander has argued convincingly, did not mean that the Holocaust had been captured, as has been sometimes inaccurately and misleadingly claimed, by some putative Jewish identity politics. In fact what was revealed by survivors’ accounts, which took so long to be heard, was the extraordinary evil of the Holocaust. Only when survivors could testify openly to the horror of the Holocaust and be heard, could the radical evil of the event be registered.

Only then did it become what Alexander has called a “moral universal”, something to measure other events against and to illuminate the evil that can be committed on this planet (Alexander 2009). What happened to the Jews was both a particular matter as the Nazis attempted to annihilate the Jews entirely, and of universal significance because the Nazis sought to reshape humanity itself, by wiping the Jews off the face of the earth. It was a genocide but one that was so radical that it led to the formulation of the concept of genocide itself. The term genocide was coined (not at all coincidentally) by a Jewish lawyer, Raphael Lemkin who was born in but forced to flee from Poland, where 49 members of his family who could not escape with him were then murdered (Cooper 2008).

Responses from Muslim Organisations

The inception of Holocaust Memorial Day provided an opportunity then, after these two perhaps necessarily sequential phases in Holocaust comprehension (first as a universal, then as a particular event) to understand both together. This means paying attention both to what happened to the Jews, which is what was captured in the aim of honouring survivors, and to considering its universal significance.

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1For example by Peter Novick (2000).

1The term “radical evil” in this context comes originally from Arendt (1968). Arendt, in many people’s minds, later abandoned the term radical in favour of banal, in her highly contentious book on the Eichmann Trial, Eichmann in Jerusalem (Arendt 1965). There is considerable debate about whether this was an improvement or a regression in Arendt’s understanding. It may make more sense, as Richard Bernstein has argued, to see these two terms as different sides of the same coin (Bernstein 1990).
This is the historical and political context in which we need to situate Muslim responses in the UK and in Italy. It is important to stress at the outset that these have been varied, both within communities (as there is no one Muslim community, contra any fundamentalist construction) and over time. At the risk of simplification (particularly serious perhaps here) we may nevertheless summarise these responses as the outcome of a see-saw of argument and pressure.

In the UK, organisations representing Muslim communities have moved back and forth from an initial refusal to participate, to participation with reluctance for a brief period, to a further refusal to participate, to organising alternatives. Between 2000 and 2007, the Muslim Council of Britain, the largest organisation representing Muslims in the UK and which has official recognition from the British government, voted repeatedly to boycott the day, claiming that to devote a day only to the Holocaust blocked recognition of other genocides, notably in the former Yugoslavia (where Muslims in Bosnia had been the primary victims) and much more contensionately and provocatively in the Palestinian territories (supposedly at the hands of Jews). It was argued that to hold such a day “hurt and excluded” Muslims. This position was maintained until 2007, despite considerable criticism, both from outside the organisation including some individual Muslims and from others—members of mainstream political parties, secularists and gay activists amongst them, but not primarily from Jews. In fact Jewish communities in the UK were themselves quite anxious about the inception of a Holocaust Memorial Day at the outset. There is no evidence at all to suggest that the day was conceived or authorised as a result of pressure from any Jewish organisation. Rather many Jews feared (perhaps presently) that the day might become the object of politicised controversy which could be used by antisemites.

At times during this period, the debate became quite heated, and leaders of the MCB complained about misrepresentation, particularly after an interview on the BBC of Iqbal Sacranie, the General Secretary of the organisation. The decision was reversed in 2008 in favour of participation but that was in turn reversed in 2009, following the Gaza War, when it was deemed intolerable to recognise Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) whilst Israel was killing Muslims in the Palestinian territories. In 2010 there was a further move to establishing what had often been mooted, a Genocide Memorial Day, organised by the Islamic Human Rights Coalition with representatives invited from South Africa (a veteran of Robben Island), the Stop the War Coalition, the Muslim Association of Britain and a number of other Muslim associations. This followed an earlier, isolated effort in 2007 by one small local authority, Bolton in the North of England, apparently at the request of the town’s inter-faith council, to abandon Holocaust Memorial Day and replace it a few months later by a Genocide Memorial Day (Smith 2007). Alongside this, however, there have also been more provocative moves, explicitly tying the Palestinian case to the

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2 We would like to thank Mark Gardner of the Community Security Trust in the UK for pointing this out to us.
Holocaust deliberately on this very day. In 2006, for example, the Scottish Palestinian Solidarity Committee staged a production on the day of the notorious play Perdition which accused Zionism in Hungary during the war of collaborating with the Nazis in the Holocaust itself. In 2009, the same group invited a prominent supporter of Hamas (an organization whose covenant specifically repeats several core Nazi themes) to speak on the day at an event titled "Resistance to Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing: from Europe in 1940s to the Middle East today" (Paul 2010).

In Italy, there are two major Muslim organisations. The Union of Muslim Communities and Organisations (Unione delle Comunità Organizzazioni Islamiche in Italia, or UCOII) which was created in 1990. It has connections both to Syrian and Palestinian Muslims and also with the Muslim Brotherhood, an important conduit for the importation of Nazi ideas into the Middle East. During the summer of 2006, at the time of the Second Lebanon War, it placed advertisements in several Italian newspapers asserting a direct equivalence between Israel and the Nazis, under the banner of "ieri si uccidevano i gatti, oggi si uccide il nostro" ("Yesterday Nazi massacres, today Israeli massacres") and "Marzabotto uccide Gaza, uccide Fosse Ardeatine uccide Libano" ("Marzabotto like Gaza like Fosse Ardeatine like Lebanon"). Marzabotto and Posse Ardeatine are sites of the most famous Nazi massacres of Italian civilians in World War II. The other major Italian Muslim organisation is the Islamic Culture Centre (Centro Culturale Islamico or CCI) established in 1995 and more closely associated with Muslims in Saudi Arabia, Morocco and Tunisia. In 2004 it produced a Manifesto against any form of terrorism including purportedly "defensive jihad" but was then attacked by the UCOII for being too moderate and not highlighting the supposed role of the United States and the Israeli responsibility in worsening the international relations. The UCOII for its part organised several demonstrations against the war in Gaza in January 2009 (Operation Cast Lead), characterised by violent antisemitic and anti-Zionist rhetoric which sought amongst other things to delegitimise Holocaust Memorial Day in Italy which was going to be celebrated in the week before and after 27 January. These demonstrations mobilised an unprecedented large number of Italian Muslims, bringing together radical Islamist activists and sections of the far left wing, waving various banners linking the Star of David and the swastika, as well as Hamas flags.

Criticising Holocaust Memorial Day

A number of different arguments have emerged in the course of this tortuous and ongoing history and it may be helpful (again at the risk of simplification) to try to identify and analyse them briefly here, not least because they may help understand why they have had some resonance, even in events held to mark the day itself. For none of these responses occurred in historical or educational, or political isolation. They can be situated, at least to some extent, in the context both of other debates about the history of Holocaust and other genocides, and in the context of other responses to contemporary political developments, especially in the Middle East but also in Europe.
The first argument has to do with responsibility for the Holocaust itself. This is the claim that the Holocaust has nothing to do with Muslims because it was a European, and especially a Christian, phenomenon. Whilst Islam has always had some presence in Europe, the large number of Muslims who now live in Europe migrated there after the war. They cannot have been responsible for what was done before they arrived. To require or ask Muslims to participate in HMD is to implicate responsibility where there was none. Islam as a religion was entirely absent as a factor in the Holocaust. Much of the power of Nazi antisemitism derived not in any way from Islam but from a long history of Christian antisemitism which has no parallel or equivalent in the Islamic world, where Jews have always (so it has been argued) been treated with respect. Moreover, to the extent that Europe has resolved its long-standing Jewish problem, it has in any event replaced it with another – Islamophobia, in which today’s Other has become the Muslim inside and outside Europe. 8

But, secondly, this hatred of the Other is not new. It continues a long history of European racism and the violence which accompanied the invasion, conquest and exploitation of the Third World over centuries. To privilege Jewish suffering in this broader context is a profound mistake which obscures the centrality of racism to Western culture and politics, a racism which led to repeated genocides, which are not the central focus of Holocaust Memorial Day. This explains why what is needed then is not a Holocaust Memorial Day but a Genocide Day, in which recognition could be given to all the other genocides committed by the West over centuries.

Thirdly, this is a history which continues today. Western imperialism continues to wreak havoc over the world, including in the Middle East where many Muslims live. Many have argued that the US-led invasion of Iraq was genocidal. Some even argue that Western policy towards Iraq was genocidal before the invasion, in the form of sanctions. But the most provocative form of this argument focuses on where Israel (as either a client state of the West or the eminence grise behind the United States) is held to be committing genocide against the Palestinians. Here the argument in a sense has come full circle, in that it is the very victims of the Holocaust who are now held to be the leading perpetrators of genocide. To the extent that Jews are still recognised as original victims, the problem of the Holocaust has simply been exported. Unable to deal with its own guilt, the West has exported the victims to somewhere else, onto Others outside Europe, to commit the same crime of genocide that was inflicted in the first place upon them.

All of these arguments are flawed to varying degrees, although it is not possible here to rehearse the issues involved in any detail. If the Holocaust took place inside Europe, one of the reasons Jews could be killed so extensively was that they were not considered part of the European nations. However, in the Nazi mind, the intent was

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7 This is not the space to go into arguments about the status of *antisemitizm* or to rehearse the ups and downs of treatment of Jews in the Islamic world (or, better, worlds). The similarities and differences between Christian and Islamic antisemitism were rehearsed some time ago by Léon Polakow in his multi-volume *History of Antisemitism* (Polakow 2003).

8 On the parallels between antisemitism and Islamophobia, see for example, Schanzer and Ziad (2006).
not only to kill Jews inside Europe but everywhere they could lay their hands on them and Jews from North Africa were also among the victims. The Nazi intent was a global one, not just to kill European Jews but to annihilate the Jewish people entirely. There was enthusiasm from non-Europeans too for what Hitler was doing, not least from the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem who gave his full and active support to the project. Nazi antisemitism drew from various sources, including but not exclusively Christianity. Islamic antisemitism shares some features with Christian antisemitism, and Muslim antisemites could find much in Nazi antisemitism to admire and take on board subsequently, adapting it to their own priorities and conceptual frameworks.

Islamophobia is not the same as antisemitism in several respects (which does not mean it does not exist, of course) and has no parallel in the murderous, exterminationist ambition of the Nazis. There is a complex relationship between European imperialism and racism, and between both and antisemitism and the Holocaust. In some respects they established precedents, most obviously perhaps in the case of the genocide against the Herero people in what is now Namibia. But the Holocaust was the most radical case of genocide, which is precisely what it led to the creation of the Genocide Convention in the first place. That Convention, in many ways the fruit of Lemkin's heroic efforts, articulated for the first time what the crime was, and what needed to be done to halt or prevent it and to punish its perpetrators. In this connection, it is clearly inaccurate and quite misleading to describe US policy towards Iraq before or after the war (whatever its rights and wrongs) in terms of genocide, which requires intent to destroy a group in whole or in part.

But the inaccuracy of this charge rather pales before the hyperbole and perversity of the charge of genocide against Israel. There is no evidence of intent on the part of the Israeli state to annihilate the Palestinians as a group. However dire the conditions in which many Palestinians live, the Palestinian population has not shrunk but grown. Palestinian children have not (as was the case with aboriginal children in Australia for example) been taken away from their families and brought up as Israelis. There were no Jews left inside the Ghettos after the Nazis had destroyed them. Whatever the number of casualties inside Gaza, it is clearly not the case that the population has been annihilated. There are, moreover, no slave-labour camps nor are there any extermination camps anywhere in Israel/ the Palestinian territories.

The problem however lies less here in the inaccuracy, over-simplification and ultimately perverse character of these arguments than in their resonance and effect. For they have been connected up with particular concerns and perceptions of some on the European Left and resonate too with certain well-known antisemitic tropes within both Catholic and Protestant traditions. This is not to suggest that the Left as a whole or Catholicism and Protestantism are responsible for these resonances and effect.

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9 On the connections between the Grand Mufti and the Nazis and more generally on links between Nazi antisemitism and Islamists in the Middle East, see Kertzer (2007); Herl (2009).

10 See, for example, Zimmerman (2005), Madley (2005). The silence of these connections has been questioned, however, by others. See, for example, Gerworth and Malinowski (2009).
though it may suggest that perhaps a more critical response from the Left and from Catholics and Protestants might help support those Muslims who have significantly challenged these ways of thinking.

In sections of the European Left today, these kinds of criticisms from some Muslims of Holocaust Memorial Day fall on receptive ears, particularly in the aftermath of the Iraq War and the Gaza conflict. The former was widely seen in some quarters as yet another example of Western imperialist violence with familiar genocidal dimensions and consequences. Whatever the purported (and widely denied) purposes or justifications. The latter saw repeated (and largely unchallenged) comparisons being drawn with the Warsaw Ghetto in particular, not just in terms of the use of overwhelming Israeli fire-power against Palestinian civilians but in the subsequent blockade, which was not just seen as illegal but wholly immoral.

On Holocaust Memorial Day

This has not (yet) resulted in a widespread withdrawal of support for the day itself, but has (in the experience of both authors at any rate, both of whom have given several talks on the day in recent years) impacted on how the day itself has been structured and managed. At one level, this is apparent in the increasingly general level of themes adopted for the day, such as “Standing up to Hatred” (2009) or the “Dignity of Difference” (2007) when earlier themes made rather more specific reference to the Holocaust – “Britain and the Holocaust” (2002) or “Children and the Holocaust” (2003).

There is nothing in such themes to prevent speakers or audiences connecting the particular to the universal. But our experience at any rate suggests that this is becoming more difficult, not because of the growing distance in time from the Holocaust but because audiences themselves seem to be becoming increasingly uninterested in the particular, in antisemitism and in the fact that Jews were the victims.

In both the UK and Italy, despite the obvious differences in political culture, in history and predominant religious affiliations, there have been startling similarities in the way in which audiences have responded on a day marked to remember the Holocaust. It is precisely because these differences are so marked that the similarities are so striking. The UK after all was the one European country to stand firm against the Nazis, even if it did not go to war to save the Jews. It has a deeply anchored liberal democratic culture and, although the separation of Church and State is not formalised, the form of Protestantism adopted by the majority is not (comparatively speaking) a source of political motivation or instruction. Italy by contrast was, under Mussolini, an inspiration to some extent for Hitler, an ally of Nazi Germany, and helped send many Italian Jews to their deaths. It is also predominantly a Catholic country, with Catholicism acting in many ways as a political reference for many in the population. The presence of Muslims in each country is quite different. There is a significant Muslim population in the UK, connected to its imperial past, drawn from many places, but especially the Indian sub-continent. There is no equivalently sized Muslim population in Italy.
Yet the arguments adopted by some Muslims in both countries seem to strike very much the same chord. In our diverse experiences, which include speaking in a municipality, in a town hall, in a district prison, and in Universities, the same arguments adduced above reappeared repeatedly. Rather than showing interest in accounts or understandings of what happened to the Jews, there has been a marked indifference to that particular experience. Instead there have been repeated comparisons between Israel and Nazi Germany as nations states, with "the" Jews cast as the new Nazis, claims that gas is being used to kill Palestinian children, and that Gaza (and the Occupation more broadly) is today's Warsaw Ghetto. These have been backed up with arguments about the West's collusion with Israel, both in its treatment of Palestinians and in the war in Iraq, connected to and deriving from the West's historic and continuing role in genocide, with Israel cast as self-evidently part of the West, and Muslims as the target.

In some cases, there were self-declared Muslims in the audience but in other cases not. This did not seem to make any significant difference to the thrust and tenor of discussion, which suggests that the criticisms most openly articulated by some Muslims in both countries need to be located in a broader context which goes beyond the national. They are criticisms which cast a particular appropriation on Jews which (if unchallenged) risk effectively silencing survivors who know all too well that they were themselves targeted precisely because that is who they were.

Rearticulating Antisemitism

It is hard not to think that converging streams of antisemitism are involved in the formation of what threatens to become a new common-sense. It is sometimes argued that the antisemitism of the Nazis was quite different to the earlier forms of antisemitism. But Nazi antisemitism drew on several different sources - pagan, Christian, nationalist, modern as well as anti-modern. These did not all disappear when Nazism was defeated, either in Italy or the UK.\(^{11}\)

\(^{11}\) This may modify some of the criticisms made of Holocaust Memorial Day, that it has been distorted by nationalist considerations of one kind or another. See, for example Shire 2006.

\(^{12}\) In a recent survey carried out by Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea (Centre of Contemporary Jewish Documentation) of Milan, it emerged that in Italy some 44% of the population is hostile to the Jews, out of which 10% share the classic antisemitic stereotypes (they are not really Italian, they are not trustworthy, etc., but without prejudices against Israel and the Holocaust) and politically they belong both to the Right and to the Left: 11% adopt modern antisemitic stereotypes (wealth, control on the media and finance, etc.); 11% is constituted above all by persons of the Left, secular and with high levels of education, who have prejudices against Israel and think that the Holocaust is a political self-serving instrument when, on the contrary, "the Jews behave like Nazis against the Palestinians", and finally 12% is constituted by genuine antisemites who adopt all the prejudices of the other three groups and belong both to the extreme Right and Left (Mandichnev 2009).
An important aspect of the radicalism of Nazi antisemitism can be found in the way in which it built on the past, fusing the different elements in a new combination. There is no reason to think that subsequent forms of antisemitism cannot do the same, and rework earlier themes, drawing on continuing sources of inspiration, and articulate them for a new context. In the kinds of arguments we have encountered and identified here, a similar process may be at work. The emphasis on the Holocaust in a Holocaust Memorial Day has been challenged both from within and without. In the former case, it involves an effort to rework the event itself, by universalising it, so that the Holocaust comes to be of central or primary significance even on that day. In the latter case, it involves formulating a more direct challenge to the event itself, and an effort to replace it with something that is only universal, and in which the specificity of the Holocaust disappears. In both cases, however, (albeit to different extents) it is possible to discern two familiar antisemitic tropes – turning things upside down and unmasking conspiracies. In blaming “the” Jews for genocide today, the central victims of the most radical genocide of all have now been turned into conspiratorial perpetrators. This was, as Peter Fritzschke has pointed out (Fritzschke 2008), one of the first claims that the Nazis made, as they were preparing for what they themselves were planning to do.

That such arguments can be made so uninhibitedly today, even or especially on a day set aside to remember the Holocaust, both by some Muslims and by others, is quite disturbing, not least because it risks silencing survivors once more time. As time passes, moreover, they will increasingly not be there to speak for themselves. Given the difficulty that survivors had in communicating their experience in the first place, this would compound an original offence, which was both a profound injustice and an obstacle in the way of understanding the significance of this great catastrophe.

But the question of communication also points to another problem. A common memory (which is what Holocaust Memorial Day aspires to articulate about a critical occurrence with both a universal and a particular significance) requires communication, as Michael Rothberg (following Avishai Margalit) has argued. A central moment in this communication means listening to accounts of what happened both to a particular group (Jews), so that we can see both what happened to them and at the same time to humanity itself (from which the Jews were now to be eliminated). We need to make sense of them together, Muslims and non-Muslims in the multi-cultural Europe we all inhabit. This is not after all, as Rothberg rightly insists, “a zero-sum game” (Rothberg 2009, 11). It is perfectly possible to remember what happened to the Jews at the hands of the Nazis, to honour the survivors and to think about subsequent genocides (real ones that is, not imagined ones) and injustices. Indeed, as Rothberg has shown, this is exactly what has happened precisely on the question of colonialism itself.

One might go further. Given the radical nature of the Holocaust, the radical injustice that it involved, the fact that it was recognised as a genocide, the “crime of crimes,”

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11 For a more extensive discussion of this, see Spencer (2010).
it may only be by attending to what happened there that we can attend to the injustices that have tragically followed in its wake, whoever has committed them and against whoever they have been committed, by and against Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

References


Perceptions of the Holocaust in Europe and Muslim Communities

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