

THE HOLOCAUST: THE MOST EXTREME FORM OF GENOCIDE

Excerpt from:

Witness: Passing the Torch of Holocaust Memory to New Generations, 2020, by Eli Rubenstein.

Published by Second Story Press

“The Holocaust,” according to one writer, “has become the ‘master narrative’ for suffering, shaping discussions about every present conflict over genocide and human rights.” Certainly, at first glance, there are aspects that seem to make the Holocaust stand out, even though each genocide is unique. The Holocaust is “uniquely, unique” as some have described it, not just because of the staggering number of victims, but also because of the machinery of death created by the Nazis in pursuit of their goal. They used modern technology to create assembly lines of death, where the “raw materials” were Jewish men, women, and children, and the “finished product” was ash (and side products of plundered Jewish possessions and gold teeth, hair etc.). The terrifying efficiency of this Nazi machine cannot but cause one to shudder and to recognize the level of ultimate evil to which humanity can descend.

Conceptually, too, the Holocaust was different from all other genocides. In mass murder, large numbers of people are killed by a government or other force; in genocide, mass murder takes place on an ongoing basis, with the goal of destroying the culture and/or national existence of another people. The Holocaust, however, was mass murder, plus genocide...plus the attempt to annihilate the existence of an entire group of people, and obliterate it forever. What the Jews faced at the hands of the Nazis was unprecedented in human history.

What makes the Holocaust unique is the combination of three conditions: it was driven by ideological rather than pragmatic (land, resources etc.) reasons; it was global in reach; and the intended target was the entire Jewish people (from

infancy to old age). “The Nazis were looking for Jews, for all Jews,” in the words of eminent Holocaust historian Yehuda Bauer. As Dr. David Silberklang notes: “The very goal itself – a state plan to annihilate an entire people without exception, not to leave a single Jew alive under any circumstances – is what makes the Holocaust unique.”

When one understands this, one comes face to face with the utter irrationality of the Holocaust, which maintained that the very redemption of the world relied upon the “extermination” of every last Jew, to finally and totally rid the world of this contemptible “virus.” No course of action of any kind by the victim – supplication, conversion, bribery, slavery, or exile – could ever suffice or placate the Nazi agenda. No other mass murder or genocide was ever conceived or implemented on the basis of such an absolutist worldview.

In light of this, it has been argued that, on the continuum, the Holocaust is the most extreme form of genocide and should be the starting point of any attempt to understand genocide – not because Holocaust victims suffered more than others, but because of its unprecedented and total nature.

The Holocaust, perhaps more than any other genocide, teaches us – warns us – that lacking restraint, humanity’s potential for extreme evil and cruelty is virtually without limit, beyond our worst fears and our wildest imagination. Of course, the deaths of victims of mass murder, genocide, and the Holocaust are all unjust and must be mourned by the world community. As humanitarian Lieutenant-General Roméo Dallaire, former Canadian senator, reminds us: “No human is more human than any other.” The victims of the various genocides throughout history may have perished for different reasons and under different circumstances – and this, indeed, is worthy of examination – but their lives were equally, infinitely, and immeasurably sacred.

Our study of all genocides should lead us to the acceptance of the fundamental equality of every member of the human family – their right to life, justice, freedom, and dignity – and the resolve to live together in peace.