



## COMING TO TERMS WITH THE PAST SAFEGUARDS HUMAN RIGHTS FOR ALL

*The UN's Holocaust Outreach Programs  
By Eve Epstein and Felice Gaer*

At the UN, it took more than half a century to turn history right-side up when addressing the Holocaust. From 1945 to 1998, top officials routinely invoked euphemisms such as “World War Two” or “the acts of the Nazi regime” when referencing the Holocaust. Remarkably, no senior United Nations official had ever spoken publicly about the Jews as victims of the Nazi genocide, until the 50th anniversary of the Convention against Genocide when former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan ended the UN’s silence. Annan remarked that “the Holocaust of the Jews” must never be repeated. This exhortation was no mere ceremonial pabulum. Given the UN’s political realities, it was an act of courage and moral leadership. For the first time in the UN’s history, a secretary-general linked the Second World War and Nazi atrocities to its Jewish context and spoke about the relationship of the Holocaust to the Genocide Convention and the UN’s founding mission.

Until January 2005, when the UN General Assembly convened a special session to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps, the representatives of the 192 UN member states had never officially addressed the Holocaust. For the first time in its history the General Assembly heard a first-hand account from a Jewish Holocaust survivor. It was also the first time that a secretary-general told the international community that “The tragedy of the Jewish people was unique.” Later that year, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 60/7 designating January 27 as an annual International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust. Significantly, the resolution rejected “any denial of the Holocaust as an historical event, either in full or in part.” In 2020, in Res. 76/250, the Assembly condemned Holocaust denial as a form of antisemitism, asking states “to educate their societies truthfully about the facts of the Holocaust and the importance of its lessons as a countermeasure against Holocaust denial and distortion, in order to prevent future acts of genocide.” And so, belatedly, the UN has begun properly to acknowledge and come to terms with the Holocaust—and stand up to those who sought to deny or diminish its significance.

While Holocaust denial as a vehicle for denigrating Jewish survivors of the Holocaust and de-legitimizing the State of Israel is hardly a new phenomenon, Iran’s then-President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s pronouncements questioning the existence, dimensions, and impact of the Holocaust, when understood in the context of his threats to Israel’s existence, gave a new sense of urgency to Holocaust education and remembrance. Mocking the Security Council’s and secretary-general’s approbations, Ahmadinejad promoted a conference in Tehran to award prizes to cartoonists who tried to de-legitimize the Holocaust. Annan rightly called such Holocaust denial “the work of bigots.”

On the eve of the 2007 UN Holocaust Commemoration, the UN General Assembly again challenged Ahmadinejad’s Holocaust denial by adopting a consensus resolution calling on its member states “unreservedly to reject any denial of the Holocaust as a historical event...” Notably, a majority of the GA’s membership—one hundred three states—co-sponsored the resolution, thus ensuring its adoption without equivocation, distortion or amendment. Iran alone disassociated itself from the resolution. Even before taking office as secretary-general, Ban Ki-moon spoke frankly to the press about the Iranian position on the Holocaust, warning that Holocaust denial is “not acceptable.” “Nor is it acceptable” he said, “to call for the elimination of any State or people.” Five weeks later, after being sworn in as UN secretary-general, Mr. Ban said that “The Holocaust was a unique and undeniable tragedy...The ability of the Nazis to command a following, despite their utter depravity,

still strikes fear.... We must apply the lessons of the Holocaust to today's world." Like his predecessors, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres reminded us all in 2017 that "we still see Holocaust denial, despite the facts. There is also a new trend of Holocaust revisionism, with the rewriting of history and even the honouring of disgraced officials from those days."

Clearly, the UN approach to the Holocaust has changed. As recently as 2005, there was nothing about the Holocaust as such in the UN's exhaustive record of documents. Today, an impressive UN website, <http://www.un.org/holocaustremembrance/> is devoted to Holocaust education and remembrance. Virtually anything you want to know about the Holocaust—from victims' testimonies to Holocaust scholarship in China, Africa, or elsewhere—can be found on the website. A permanent exhibit on the Holocaust sits on the third floor of the United Nations just outside the UN Security Council chamber and is included in the guided tours of the UN New York Headquarters. In 2017 UN sponsored Holocaust remembrance programs totaled 157 activities from 44 UN information centers putting on programs in 51 countries. In addition to offering an array of educational seminars, discussions and other related programs and materials, the UN's Department of Public Information (DPI) now actively train its own information officers about the Holocaust, and DPI claims it works with UN Information Centers located in UN Member States throughout the world to support UN Holocaust remembrance education initiatives and programs. Secretary-General Ban made it clear that under his stewardship the UN Secretariat would fulfill the General Assembly's mandate "to establish a program of outreach on the subject of the Holocaust and the United Nations" and "mobilize civil society for Holocaust remembrance and education, in order to help to prevent future acts of genocide." This year, commemoration of the Holocaust at the UN will continue with exhibits, film screenings and a remembrance program at the UN Headquarters in New York.

Now several Secretaries-General and the UN General Assembly have affirmed that it is no longer acceptable for states and their leaders to pretend that the Holocaust was anything other than the most heinous example of anti-Semitism in history—and a genocide directed against the Jews. As the Yad Vashem website explains, while the Holocaust is part of a broader aggregate of acts of oppression and murder of various ethnic, social and political groups by the Nazis, it nevertheless has unique significance due to the exceptional way its perpetrators regarded their Jewish victims. For example, in the Nazi terminology, the Jews were referred to as "world Jewry," a term unparalleled with respect of any other ethnic, ideological, or social group. Accordingly, when the UN speaks of the Holocaust's universal lessons and remembers other victims of Nazi racism, two crucially important guideposts for preventing genocides, it should always underscore the historical reality that the Nazis proclaimed goal was the systematic annihilation of the Jewish people.

At the opening of the new Yad Vashem museum in Israel, Kofi Annan remarked, "A United Nations that fails to be in the forefront of the fight against anti-Semitism and other forms of racism denies its history and undermines its future. That obligation links us to the Jewish people, and to the State of Israel, which rose, like the United Nations itself, from the ashes of the Holocaust. It links us to all people who have been, or may be, threatened with a similar fate." During Ban Ki-moon's 2013 visit to Auschwitz, he stated that "the world must never forget, deny or downplay the Holocaust. We must remain ever on our guard. And we must do more, far more, to promote equality and fundamental freedoms. Every day, around the world, the United Nations strives to fulfil its cardinal mission of preventing any other such descent into darkness." Acknowledging and continuing this legacy will ensure the UN's relevance and help it to safeguard human rights for all persons throughout the world.

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