

The Day of Remembrance for the Victims of National Socialism in Germany

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Introduction

The past decades have witnessed the development in Germany of a multifaceted culture of remembrance for the victims of the Holocaust. The search for fitting ways to approach the history of National Socialism and the murder of Europe's Jews is an issue that is widely debated—a debate that despite the passage of time has lost virtually nothing of its intensity. Given the issue's public prominence and the far from purely scholarly attention it receives, the urge to explore and understand this history is clearly by no means confined to the survivors, academic circles, and the media.

Paul Spiegel, the current president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, commented in 1997 in an interview with the Shoah Foundation:

We were rather apprehensive the 50th anniversary would serve to draw a line under that past for good and all. That people would say: That's it now, over and done with. My feeling, however, is that the opposite is the case. That all these events, activities and testimonies have, in a very striking way, helped put across to young people in particular: You are not responsible for what happened but you are responsible for your future. And you can only build the future if you know the past. That is the message, and I believe most people, particularly among the young generation, also accept and share that view.²

On January 3, 1996, the then Federal President Herzog declared that January 27, the day Auschwitz was liberated, was to be a national "day of commemoration for the victims of National Socialism." In the words of Roman Herzog:

". . . it takes more than just legal norms to immunize individual human beings against these things. There is a need for additional efforts, particularly for those who did not experience this massive crime for themselves and who can no longer hear the experiences of eyewitnesses.

This is the reason why two weeks ago, with the support of all the parties represented in Parliament, I declared January 27, the day Auschwitz was liberated, a day of commemoration for the victims of National Socialism. I know that human language does not suffice to express briefly what is meant by

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² Survivors of the Shoah Visual History GmbH: *Erinnern für Gegenwart und Zukunft* (Remembering for the Present and the Future), Berlin 2000 (CD-ROM)

this day. "Victims of the Holocaust" would have been too narrow a concept, since National Socialist racial policy affected more people than the Jews. "Victims of National Socialist racial policy," "victims of National Socialist racial insanity" or similar expressions, on the other hand, would not have been strong enough to even come close to expressing the horrors of this part of our history. As such, I decided to remain with the expression "victims of National Socialism," which has come into usage in our language, well aware that many, in a broad interpretation of this expression, will include the victims of flight, expulsion and abduction. We will not forget these victims either. However, for many years now we have commemorated them on the Day of National Mourning, and this should continue to be the case. I would also like to see this day of commemoration established more firmly in our minds again, and I hope all those who write and ask me to create a day of commemoration for the victims of expulsion will attend Day of National Mourning observances. January 27 is intended as a day of commemoration for the victims of an ideology that propagated a "Nordic master race" as well as "subhumans" and the denial of their right to exist. The date selected reflects this unequivocally.«

Already previously a number of days to commemorate particular events during the National Socialist era had been established, including (in chronological order): the Day of National Mourning,^{3[3]} November 9,^{4[4]} September 1,^{5[5]} July 20,^{6[6]} May 8,^{7[7]} as well as various local remembrance days to commemorate local events or war incidents or the liberation of a concentration camp in the vicinity.

The range and variety of events commemorated as well as their very different significance reflects the complexity of the nation's collective memories of the National Socialist era, the Holocaust, and the Second World War.

Of all these dates January 27 and November 9 both have a clear connection with the history of the Holocaust and National Socialist persecution of the Jews. The Central Council of German Sinti and Roma are keen for another day of remembrance to be established on December 16.^{8[8]} On December 17, 1999, in Bonn, the Bundesrat, the council of Germany's 16 constituent states, held a minute of silence to pay tribute to the Sinti and Roma victims of the National Socialist policy of persecution and extermination. Some half a million members of this minority in Europe lost their lives in the Holocaust. As Kurt Biedenkopf, the

³ Instituted in 1922 to commemorate the soldiers who lost their lives during World War I; renamed "Fallen Heroes Day" in 1934 by the Nazis, who planned in commemoration of the "martyrs" of their own movement to schedule it permanently on November 9. The Day of National Mourning was for the first time observed in the Federal Republic of Germany in 1950 with a ceremony held in the German Bundestag. As it depends on the church calendar, the actual date varies from year to year.

⁴ November 9, 1938, November Pogrom/Pogrom Night/"Night of Broken Glass"

⁵ September 1, 1939, the outbreak of World War II with the German invasion of Poland

⁶ July 20, 1944, abortive assassination attempt on Hitler

⁷ May 8, 1945, World War II ends with the unconditional capitulation of the Third Reich

⁸ Himmler's "Auschwitz Decree" of December 16, 1942, ordered all Sinti and Roma in Germany and Austria to be deported to the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp.

minister president of Saxony and current president of the Bundesrat pointed out, "the memory of that inhuman persecution must never be allowed to fade." For far too long after the end of the war, he noted, the reality of the genocide of the Sinti and Roma was denied.

There are also a number of local days of remembrance such as anniversaries of the deportation of the Jews from a particular neighborhood or the liberation of a concentration camp in the vicinity. Special events are organized by all memorial centers at former concentration camps to mark the day of liberation, an opportunity for the nation today to show survivors and victims' families that we share in their grief and determination not to forget the crimes of National Socialism and its victims. As in the past, nationwide observances—as the example of November 9 shows—are complemented, however, by local activities to commemorate events of particular significance to the local community.

Although initially it was often the survivors who paid tribute to their dead comrades on these occasions, over the years many sections of society became involved in all kinds of activities to commemorate the victims. Local politicians and church leaders had long participated in events organized by Jewish communities to commemorate the November Pogrom, but on a broader level it was not until 1978 that it became more common for schools, universities, and adult education institutions as well as organizations and social groups such as parties, trade unions, and church parishes to organize such events of their own, a trend increasingly pronounced from 1988 onwards. Survivors of Nazi persecution and Jews from all over the world who had once been forced to flee their homeland are frequently invited to take part in such local events.

Remembrance at Local Level

One example from Bavaria: The program held at the Dachau Memorial Center on May 2, 1999, to mark the 54th anniversary of the camp's liberation, an event commemorated every year, included a Russian-Orthodox and an ecumenical church service, a ceremony organized by the Bavarian Association of Israelite Congregations, and a commemoration organized by the Comité International de Dachau. The program organizers were the Lagergemeinschaft Dachau, the memorial center, and the Promotion Council for International Youth Exchange. The Bavarian Agency for Civic Education was involved both in organizing the ceremony and inviting surviving inmates of Dachau and Flössenburg to attend the events.

In Hamburg an annual ceremony is held at Bullenhuser Damm Memorial Center to pay tribute to the Jewish children and their caregivers, who in 1945 were murdered in the former school building to cover up the pseudo-medical experiments they had been subjected to. The memorial center is visited by many school classes throughout the year.

Lower Saxony provides a good example of the variety of organizations involved in local remembrance activities as well as the diversity of approaches employed. Institutions working in the field of civic education collaborate closely with history workshops and similar organizations in planning a series of thematically focused activities, including exhibitions, encounters with eyewitnesses, film evenings, concerts, lectures, seminars, and study trips designed to appeal in different ways to a wide public.

At the former SS Special Camp/Hinzert Concentration Camp Memorial Center in Rhineland-Palatinate an international ceremony in memory of the camp's former inmates is held every year on the third Saturday in September. As the multitude of organizations involved in arranging this event demonstrates, it is important to the survivors but also to German society as a whole that the camp and its history should be remembered. The program is organized jointly by the Trier Regional Authority, the Land Agency for Civic Education, the Conseil National de la Résistance in Luxembourg, and the French Consulate-General in Mainz. Recently schoolchildren from Rhineland-Palatinate, Luxembourg, and France have also been invited to take part.

November 9

Both at local, Land, and federal level the anniversary of the November Pogrom is marked by a multitude of different activities (particularly on the 50th anniversary in 1988, when it was also commemorated for the first time in the former GDR on a relatively large scale).

While official observances are held in local Jewish communities, the Bundestag, and Land parliaments and governments, a striking feature of this anniversary is the way it is commemorated, in addition to the churches, by an ever larger number of political and social groups of various kinds. As a result of local historical research often initiated, funded, and supported by the relevant local authorities, parliaments and civic education bodies, a wide range of exhibitions and publications have helped to focus attention on the history of persecution in the local community and of its Jewish population, especially during the period of National Socialism.

One form of remembrance many cities (e.g. Berlin and Hamburg) have adopted since the mid-nineties is the public reading out—frequently over a period of hours or even days—of the names of Jews who were deported and murdered, the aim being both to highlight the individuality of the victims and convey through the sheer numbers involved some idea of the magnitude of the crime. Groups of school students often take part in such readings of names, which, following a tradition developed in Israel for the Yom haShoah, now usually takes place on January 27. As the Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania points out, in the former GDR it was at the initiative of the Protestant Church that November 9 first started to be commemorated. To mark the 50th anniversary of the November Pogrom, the departments of history and theology at the Ernst Moritz Arndt University in Greifswald held in November 1988, just one year before the fall of the Berlin Wall, a colloquium on the history of the pogrom itself and of the Jewish community in Pomerania.

For some 25 years now on November 9 in Wilhelmshaven, Lower Saxony, the German Trade Union Federation's youth organization has regularly held a vigil on the square where the city's synagogue once stood.

The program organized for November 9 by the Gerhard Mercator University in Duisburg, North-Rhine/Westphalia, is typical of the way the universities commemorate this occasion. The Department of Jewish Studies in particular is involved in organizing remembrance days, which tend to be more academic than commemorative in a conventional sense. University staff and students also take part in public events in Duisburg and other cities to mark November 9. In 1999 the

University's Steinheim Institute published a book of remembrance on the 280 synagogues destroyed on November 9, 1938, in the area that is now North-Rhine/Westphalia. The universities have now begun to critically examine their own past complicity in the crimes of National Socialism. The Senate of the University of Bonn, for instance, held a special ceremony on November 10, 1998, to publicly rehabilitate all those whose academic titles had been rescinded for political reasons during the period of National Socialism as well as all students barred from the university for political reasons during this period, and to declare the relevant legal acts null and void.

The city of Lübeck (Schleswig-Holstein) has for a number of years now organized around November 9 a series of events entitled "Time to Remember." To mark the 60th anniversary in 1998 the city planned in conjunction with the Hamburg Forschungs- und Arbeitsstelle "Education after/about Auschwitz," an international academic conference with Ignatz Bubis, the then president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, as its patron. Over 60 distinguished speakers were invited together with some 520 participants. A new departure was the presence of some 150 school students, who also took an active part in the proceedings.

January 27

The activities surrounding January 27 are remarkable particularly for their range and variety, clear evidence that, with respect to the history of National Socialism and the Holocaust, there has developed in the Federal Republic a complex and broadbased culture of remembrance, which through its very diversity reflects the complexity of this history.

Throughout Germany a host of programs and events are organized by the Länder, municipalities, religious communities, political parties, trade unions, associations, and schools, ranging from traditional commemorative observances to discussions with eyewitnesses, readings, and project work. In this context young people are an important target group, with particular attention being given to how to make the Holocaust relevant and meaningful to them.

As in the case of Bremen, Hamburg, Rhineland-Palatinate, and Saarland, it is common for the Land parliaments to organize public commemorative events or lectures.

To mark the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz on January 27, 1945, Hamburg for example convened an international conference, for which Ignatz Bubis, the then president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany and a keen supporter of making January 27 a national day of remembrance, agreed to be patron.

The city of Stade in Lower Saxony serves as an example of the kind of events organized at local level to mark this anniversary. On January 27, 1999, two groups, each comprising some 350 school students, discussed with a speaker invited by the city various aspects of remembrance. The guest speaker went on to conduct a workshop for teachers on the subjects of the Holocaust in the new media and provide the lead-in for a discussion in the evening.

In Rhineland-Palatinate, the Land Agency for Civic Education since 1997 has organized a central event to mark the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of

National Socialism. In 1997 an exhibition was opened in the Land Museum in Mainz entitled *50 Years of Education about National Socialism in Rhineland-Palatinate*, at which a range of local and regional associations and initiatives presented the results of their work. In 1998 the Landtag (regional parliament) held an extraordinary session at the National Socialism Documentation Unit of Osthofen Concentration Camp Memorial Center. In 1999 the Agency arranged a discussion with an eyewitness of the period, Inge Deutschkron, followed by the performance of a play entitled *As from Today Your Name Is Sara . . .* by a school drama group and a discussion between students and members of the Landtag. By choosing different forms of remembrance it is hoped to avoid ritualization and an over-emphasis on form at the expense of content.

The hour of remembrance observed on January 27, 1998, at the Buchenwald Concentration Camp Memorial Center in Thuringia is typical of the many official commemorative events involving representatives of the Land governments and parliaments. The event included addresses given by the Landtag president, the chairman of the Thuringia Jewish Community, and the minister president, a recital by students of the Belvedere School, and a wreath-laying ceremony.

At the initiative of the Land Ministries of Education and Cultural Affairs, classroom materials have been prepared and distributed to give January 27 nationwide prominence as the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of National Socialism. The various agencies of civic education and institutions concerned with teacher training have in many cases designed their own materials to help schools arrange commemorative activities. Clearly such support always serves also schools' longer-term educational goals. The problem is not so much to find materials and ideas suitable for the classroom but to choose from among the wealth of materials available for different age-groups.

In Baden-Württemberg, for example, a teachers manual with classroom materials covering a full range of subjects was prepared and distributed to all schools for the first time in 1997. The intention is to provide ideas for a more sustained classroom treatment of the National Socialist genocide as well as suggestions for schools' own activities to commemorate the Day of Remembrance. Local school offices have also designed materials on this topic for use in history as well as community, environment, and social studies. Schools have been so keen to obtain such materials that many are now out of print.

The Institute of Teacher Training and School Development in Berlin has also developed a series of suggestions for classroom practice, visits to memorial centers, discussions with eyewitnesses, and learning about contemporary Jewish life.

In Hamburg the Office for Schools, Youth, and Vocational Training supports the Bertini Prize, which was established at the initiative of a teacher on January 27, 1998, and awarded for the first time on January 27, 1999. The aim of the award is to encourage young people to join in keeping memories alive, promote partnership on equal terms within the community, and speak out against injustice, social exclusion, and violence.

Schools participate in a multitude of different ways in commemorating the Day of Remembrance. As the Bavarian Education Ministry rightly points out, many forms

of remembrance do not lend themselves to being reported. In general it can be said, however, that commemorative activities are part and parcel of sustained efforts to come to grips with National Socialism, racism, and the Nazi rule of terror. They may constitute the stimulus or point of departure for longer-term projects at individual schools, the Hamburg Schools Office notes. Many school projects which present the results of their work on the Day of Remembrance testify to a sustained and intensive commitment on the part of the teachers and students involved.

In Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania the school curriculum requires or suggests particular classroom topics with specific reference to the various dates to be commemorated. At the same time, however, there is ample scope for integrating local aspects, for example, by using individual biographies as an introduction to the wider subject. Such local aspects are particularly useful in encouraging greater school involvement with its neighborhood. Projects, visits to memorial sites, special ceremonies to mark commemorative occasions, even the names of schools themselves provide opportunities throughout the year for students to learn about the Holocaust.

Some kinds of activities that are clearly of particular value in this context are found in schools throughout Germany. These include discussions with eyewitnesses, local history projects, exhibitions or plays prepared by students inside or outside the classroom, and participation in commemorative events organized by the local community.

All activities are born of this clear conviction: we owe it to the victims to face up to our history and we owe it also to our own past, present, and future.