



Stand Together

'Don't be content in your life just to do no wrong, be prepared every day to try and do some good.'

Sir Nicholas Winton, who rescued 669 children from Nazi-occupied Europe

Background

Each year, the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust chooses a different theme to enable audiences on Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) to learn something new about the Holocaust and genocide, and to make it easier for HMD activity organisers to create fresh and engaging activities. Every theme is relevant to the Holocaust, Nazi Persecution and to the genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur, and has the life stories of those who were murdered and those who survived at its heart – as well as the experiences of resisters, rescuers and witnesses.

HMD 2020 marks the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz – this is a significant milestone and is made particularly poignant by the dwindling number of survivors who are able to share their testimony. It also marks the 25th anniversary of the Genocide in Bosnia.

Introduction

The theme for HMD 2020 is Stand Together. It explores how genocidal regimes throughout history have deliberately fractured societies by marginalising certain groups, and how these tactics can be challenged by individuals standing together with their neighbours, and speaking out against oppression.

In the years leading up to the Holocaust, Nazi policies and propaganda deliberately encouraged divisions within German society – urging 'Aryan' Germans to keep themselves separate from their Jewish neighbours. The Holocaust, Nazi Persecution of other groups and each subsequent genocide, was enabled by ordinary citizens not standing with their targeted neighbours.

Today there is increasing division in communities across the UK and the world. Now more than ever, we need to stand together with others in our communities in order to stop division and the spread of identity-based hostility in our society. Everyone can take some action to support others - by using our voices, presence, platform or influence.

Scope of the theme

1 - Steps leading to genocide

In the years prior to the Holocaust, Nazi persecution and to each subsequent genocide, governing regimes actively developed policies that separated people, causing certain groups to be treated as 'the other'.

a) Us versus Them

'I made a promise to a girl in Auschwitz - to make young people aware of the dangers that the dehumanisation, denigration and differentiation of people can lead to.'

Iby Knill, Holocaust survivor

As soon as the Nazis came to power they began restricting certain people's rights. The introduction of the Nuremberg Laws in September 1935 meant Jews were banned from marrying non-Jews and their citizenship was removed, including their right to vote. Eventually Jews were banned from all professional occupations and Jewish children weren't allowed to attend state schools. From 1933 the 'Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring' was used to justify sterilising ill and disabled people, and in 1935 the Nazis redrafted Paragraph 175 of the German Penal Code to criminalise a broader range of male homosexual acts, and make the punishment harsher.

In Bosnia in 1991, non-Serbs were forced to wear white armbands and fly white flags outside their houses. Bosnian Serb forces wanted to be able to easily identify Bosniaks – Bosnian Muslims, who were then forced from their homes, many of them ending up in concentration camps.

By slowly dividing society and making a target group visible through symbols on clothes, opportunities for people to stand together and speak up are reduced. The target group is removed from the workplace and schools, or rounded up into ghettos and camps, and the idea of the target group as 'different' or 'inferior' is normalised. Friendships and work relationships are deliberately broken down in this way, so that the targeted group of people becomes less known and familiar – making it easier to increase oppression at a later stage.

b) Propaganda to divide

'On the hate radio they were saying "Those cockroaches and their spies must be killed because they had killed the President".'

Immaculée Heddou, survivor of the Genocide in Rwanda

Propaganda uses stereotypes and existing prejudices to create caricatures of the victim group, and turn the rest of the population against them. Nazi propaganda relied on dehumanising the Jews, often by portraying them as animals such as rats and lice. Cartoons were published in state-sponsored newspapers, and displayed as posters in public spaces. Posters and articles in newspapers also demonised Roma and Sinti communities as a 'Gypsy plague', paving the way for the Nazis to target these groups for total destruction.

In Rwanda, a radio station called RTLM broadcast hate-filled propaganda against the Tutsi people for almost a year in the lead-up to the genocide. In shocking echoes of Nazi persecution, Tutsi people were called cockroaches and snakes. They were blamed for Rwanda's problems, and described as a threat to the safety of Hutus.

By using dehumanising language, the creators of this propaganda encouraged people to think of certain groups of people as having the characteristics of those animals, for example: dirty, disease carrying, a pest, sneaky or creepy. This tactic also served to encourage the perpetrator group to think of the people in the targeted communities as 'less than' human.

2 - 'Standing together' during genocide

Despite the introduction of these policies, examples can be found of inspiring individuals who assisted, rescued or showed solidarity with those who were being persecuted in their communities and countries.

a) Assisting persecuted people

'The subject of [their] discussion wasn't whether to save the Jewish Mandil family, but how. How to move them and how to save them.'

Gavra Mandil, whose family survived the Holocaust in hiding

One of the ways people survive persecution and genocide is by living in hiding. This is not something they can do alone. Brave people have to offer places to hide, lie to protect them and provide ongoing assistance such as food and medicine - often at great danger to themselves.

Moshe and Gabriela Mandil and their children Gavra and Irena fled their home in Yugoslavia when the Germans invaded in April 1941, and made their way to Albania. There they were taken in and hidden by an Albanian Muslim family called the Veselis. The Veselis also hid another Jewish family, and when questioned, no one in their village gave the Jews up to the Nazis. Many Jews who made their way to Albania were welcomed and sheltered in this way. The Albanians' refusal to comply with the Nazis' genocidal policies was grounded in 'Besa', a code of national honour, emerging from strong Muslim and ethical beliefs. The Albanian population was so effective in their efforts that there were only two reported cases of Jews being deported by the Nazis.

Read more about the Veseli family: hmd.org.uk/veseli

Sokphal Din survived the Genocide in Cambodia. One of the things that saved him was solidarity from neighbours following a moment of quick-thinking to hide part of his identity. Sokphal was a bright 17-year-old in Phnom Penh, working hard at his studies and dreaming of becoming a doctor. These dreams were brought to an end by the genocide. When questioned by the Khmer Rouge, Sokphal lied and said he couldn't read or write, and was a bread seller. Nobody around him revealed that this wasn't true. This lie saved his life, as the Khmer Rouge were targeting and killing academics.

Read more about Sokphal Din: hmd.org.uk/sokphal

b) Standing together in resistance

'Activism allows us to shake inequality from the core, it lets us redefine what matters by lifting the voices of those around us.'

Emtithal Mahmoud – a poet born in Darfur

Despite the danger to personal safety, in every genocide there have been opponents and resisters who fight back against the persecution and stand together with the targeted group.

Safet Vukalic, a Bosnian Muslim remembers his Serb neighbour refusing to join the Bosnian Serb army and take part in the atrocities being committed. His neighbour was called a traitor, but to the 16 year old Safet it was a powerful reminder that not everyone was against them.

In 2018, Sudanese poet and peace campaigner Emtithal Mahmoud walked 1,000km in 30 days, from Darfur to the capital city of Khartoum. Her aim was to promote peace and safety in the region, where there has been an ongoing genocide since 2003. At the time of publishing, in early 2019, Sudanese citizens have been protesting daily for several months against President Bashir's government, which has been in power for 30 years. The government are attempting to repress these peaceful protests through violence, including sexual violence, detention and even killings.

Learn more about the ongoing situation in Sudan: wagingpeace.info

c) Speaking out against persecution and challenging a hostile culture

'Woe to mankind, woe to our German nation if God's Holy Commandment "Thou shalt not kill" is not only broken, but if this transgression is actually tolerated and permitted to go unpunished.'

Cardinal Clemens von Galen

One of the most powerful ways to challenge an oppressive regime is to speak out publicly against its actions.

On 3 August 1941 a Catholic Cardinal, Clemens von Galen, delivered a passionate sermon in Münster Cathedral attacking the Aktion T4 programme of 'euthanasia' against those with physical and mental disabilities and illness, which he described as 'plain murder.' He spoke of a terrible future for humanity if euthanasia became acceptable for those perceived to be weak. People who publicly opposed the Nazis had been imprisoned in concentration camps, persecuted and murdered since 1933, so Cardinal von Galen knew he was risking his life for what he believed in.

Under pressure from public opinion, Hitler ordered the closure of the official 'euthanasia' programme. However the murders did not cease, continuing instead in more secretive ways. Nonetheless, Cardinal Clemens von Galen's actions demonstrate the power of speaking out. To do so can rally others to join in challenging the prevailing culture, and can be a powerful act of solidarity, providing comfort to those under attack.

3 - 'Standing together' today

Holocaust Memorial Day is an opportunity each year for people around the UK to stand together with those in their local community, learn about those affected by genocide around the world, and take action for the future.

a) Standing together against rising division and hate

In 2019 we commissioned research to get an insight into the general public's knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust. Alongside some encouraging results, there were some worrying findings. 5% of those polled didn't believe the Holocaust really happened, 8% believed the scale of the Holocaust has been exaggerated, and 64% do not know how many Jews were murdered or grossly underestimate the number.

In 2017/18, there were 94,098 hate crime offences recorded by the police in England and Wales, an increase of 17% compared with the previous year. This continues a trend of increasing numbers of offenses recorded in recent years.

In order to combat hate in our communities, individuals have a crucial role to play in changing what is seen as acceptable language and behaviour. These changes are made through actions – if certain groups are routinely excluded, make sure to include them by inviting them to an event. If a group is viewed with suspicion or fear, find out more about their way of life and begin a dialogue.

b) Standing together with the memory of people who were murdered

'If something happens, I would want there to be somebody who would remember that someone named D. Berger had once lived.'

David Berger, murdered in the Holocaust

The perpetrators of genocides are aiming to wipe out entire groups – removing their culture, identities and history from existence. By remembering the people murdered during a genocide, we ensure that this does not happen.

We have a duty to stand together with these people by learning and sharing their stories, taking part in commemorative activities such as candle lightings, moments of silence, and reading names.

This year we mark the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz – a hugely significant anniversary. We can play a part in ensuring that the memory of those who were murdered is passed on.

By learning where prejudice and hatred can lead if left unchallenged, and committing to taking action when we see injustice in the world, we provide a legacy for people like David Berger, who was murdered by the Nazis just for being Jewish, and wished that his name would be remembered.

c) Standing together to support those in need

'We must be active in supporting and helping people who are fleeing from persecution and discrimination - if we make that first step then others will follow.'

Student from Frederick Bremer School

At Frederick Bremer School in Waltham Forest, students took part in assemblies and lessons to learn about the Holocaust and genocide in the lead up to HMD 2019. Following all they had learnt, they chose to take part in a fundraising campaign for the charity Refugee Action to support those displaced from their homes due to discrimination, war and economic difficulties.

These students took what they had learnt, and found a way they can help people in our society today. Most of us are not faced with extreme situations such as genocide in our daily lives, but we can still take action to help those facing identity-based persecution or discrimination.

Discussion questions

When reflecting upon the theme **Stand Together**, you could discuss:

- a) What motivated people to stand together with targeted individuals during the Holocaust and Nazi Persecution, and during subsequent genocides?
- b) What risks and challenges might they have needed to overcome in order to show solidarity?
- c) Why is it so important to 'stand together' today? And how might we do it?

Further resources

See hmd.org.uk for resources on this theme and on marking Holocaust Memorial Day, suggestions for further reading and for links to sister organisations.

Find out more...

Learn about Holocaust Memorial Day and explore our free resources: hmd.org.uk