Why the Holocaust must remain present today and in the future

From Isabelle Arnau

An article in the Neue Zürcher Zeitung [i] recently pointed out a worrying development: More and more young people know little or nothing about the Holocaust. This not only raises the question: What responsibility do schools bear for this development? It also raises two more fundamental questions: Are there arguments in favor of forgetting? And: What are the reasons against it?

The Holocaust refers to the state-organized and industrialized extermination of six million European Jews by the German Nazi regime between 1941 and 1945, the so-called “Final Solution to the Jewish Question”. Today, places such as the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and extermination camp are symbolic of this crime against humanity. Remembering this is a central component of German and European remembrance culture and political education.

In view of this, there are hardly any public calls for the Holocaust to be consciously forgotten. Nevertheless, arguments are repeatedly put forward that at least implicitly justify such forgetting:

Time lag. The Holocaust happened over 80 years ago. Contemporary witnesses are dying, personal references are disappearing. For young people, the Nazi era seems increasingly abstract and distant.

Overload due to constant presence. Some also argue that the constant focus on the Holocaust leads to “remembrance fatigue”. In Germany in particular, there is a strong focus on the Nazi era, which means that other historical topics are given less space.

Identification problems: young people with a migration background do not see the Holocaust as “their history”.

These arguments may seem plausible at first glance. However, they do not justify forgetting either morally, historically or politically. These are the main arguments why the Holocaust must be remembered and addressed forever:

Moral duty. The Holocaust was an unprecedented crime against humanity. Forgetting it would degrade the six million victims a second time. The duty to prevent this is incumbent on us all and for all times. Because the defense of human dignity and freedom is universal and has no expiration date.

Warning function. Anti-Semitism continues to exist – and since the massacre of October 7, 2023, in which 1,200 predominantly Jewish people were murdered, it has become much more virulent than before. Knowledge of the history of National Socialism and the Holocaust raises awareness of the dangers of this unfortunate development.

Responsibility. Dealing with the Holocaust is a question of political responsibility. This applies not only to Germany – which takes this responsibility most conscientiously – and to its accomplices at the time in Austria, Poland, Holland, France, Belgium, Ukraine, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, Croatia, the Baltic states and Italy. It applies to the entire civilized world. For this is the only way to counter the danger of a repetition of a breach of civilization such as the National Socialist crimes.

Preventing historical revisionism. Since the end of the Holocaust, there have been repeated attempts to deny it, trivialize it or compare it to other events (such as the war in Gaza). This often politically motivated development can only be countered if knowledge about the Holocaust is passed on to current and future generations.

Schools naturally have a great responsibility to ensure that this knowledge is imparted, that the extent, uniqueness and significance of the Holocaust are not forgotten and that the young generation is made aware of the dangers of anti-Semitism and racism. But the same also applies to politics. For as Jan Gerber, for example, points out in his book “Nie wieder. Die deutsche Linke und der Antisemitismus nach Auschwitz”, the confrontation with anti-Semitism and ideological continuities after 1945 remains a permanent challenge.

This applies not only to individual political milieus, but to our democratic society as a whole. Remembrance must therefore not be a completed historical act that is ticked off at some point and put aside. Remembrance enables us to continually reassure ourselves about the moral, legal and political norms that underpin a free society. And nothing can show us better what happens when these norms are lacking than the memory of the Holocaust.

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[i] Zelda Biller, NZZ of February 23, 2026: “The Holocaust is disappearing: The memory of the greatest crime against humanity in history is in danger of being forgotten”