

HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL DAY 2018

THEME VISION



HOLOCAUST
MEMORIAL
DAY TRUST

THE POWER OF WORDS

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'I want to go on living even after my death! And that's why I am so grateful to God for having given me this gift, which I can use to develop myself and to express all that's in me. When I write I can shake off all my cares; my sorrow disappears; my spirits are revived.'

Anne Frank, written in her diary, 5 April 1944

Words can make a difference – both for good and evil

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 past, 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 each subsequent genocide, 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.

Introduction

Spoken and written words from individuals, corporations, community organisations or the state, can have a huge impact, whether good or bad.

This theme explores how language has been used in the past, and how it is used in the present day. HMD activities can focus on the impact that words had in the Holocaust and subsequent genocides, through propaganda used to incite, through slogans written in resistance, and through memoirs written to record and respond to what was going on. The words that we see and hear all around us today – in newspapers, online, in conversations – the words that we chose to use, all have an impact upon us and those around us.

Scope of the theme

1 - The power of words

Words have a mighty power, articulating in writing or speech what is otherwise unsaid. They can reflect thoughts, views and attitudes, and can also play an active role in shaping them.

Kind words can take on disproportionate power in times of intimidation and insecurity, where some people are victimised and persecuted. Words used to good effect can restore hope, courage or faith. Words can challenge prevailing views and can state solidarity.

Words that are used to ill-effect, when seen or heard, can normalise what might otherwise have been considered too extreme. Harsh words, or words that feed negative stereotypes, can fuel tensions, increase vulnerability and even incite violence.

2 - Words written during the Holocaust and during the subsequent genocides

a) By perpetrators

Nazis used propaganda extensively to incite ordinary people to persecute Jews and others. Nazis deliberately used words and images in newspapers, films and school textbooks, to build and reinforce negative stereotypes, to label Jews and other groups, whip up negative feelings and promote ideologies. In the years leading up to the Genocide in Rwanda, propaganda was disseminated via the radio, with broadcasters referring to Tutsis as 'cockroaches'.

b) By people who wanted to criticise perpetrator regimes, or stand up against them

Criticising a prevailing culture and perpetrator ideology in printed or broadcast form was difficult and often dangerous to do, as writers and journalists were often on target lists. But there were brave individuals who used the spoken and written word to challenge what they saw around them, for example the White Rose group published leaflets in 1942 and 1943, challenging Nazi ideology, and distributed thousands of copies.

c) By people who wrote to survive, or to record their experiences for the future

Some people found solace in the written word, such as diaries, poems or letters, and used their writing to provide inner strength. Others wrote to record testimony and provide evidence for the future: Imprisoned in the Warsaw Ghetto along with hundreds of thousands of Jews, and correctly believing that they were facing certain death, the historian Emanuel Ringelblum organised the Oneg Shabbat archive to record the details of their life and the conditions in the ghetto.

3 - Words written as a response to Holocaust, Nazi Persecution and the subsequent genocides

Some survivors, witnesses and others affected have responded to their experiences through writing. Examples include Primo Levi (poetry and memoirs about the Holocaust), Denise Affonço (autobiography about the Cambodian genocide), Mary K Blewitt (personal account of her work with survivors of the genocide in Rwanda) and Zlata Filipovic (memoir of her childhood in Sarajevo). For some, this is a way of coming to terms with their past, for others it is to provide evidence or serve as a warning for others, for others it is a way of honouring the past and memorialising their murdered relatives.

Some of the most powerful words written since the Holocaust are those that form the text to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, developed in response to the Holocaust and the Second World War.

4 - Words today

We cannot be complacent today. We see media headlines, listen to politicians talk and have a responsibility to read and listen critically. The words we read and hear have power and can shape our views; how careful are we with the words we ourselves use? Social media enable words to travel faster and further than ever before; they can be powerfully used to unite people to achieve positive goals but can also be used to whip up prejudice, to intimidate and harass people.

5 - How we respond to words

Today, bombarded with information and relentless social media, we may find ourselves filtering out what we do not want to hear and are in danger of listening only to what we want to hear - words which can reinforce our own prejudices. Are we equipped to recognise, and are we able to respond adequately to, propaganda? Will our words be backed up by action?

6 - The power of definitions

The legal term 'genocide' carries a weight of international political and legal commitment that differs from that attached to other atrocities of war and crimes against humanity. This makes tangible differences in terms of international support given to victims and their communities, and the potential for initiating legal processes in seeking justice. For some victims, this can result in hoping that the crimes they suffered will be labelled 'genocide' – and many feel they carry an additional burden if the crime is not defined as such.

7 - Free speech and censorship

In recent times some institutions have initiated policies of 'no platform' to prevent extremist and offensive speakers from airing their views publicly. This sends a strong message that such views are not tolerated by the institutions, and limits the influence these views may have. However, this policy can be counter-productive in serving to draw attention to the proscribed speakers. Moreover, it can be used to render unheard a wide range of perspectives, and can entrench views when those in power 'no platform' people with whom they disagree.

Further reading

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...

Holocaust Memorial Day Trust: hmd.org.uk

Order an activity pack or resources: hmd.org.uk/activitypack

Resources for educators: hmd.org.uk/educators