

OpEd: Canada's Leadership as Mass Violence Continues

Thursday, May 5, was Yom Hashoah, the day in the Jewish calendar set aside to remember and mourn the victims of the 20th century Nazi genocide of Jews of Europe. Seventy-one years after the end the Holocaust, people across the world mark this day with solemn ceremonies. In Canada, which became home to more than 30,000 survivors of the Holocaust after the War, members of all political parties and representatives from across the country came together in Ottawa for a national commemoration.

As in past ceremonies, moving speeches were made, and nearly all pointed out that preventing and responding to genocide is of critical importance today, that examples of mass violence and discrimination continue to abound, and that Holocaust remembrance and education remain essential, its messages universal.

But what can Canada actually do? The new government asserts that "Canada is back" on the world stage and that Canada's role in the world rests on a combination of moral leadership and practical soft power initiatives. Will the extent of Canada's leadership in the area of Holocaust education and genocide prevention be limited to speeches by Parliamentarians once a year?

Canada has the opportunity to take an important leadership role in the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), an intergovernmental body founded in 2000 whose purpose is to place political and social leaders' support behind the need for Holocaust education, remembrance and research.

The commitment of the international community to IHRA's founding principles, as defined in the 2000 Stockholm Declaration, was the starting point for many countries to begin a public debate on their national history and to acknowledge their role in the Holocaust – and for countries like Canada to acknowledge its largely bystander position.

Today, IHRA has expanded into an international network of experts and political representatives from 31 countries. Member states commit to the principle that "the unprecedented character of the Holocaust will always hold universal meaning," and that the international community shares a solemn responsibility to fight genocide, ethnic cleansing, racism, antisemitism and xenophobia. It is a commitment to the past and to the future.

IHRA does excellent work, including the implementation of Holocaust education guidelines and a critical review that is leading to an impactful, strategic and coordinated approach to teaching and learning about the Holocaust around the world – from countries that collaborated in Holocaust atrocities to those that see this as ancient history, as is the common viewpoint of many Canadian high school students.

IHRA enables shared reflection on universal issues – such as teaching without survivors and teaching about the Holocaust and other genocides. It moves countries to work together and to look within to their own policy and practice.

IHRA has significant international buy-in. It is the only international forum focused on the Holocaust and it has the credibility gained from longevity, the commitment of key partners, and results in both member and non-member countries.

Canada was there to adopt the Stockholm Declaration in 2000, but did not join IHRA until 2009. Upon joining, Canada pledged, like all other member states, to strengthen efforts to promote Holocaust education, remembrance and research, and quickly showed aspirations to play a leadership role.

The delegation at the time, which included the heads of Canada's three most important Holocaust education centres – Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver – and several other key stakeholders in the field, was very active and their contributions have been widely recognized. Canadians have chaired all four of the core Working Groups – on Education, Academic Research, Museums and Commemoration, and Communications (by far more than any other country). They have been involved in key ways in the work of all the committees and have provided unique Canadian expertise, materials and tools for teaching about the Holocaust and genocide in multicultural societies and addressing the special challenge of the use of social media in the classroom. They committed weeks of time as volunteers to move Canada and IHRA forward in this field.

The height of Canada's recent involvement came during the 2013-2014 session when we became Chair of IHRA. After taking a leadership role, however, the Canadian commitment has waned over the past two years. The government has not set an agenda and the delegation has not been given direction or purpose, nor been given the opportunity to help the Government define these. There's been neither consistency nor continuity in terms of participation and representation on the delegation. Yom Hashoah is a key moment to take stock of our commitment, and we appear to have lost our way.

Yet the opportunity remains for Canada to be a model, to take a moral leadership role and to provide its unique expertise.

Our country has been profoundly shaped by the Holocaust survivors who settled here. Survivors have been instrumental in creating Holocaust education centres, museum and commemoration programs. Their legacy and our collective work directly connects to modern-day discussions about the refugee crisis, respect for diversity and genocide prevention. Survivors continue to contribute through their words - in writing memoirs and by speaking to tens of thousands of Canadians each year, and through video testimony now accessible through digital media. Through their efforts the story has become truly Canadian. It is our story.

Canada needs to establish a truly expert delegation with a strong head that will have a clear sense of purpose and a plan to renew our international engagement and showcase what we have to offer the world.

Our delegates generally work for not-for-profit and community organizations and give much time, expertise and leadership without remuneration. The key developers of Holocaust education and remembrance initiatives in Canada should be the cornerstones of the delegation to IHRA and they need the reinstatement of government support for travel to do so.

It is time for the Government of Canada to reaffirm its commitment to the Stockholm Declaration and the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. With the community of Canadian survivors fast disappearing, we must take on the collective responsibility of memory and education. It is up to us – experts in the area – to speak on behalf of the millions of Jews and others murdered. We must honour the life’s work of our Canadian Holocaust survivors, and take up this work as our own.

The time is now.

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