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The Holocaust wasn't an aberration

A Jewish state could have prevented it

• By JACOB SIVAK

A few weeks after the horrifying October 7 attack by Hamas on men, women, and children in southern Israel, a letter appeared in the *New York Review* (November 20, 2023) signed by 16 Holocaust scholars (including Christopher Browning, who wrote *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101* and the *Final Solution in Poland*) criticizing the misuse of Holocaust memory. The writers were concerned about inappropriate comparisons to the Holocaust made by Israeli and American public figures in relation to the (still ongoing) war between Israel and Hamas.

Their intention was to protect the memory and uniqueness of the Holocaust. However, they have to be naive and or misinformed when they describe the Holocaust, in a narrow sense, "The Nazi genocide involved a state – and its willing civil society – attacking a tiny minority, which then escalated to a continent-wide genocide." Do they really believe that the Holocaust began with the Nazis?

I grew up in Canada in the 1950s and '60s and first heard about the six million Jews murdered in the Holocaust as a young boy. I also learned about the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. That a mere decade separated the Holocaust from the establishment of a Jewish state was starkly evident to me then, as it is now. Had a Jewish state existed just 10 years earlier, the Holocaust might not have occurred.

What I cannot understand is how the connection between the absence of a Jewish state and the circumstances that led to the Holocaust is not obvious to everyone; including, apparently, the 16 scholars who signed the letter.

The genocide we now know as the Holocaust was not an aberration. Its beginnings go back to a period well before the Nazis took power. Not coincidentally, the lead-up to the Holocaust coincided with the development of modern Zionism.

ANTISEMITISM, OFTEN called the longest hatred, has both religious and racial features, but the incendiary form that developed in Europe during the late 19th century and early 20th century also had a demographic history. In the mid-1700s, the number of Jews in the world was a little more than two million (Della Pegola, *Genealogy*, 2024), roughly evenly divided between those in Europe (mainly Ashkenazi) and those in North Africa and the Mid-

dle East (Sephardi and Mizrahi).

However, by the end of the 1800s, because of high birth rates, marriage at a young age, and improved living conditions, the number of Jews living in Eastern Europe (the Pale of Settlement – today's Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, and Latvia) had soared to around eight million, about 90% of the world's Jews.

In an area awash with growing nationalist sentiment, the Jews just did not fit in. They were too widely dispersed to claim a territory of their own, yet they were too numerous to be ignored (in cities such as Warsaw, Lodz, and Odesa more than 30% of the population was Jewish). One way or another they had to be gotten rid of.

For a while, Eastern European Jews were able to emigrate to the US and other countries and about two million availed themselves of this opportunity before the outbreak of World War I. Some made their way to the Holy Land as part of the growing Zionist movement.

All the early Zionist leaders, including Theodor Herzl, Ze'ev Jabotinsky, Chaim Weizmann, and David Ben-Gurion, understood that millions of European Jews, especially those in Eastern Europe, were in imminent physical danger. The widespread use of the term "pogrom" to describe savage Russian anti-Jewish violence began in 1881-1883, after the assassination of tsar Alexander II.

An even bloodier wave of pogroms took place during 1903-1906. Herzl raised the British offer of a temporary refuge for Jews in Uganda at the 1903 Zionist Congress. (It was actually a tract in the highlands of Kenya.) He was thinking of the devastating Kishinev (today Chisinau, Moldova) pogrom that took place a few months earlier.

In the end, opposition by many among the Zionists to settling anywhere but Zion, as well as opposition from existing British settlers, led to a withdrawal of the offer.

However, the most devastating pogroms by far were those that accompanied the Russian Civil War from 1918 to 1921. More than 100,000 Jews died and many more were injured. My father and his family experienced a pogrom in 1920 when their shtetl, located about 100 km. south of Kyiv, was savagely attacked. Of the 3,000 Jews living there, 200 were killed (including my father's brother and grandmother) and 800 injured.

TO JEFFREY Veidlinger, director of

Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan, these pogroms were a practice run for the Holocaust that took place just two decades later. In his 2021 book, *In the Midst of Civilized Europe*, he notes that they demonstrated that violence against Jews was acceptable, and that their complete annihilation was feasible.

Veidlinger includes an eerily prescient quote from a 1919 *New York Times* article about the pogroms, warning that six million Jews in Ukraine and Poland were in danger of extermination.

Just 17 years later, in 1936, Weizmann's statement to the Peel Commission (see *The Siege*, by Conor Cruise O'Brien, 1986), established by the British in response to Arab-instigated violence in Palestine, noted there were six million people for whom the world was divided into places where they cannot live and places into which they cannot enter. He asks, "Have we the right to live?"

The commission's 1937 report, a 400-page document available online, recognized the continuous Jewish presence in Palestine over the centuries, and the periodic Jewish immigration to the land. It recommended partitioning Palestine into Arab and Jewish states, with only 17% (less than 5,200 sq. km.) allocated to the Jewish state. Weizmann and Ben-Gurion were in favor of the proposal, but it went nowhere. The Arabs refused to consider even a tiny Jewish state.

In 1956, Ben-Gurion, responding to an inquiry from Prof. Hanoch Albeck of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, lamented: "If the state had been established not in 1948 but in 1937 – and if millions of Jews in Europe had not been annihilated, the situation of the State of Israel would have been entirely different. What, after all, are 11 years in the history of our people which stretches back thousands of years?" (Shapell Manuscript Foundation).

The Jewish people paid a heavy price for not having a state when needed most. The 16 Holocaust scholars mentioned earlier are wrong. The genocide perpetrated by Hamas on October 7, as well as genocidal slogans such as "from the river to the sea" and "by any means necessary" now emanating today from universities across North America, are comparable to the hatred experienced by Jews before and during the Holocaust.

The writer, a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, is a retired professor who taught at the University of Waterloo.