

Holocaust Memorial Day 2021

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By Mary Collins

The theme for Holocaust Memorial Day this year is “the light in the darkness”. The darkness can be easily perceived to be the Holocaust itself, the unconscionable extermination of 6 million Jews by the Nazis during WWII. That darkness of genocide requires light to be shone on it, revealing its ugliness. As a Christian, I clearly see Jesus as the Way, the Truth and the Light. Christ eschewed exclusion and exceptionalism at all times and pointedly interacted with ordinary workers (calling his apostles from among fishermen), social outcasts (tax collectors and prostitutes), and gentiles (sometimes to the horror of his own followers). So we need to behave similarly. We must never let the world deny or forget the extermination of the Jews during WWII; or the historical genocides that we have benefited from; or the genocides that continue today. To see, truly see, the Light, we must first acknowledge the darkness of genocide that has occurred, and that is happening still, in all the places where it is occurring, including Israel/Palestine.

The concept of genocide didn't even exist until 1944. A Polish Jewish lawyer, Raphael Lemkin, coined the term, and “led the campaign to have genocide recognised and codified as an international crime”¹. It was acknowledged as a crime under international law in 1946 and the Genocide Convention was adopted by the UN in 1948.

So humanity finally had a name for actions that had been happening for centuries. The history of Western imperialism is a catalogue of genocide. From the elimination of the Carib peoples by the Spanish (as documented by Bartolomé de las Casas in 1542²) to the annihilation of the Aché Amerindians of Paraguay in the 1970s,³ indigenous peoples have been methodically removed to gain access to their land and/or resources. The British, too, have participated whole-heartedly in genocides throughout the Empire, in India,

¹ <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.shtml>

² <https://www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/bdorsey1/41docs/02-las.html>

³ http://www.ipahp.org/index.php?en_acts-of-genocide

Africa, and the Caribbean⁴. It's important to acknowledge that we have benefited from the heinous acts of our ancestors. Those crimes against humanity laid the groundwork for our societies to grow and thrive. Let's let that Light into the darkness.

Genocide continues, and we must all recognise it, denounce it, and agitate against it. Wikipedia lists 13 places where genocide is ongoing⁵; other human rights organisations include more than that⁶. The suffering of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar and the Uighur Muslims in China are becoming more widely known. But among the many genocides acknowledged, one is conspicuous by its absence: the genocide being perpetrated against the Palestinian people by the state of Israel.

The Palestinians refer to the actions of the new state of Israel in 1948 as the Nakba, or catastrophe. Whole villages were cleared of inhabitants, and now, Palestinians are confined to the West Bank and Gaza. Israel has occupied these territories for over 70 years, and 'some human rights experts, including Israeli historian Ilan Pappé, have warned of an "incremental genocide" of Palestinians and the ultimate destruction of Palestinians as a national group'⁷. Just yesterday, the BBC reported that while Israel boasts the highest rate of COVID vaccination in the world at over a quarter of its population, Palestinians are not getting the vaccine⁸. The Palestinians have suffered every form of discrimination, their property and their persons destroyed and disrespected, and now, crowded into the small bits of land left to them, they face this pandemic without access to the vaccine. The Palestinians who have been experiencing a slow-motion genocide may soon contend with a full-speed one. Let's let that Light into the darkness.

Christ calls us to courageous action. Let us always respond by enacting His Love on this earth.

⁴ https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/british_empire/

⁵ https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genocide_of_indigenous_peoples#The_Southern_Cone

⁶ <https://www.genocidewatch.com/countries-at-risk>; <http://www.ipahp.org/index.php?en>

⁷ Ilan Pappé, A Brief History of Israel's Incremental Genocide, in ON PALESTINE (Noam Chompsky and Ilan Pappé ed.; Haymarket 2015) pp. 147-154. See also, Steve Lendman, Israel's Slow-Motion Genocide in Occupied Palestine, in THE PLIGHT OF THE PALESTINIANS (William A. Cook ed., Palgrave 2010).

⁸ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/55800921>

