

Remembering the Muslims Murdered at Auschwitz

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Articles & Testimony

This modest proposal—to broaden the scope of Holocaust remembrance by including the names of Muslims killed at Auschwitz—appeared this weekend in English and Arabic in Saudi, Egyptian, and Israeli media outlets.

Their names and numbers were Ismail (R9954) and Nasreddin (R9955), Mohammed (R9959) and Hassan (R9965). They were Soviet prisoners of war, captured on the eastern front.

In late February and early March 1942, they and several dozen other Muslims joined the thousands upon thousands of Abrahams and Sarahs, Isaacs and Rebeccas, Jacobs and Rachels, who together made up the 1.1 million men, women and children killed at the vast complex of Nazi concentration, labor, and extermination camps in rural Poland known as “Auschwitz.”

Jews, of course, were the principal victims of Auschwitz’s barbarity, making up nearly 90 percent of its vast death toll. Even that huge number was itself just a fraction of the six million Jews killed in the Nazi effort to exterminate the Jewish people, known as the Holocaust. When world leaders descend upon Auschwitz on January 27 for the 75th anniversary of its liberation by Soviet troops—the date chosen by the world community to commemorate the Holocaust—the names of martyrs they will recite will, justly and appropriately, be Jewish. But if the goal of Holocaust remembrance is, at least in part, to counter Holocaust ignorance and denial—a phenomenon that can range from not knowing the basic facts of the Holocaust to rejecting its proven history to glorifying Hitler’s near-success in achieving his genocidal goal—then organizers of the Auschwitz memorial should consider including in their recitation the names of the Nazis’ Muslim victims, too.

Focusing on the small number of Muslim victims is not to obscure the role of Muslim perpetrators, such as the Bosnian troops of the SS’s infamous 13th Waffen Mountain Division. And citing Muslim victims as a way to counter Holocaust ignorance and denial is not because those are uniquely “Muslim problems”—to the contrary, these are

cross-cultural, cross-ethnic, cross-national, cross-religion phenomena. Just last year, for example, 13% of Britons told pollsters they either believe the Holocaust was a hoax or the number of Jewish deaths greatly exaggerated. And a 2018 poll showed that 41% of Americans—and 66% of millennials—could not correctly say what Auschwitz was.

But that reality does not diminish the fact that Holocaust denial is particularly pronounced in many Muslim societies. Coupled with its first cousin—anti-Semitism—it is propounded by national leaders, like Malaysia’s Prime Minister Mohamed Mahathir and the Palestinian Authority’s Mahmoud Abbas, and by religious leaders, like the influential Qatar-based cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi. In Arab and broader Muslim popular culture and social media, the phenomena of Holocaust ignorance, denial, and celebration are, regrettably, commonplace.

Thankfully, there is some important good news. A growing chorus of Muslim leaders has been increasingly active in countering this pernicious hate, speaking out in support of tolerance and against Holocaust rejectionism. These range from the king of Morocco, who has publicly declared the Holocaust to be “one of the most tragic chapters of modern history,” to the secretary-general of the Saudi-based Muslim World League, who denounced Holocaust denial and is now making his own high-profile visit to Auschwitz.

Including Muslim victims of Auschwitz alongside the nearly million Jewish victims and the thousands of Christian victims will help bring Muslims into this critical historical narrative and contribute to this positive trend. After all, while the Holocaust was an overwhelmingly Jewish tragedy, the Nazi quest for global domination based on a warped sense of racial supremacy continues to animate annihilationist rhetoric and apocalyptic strategies one hears from extremists in Muslim societies. And the genocide the Nazis attempted to perpetrate on the Jewish people has, regrettably, been replicated since then by genocidal attempts to wipe out millions of other innocents, many of whom have themselves been Muslim, from the Kurds of northern Iraq to the Rohingya of Myanmar.

The Muslims who died at Auschwitz may not have been killed because of their faith, but their faith did not exempt them from their fate. Remembering them—Ismail Mamatzdzanon, Nasreddin Tadzubajev, Mohammed Sultanov, Hassan Mamedov and their co-religionists—is a small step that could reverberate far beyond the killing fields of the Polish countryside.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute. The English version of this article appeared in the Times of Israel (<https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/remembering-the-muslims-murdered-at-auschwitz/>) and the Saudi-owned journal al-Majalla (<https://eng.majalla.com/node/80736/understanding-the-holocaust-in-its-totality>); Arabic versions were published in the Egyptian outlets al-Basmah (<https://www.elbasmah.com/6004>) and Sout al-Alam (<https://www.soutalalam.com/7310>). ❖

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