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Countering Hate: Lessons from the Past, Leadership for the Future
2019 OSCE PA Annual Session
Luxembourg

German lawyer and World War I veteran Victor Klemperer, a converted Christian married to a Christian woman, but considered Jewish by Nazi authorities, was one of the few Jewish men who survived the Holocaust within Nazi Germany. He kept detailed diaries, and in March 1945, just six weeks before Germany's surrender and the end of the war in Europe, Klemperer reflected on the past thirty years. He wrote, "Have we not continually experienced, since 1914 and even more since 1933 and with ever greater frequency in recent weeks, the most utterly improbable, the most monstrously fantastic things? Has not what was formerly completely unimaginable to us become commonplace and a matter of course? It's not only the word 'impossible' that has gone out of circulation, 'unimaginable' also has no validity anymore."

The Holocaust did not appear out of nowhere; in fact, the Nazi Party was in power in Germany for eight years before mass killing began. And the roots of the genocide were much longer and deeper than that. Antisemitism, the ancient hatred, grew and morphed throughout millennia, as Jews, a people without a homeland, were subjected to pogroms, blamed for plagues, welcomed as the only legal moneylenders in Catholic lands and then kicked out when those in power wished to cancel debts without consequences. Pogroms in eastern Europe and Russia at the end of the 19th century led to a flood of Jewish refugees to Germany and the Austro-Hungarian empire. This mix of ancient hatred and xenophobia made it easy for Adolf Hitler to blame an imagined Jewish treachery for Germany's loss in World War I.

That war, which had resulted in between 15-19 million military and civilian casualties, further destabilized any European order that had existed. The industrial revolution had led to an industrialized, brutal war. Historian Barbara Tuchman wrote, “The idea of progress was the greatest casualty of that war, and its aftermath was cynicism.” The promise of technology, mass media, a global world—World War I shattered these ideals. Empires were broken up, country lines redrawn according to ethnic and linguistic groups, all decided in Paris and rarely by the inhabitants of these areas. The Russian Revolution in 1917 created a new myth, that of the Jewish communist, which led to further antisemitic pogroms in regions threatened by communism. And throughout continental Europe, post-war political instability led to the rise of far-left and far-right parties. The center could not hold and hollowed out.

In the meantime, the United States excused itself from international affairs. The Senate refused to join the League of Nations, and the country demilitarized, vowing to never again cross the Atlantic Ocean for war. A belief in eugenic science—the idea that biologically some humans were better than others—found champions among American and British scientists and politicians. The House Committee on Immigration had a staff eugenicist. In 1924, Congress set both an overall immigration cap and quotas based on an immigrant’s country of birth, privileging countries where so-called “good” immigrants lived, and designating far fewer visas for countries with large Jewish or Catholic populations. Congress rejected any exemption for refugees fleeing persecution. Many immigration applications were rejected outright due to race, disability, or financial status. Xenophobia, isolationism, and fear led the United States to retreat from the rest of the world.

Post-World War I reparations imposed by the Treaty of Versailles hit Germany hard, but the roller coaster of economic crises in Europe dipped even further with the worldwide depression beginning in 1929. Within this crisis, a relatively new political

party in Germany, the National Socialists, began to rise. Despite the name, national socialism was a specifically German form of right-wing populism--antisemitic, anti-liberal, and anti-communist. In a 1920 speech, Hitler called for the creation of a "greater Germany" which would necessitate, he said, a return "to genuine, German socialism in contrast to the class warfare socialism preached by Jewish leaders." His use of propaganda, his populist push for one big idea—that an ethnically Aryan German community could regain its former glory—and his deftness at playing to his audience, led the Nazi party to rise in the polls. And yet Hitler was not elected, he was appointed chancellor of Germany in January 1933 by a conservative coalition, encouraged by German business leaders, who thought they could control him and his Nazi followers.

Under the guise of a national emergency to oppose a communist threat, Hitler almost immediately began a campaign of persecution. Political opponents were incarcerated in concentration camps—Dachau opened in March 1933. Within months of Hitler's appointment, Jews were removed from civil service, from the practice of law and medicine, from teaching in public schools and universities. Jewish businesses were boycotted, anti-Nazi books collected and burned. The Nazi propaganda ministry excluded Jews from the media and solidified control over newspaper and radio coverage. Victor Klemperer, our Jewish lawyer and diarist—and, remember, a World War I veteran—wrote, "In the war I was subject to military law, but subject to law nevertheless; now I am at the mercy of an arbitrary power." Nazi attacks on Jews were not secret but front-page news in the United States and elsewhere. Yet fear of conflict, tinged with these countries' own antisemitism—and in the United States, a belief that any formal protest against the Nazi treatment of Jews would lead to a Nazi protest against America's treatment of African-Americans—led these countries to stay silent.

In 1935, a series of laws announced at the annual Nazi Party rally at Nuremberg stripped citizenship from Jewish Germans. It set the Nazi swastika flag as the official

symbol of Germany, and outlawed marriage and sexual relations between Jews and non-Jews. Nazi lawyers had studied the anti-miscegenation laws of America's southern states for inspiration. These laws also affected anyone deemed racially inferior, including Roma and Sinti and Afro-Germans. By that time, anyone deemed a "habitual criminal"—a loose definition which included alcoholics, petty criminals, or the homeless, could be imprisoned indefinitely. Jehovah's Witness organizations had been banned, since Witnesses would not swear loyalty to the Nazi regime. Male homosexuality, already illegal, was penalized more heavily, and the "Law for the Prevention of Progeny with Hereditary Diseases" mandated the forced sterilization of people with physical and mental disabilities. In his diary, Klemperer quoted Hitler as saying in 1936, "I am not a dictator, I have only simplified democracy."

What Germany was doing to its own citizens was not illegal under international law. But as Germany began to expand, annexing Austria in March 1938, and taking the Sudetenland in September 1938 with British and French—but not Czech—acquiescence, Nazi Germany subsumed hundreds of thousands more Jews and those who did not fit the Aryan ideal. President Roosevelt called an international conference in Evian, France, to find a solution to the emerging refugee crisis—32 nations attended, nearly all refusing to change their immigration laws. Some blamed the ongoing economic crisis on their refusal, others stated bluntly that they did not want to import a racial problem.

Although forcing Jews to emigrate was Nazi policy until 1941, immigration was nearly impossible. The Nazis stripped Jews of their wealth, which made them undesirable immigrants; the war significantly decreased the ability to escape, as countries placed more and more restrictions on immigration in the name of national security. To Hitler, the destruction of European Jewish communities, first through immigration and when that failed, through mass murder, was a necessary part of the war. Jews were the ultimate enemy of a successful Germany, after all, and would undermine the Reich and its Axis

partners whenever they could. The western Allies, to whom Nazi persecution was Hitler's strange and destructive obsession but nothing to wage war over, did not comprehend the totality of the Holocaust until millions of Jews had already been killed. The Holocaust ended—and could only have ended—with the defeat of Nazi Germany and its collaborators.

Since history can only be lived in one direction, it is impossible to pinpoint exactly what action could have been taken to prevent the Holocaust. But that does not give us an excuse for inaction. As Klemperer noted in the final weeks of the war, "It's not only the word "impossible" that has gone out of circulation, "unimaginable" also has no validity anymore." Since the Holocaust proved the impossible possible, and the unimaginable stark reality, we are compelled to look back and identify warning signs, signs which drive our concern today. The rise of populist leaders, of simple solutions, of demonizing minorities, of propagandizing hate, of neglecting or ignoring refugee protections, of isolationism, of appeasement —these factors, when taken together, have led to genocide in the past, and not just in Europe. We must stay vigilant and, through a mix of historical memory and international coordination and cooperation, work together to prevent genocide in the future.