News



The gate that reads "Arbeit macht frei" ("Work sets you free") is seen Jan. 27, 2025, at the Nazi German Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and extermination camp in Oswiecim, Poland. Jan. 27 was the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. (OSV News/Grzegorz Celejewski, Reuters)



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OSWIECIM, Poland — January 27, 2025
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Church leaders across Europe marked the 80th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp with calls to remember German Nazi-inflicted sufferings and to counter a new rise in antisemitism and extremism.

"The memory of Auschwitz, and the moral obligation that Auschwitz must not be repeated, characterize the political culture of Germany and Europe," said Bishop Georg Bätzing of Limburg, president of the German bishops' conference, emphasizing that this "makes human dignity and rights the basis of all political action," which "however imperfect, binds the actions of states to legal principles and seeks to prevent and punish war crimes."

The German prelate said in recent years he was "shocked to see" that "political movements and parties have been able to establish themselves in society that aggressively question the constitutional foundations of democracy and international law and often demonstratively disregard them where they govern." He lamented that "in parts of the public and social media, the memory of Auschwitz has faded, there is a rhetoric of contempt towards minorities and those who think differently, and misinformation and lies are deliberately spread."

The statement was issued as heads of state and government gathered Jan. 27 at Auschwitz-Birkenau in southern Poland to mark International Holocaust Memorial Day and remember the camp's estimated 1.1 million mostly Jewish, but also Polish, Roma, Soviet POWs and other nationalities' and social group victims.

After Germany invaded Poland on Sept. 1, 1939, it occupied the country until 1945, spreading terror on an unprecedented scale, which killed 6 million of Poland's citizens, including 3 million of the country's Jews.

Bätzing said he felt "deeply shameful" that, eight decades later, Jews were still suffering "prejudices and attacks," particularly after attacks on Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, necessitating "state protection of Jewish institutions" and making the fight against antisemitism a "task for all citizens."

Meanwhile, Pope Francis said the "horror of the extermination of millions of Jews and people of other faiths" during World War II should "neither be forgotten nor denied," and he also recalled "many Christians, among them many martyrs," who also died at Auschwitz.

"I renew my appeal for everyone to work together to eradicate the scourge of antisemitism, along with all forms of discrimination and religious persecution," the pope said Jan. 26 after reciting the Angelus prayer.

A total of 53 mostly Western-aligned countries were represented, mostly by presidents or premiers, at the Auschwitz-Birkenau commemoration, which was also attended by Britain's King Charles III and the crowned heads of Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands and Spain, as well as leaders of NATO and other international organizations.

"We Poles, on whose land — occupied by Nazi Germans at that time — the Germans built this extermination industry and this concentration camp, are today the guardians of memory," Polish President Andrzej Duda said to reporters after the ceremonies in Auschwitz in which survivors of the camp participated with their family members.

Institutions from the United Nations to the European Union held their own commemorative ceremonies, with the U.N.'s High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, saying Jan. 27 he feared the world was currently "sleepwalking into a grim future where human rights and dignity are denied, stripped away or forgotten," amid "hateful rhetoric" and "rising antisemitism on the streets and online," as "discrimination and dehumanization" won out "over solidarity and compassion."

However, a veteran Jewish theologian and philosopher told OSV News he doubted the numerous warnings would have "any effect at all," as "broader and stronger anti-Jewish attitudes" grew across Europe amid recent events in the Middle East.

"Certainly, we should be pleased to hear politicians and church leaders remembering Auschwitz as a symbol of the Holocaust, and using this anniversary to

warn against anti-semitism," said Stanislaw Krajewski, co-chairman of the Polish Council of Christians and Jews.

"Yet the only novelty at this latest act of remembrance," he said, "is that war, militarism and rearmament are now happening much more obviously than 20-30 years ago — all the hazards and dangers Auschwitz represents for us are now more current than ever."

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Besides Jewish inmates, who comprised 90% of Auschwitz-Birkenau's victims, up to 75,000 Poles, mostly Catholics, were also killed by German occupiers in the camp's gas chambers and execution sites and 150,000 were deported there.

Jewish groups have long protested the placing of Christian symbols at the camp, where a Catholic Carmelite convent was closed by church leaders in 1993, and dozens of crosses removed in 1998 after international complaints.

During the German occupation of the Polish territories between 1939 and 1945, defying German orders to impose the death penalty on anyone who helped Jews, help was given to Jews by 66 female religious orders in about 450 institutions (mainly monasteries), 25 male religious orders in about 85 institutions, and by more than 700 diocesan priests in at least 580 locations in occupied Poland. Historians have stressed, however, that those numbers may be underestimated as many clergy and religious took the story of their bravery to the grave.

Auschwitz-Birkenau was visited in 1979 by St. John Paul II, who came from nearby Wadowice, as well as by German Pope Benedict XVI in May 2006 and Francis in July 2016, while 15 Catholic priests and nuns were beatified as Auschwitz martyrs in 1999 by the church, which commemorates camp victims St. Maksymilian Kolbe and St. Edith Stein as major saints.

In a Jan. 27 statement, the Italian bishops' conference said it also condemned "every form" of antisemitism "that unfortunately continues to manifest itself in subtle and ambiguous ways," while Spain's Catholic bishops warned "human beings are forgetful and tend to repeat their mistakes," and urged all Christians to "reflect deeply on the meaning of the Shoah and to work together to respect the dignity of people in all their circumstances."

The Catholic Church in England and Wales also cautioned that antisemitism had "increased significantly" across Britain and globally since the October 2023 Hamas attacks on Israel and the subsequent war in Gaza, leaving many communities "feeling vulnerable, with hostility and suspicion of others rising."

However, in his OSV News interview, Krajewski said comparisons of Israel's attacks on Gaza with Auschwitz and the Holocaust were "improper," adding that it was "terrible and hurtful" that some political groups had accused Israel of "ignoring the lessons of Auschwitz" and insisting the "moral heritage" of Holocaust victims now belonged to Palestinians.

"Any suggestion that things comparable to Auschwitz are happening today, are inappropriate and abusive," Krajewski, a professor, told OSV News as groups gathered in Krakow, Poland, to protest Israeli violence in the Gaza Strip, calling for the "Never again" slogan to be applied to the suffering Palestinians.

"That people draw lessons from the Holocaust and Auschwitz is understandable in various ways. But it's hard to believe this will lead to any change in people's attitudes and behavior, as the world witnesses resurgent populism and radicalisation, and the likelihood increases of another great war," he said.

A Jan. 23 survey, commissioned by the New York-based Jewish Claims Conference, suggested 76% of U.S. citizens and 61% of Germans currently fear a repeat of the Holocaust, with many Europeans expressing similar anxieties.

The survey also highlighted a lack of general knowledge about the Holocaust among younger adults, with 46% of 18- to 29 year-olds in France saying they had never heard of it. Also 48% of Americans could not name a single concentration camp, the survey said.