

**Holodomor Commemoration Event**  
**Coventry Cathedral 24 November 2018**

Ladies and gentlemen, honoured guests and dignitaries. I am humbled to be able to give this address. The city of Coventry, and indeed this cathedral, stands as an example to the world and to humanity of the power of reconciliation. In the Second World War Coventry was devastated by German bombing. During one raid in November 1940 over five hundred people lost their lives and in excess of two thousand homes were destroyed. The cathedral was set ablaze by incendiary bombs.

Coventry was rebuilt and has become the vibrant city we are gathered in today. It would have been easy to remain bitter and angry about the lives taken and the destruction caused, but Coventry is a special place. It is twinned with many cities that are also sites of extreme suffering including Dresden, Volgograd, Sarejevo, Arnhem and Warsaw. Indeed, in 1944, Coventry was the first major city to twin with another city when it did so with what was then called Stalingrad. This was done very much with the idea of being a place of peace and reconciliation. The most notable link has been with Dresden, with which Coventry formed a bond only fourteen years after the end of the Second World War.

It is therefore fitting and appropriate that this event, commemorating the Holodomor, should be held in such auspicious surroundings.

It is also right and proper that representatives of other communities devastated by war and genocide are here today.

Those who study genocide, at an academic or a casual level, often tend to focus on the Holocaust and events since the conclusion of the Second World War. The Holocaust stands

out due to the concerted efforts to eliminate an entire people from the continent of Europe, the numbers who were killed, the suffering caused, the intent shown, and the organised methods used. It is also the most researched and written about genocide in history.

Other genocides have been acknowledged by the United Nations – Cambodia, Rwanda, Srebrenica and Darfur. More will be acknowledged in due course, and some genocides are undoubtedly taking place now. Many will consider the crimes of fundamentalists and governments in war-torn zones as being at the very least crimes against humanity, and quite probably genocidal in nature. History is fickle and in part dictated by the people involved and how events are perceived by those with power and influence.

I have studied the Holocaust for many years. I have visited some of the sites of devastation in Poland. I am blessed to have the friendship of Holocaust survivors. I am equally blessed to have the friendship of Rainer Höß, the grandson of the commandant of Auschwitz, and to be able to work with him in trying to find ways to challenge the hate our world faces today.

I would claim to have a reasonable knowledge of the genocides that have occurred in the years since the 1940s. Multiple academics have produced extensive works about genocide and the warnings that each event gives us of the potential for future harm. It has often been said that the Holocaust did not begin with the gas chambers, the transportations, the selections, the execution pits, the slave labour or the death marches – it began with words.

It is true of all genocides that they too began with words. The words are of contempt, of dehumanising, of belittling, of hatred, of false blame, of scapegoating. They are the words and rhetoric that single out one group as unworthy of rights, of respect, of dignity, of legal protection, and ultimately of life. They are the words of superiority over perceived inferiority. They are the words that define ‘the other’ as being less worthy. They are the words of the ‘in

group' and the 'out group'. They are words from the top to the bottom of the more powerful in society; assisted by the media, by conversations in the workplace, by confirmation bias, and by normalisation through propaganda. They are words that target weaker or smaller groups who can be defined because of their race, ethnicity, language, faith, culture, gender, sexuality, social status or any other difference.

They are words that reinforce and allow the perception that 'the others' are a threat, even if there is little to back up that stance. They are words that lead to bullying and harm. Ultimately they can lead to death.

It is said that those who fail to learn from the lessons of the past are destined to repeat them. With every genocide, every war, and every crime against humanity, we must observe, question, study, and seek to understand. We must not excuse, but by analysis we can work out what happened, why it happened, and what can be done to reduce the risk of future harm. We owe it to those who have suffered and died. We owe it to the world today and to future generations.

The Holodomor, for multiple reasons, has not reached popular consciousness in western societies. In part this is because of when and where it occurred. It is because the narrative of history was controlled by the Soviet state. It is because the Ukrainian diaspora were not listened to until the 1980s. It is because it took the policies of perestroika and glasnost to allow Russian, Ukrainian and other historians access to the truth of what happened.

The famine of 1932 and 1933 was devastating. It is conservatively estimated at least four and a half million lives were lost out of a total population of only 31 million! The deaths occurred due to the policies of Stalin and the Soviet regime.

The Ukrainians had been viewed with hostility for over a decade before the famine. This largely peasant and agrarian society strove for independence but fell under the control of the Soviet Union. Forced industrialisation and collectivisation was initiated rapidly. Peasants, farmers and communities were compelled to change the way they had existed for generations. What had previously been theirs to farm and sell became the property of the state.

Poor harvests in 1931 and 1932 could have been managed. The regime of Stalin imposed grain procurement quotas which ensured that the harvests went to the military and to industrial workers in the wider Soviet Union. Not enough grain was left behind for planting. The small amount of food and livestock the peasants had was also taken from them. Even animals kept as pets were seized. The result was a predictable and avoidable loss of life at catastrophic levels. Warnings were issued about the famine, but they either went unheeded, or they were deliberately ignored. Reserves of grain were available but were not sent to those who were starving. International aid could have been requested, but it was not. When people tried to leave Ukraine they found that the borders had been closed to them. They were sealed in to a starving nation to face their fate.

Some question whether the Holodomor fits a clear definition of genocide as recognised in international law. The word genocide was conceived by Raphael Lemkin, a Polish Jew who was born in Lviv. Part of the legal definition of genocide includes: 'acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group'. Lemkin himself said of the famine: 'It is a case of genocide, of destruction, not of individuals only, but of a culture and a nation'.

There is continuing debate among historians about the genocidal nature of the famine. Some seek to find proof of intent. I would suggest that the Soviet omission of responsibility should also be considered. The suffering was apparent and reported to Moscow, but the policies, especially grain and food procurement, continued, even if that left people with nothing whatsoever to eat. Those who argue that no intent can be shown, omit to observe the obvious; when the suffering and death was clear to see, efforts should have been made to redirect surplus grain stocks and to appeal for international assistance. That Stalin and the Soviet regime failed to do this, that suffering was permitted to continue unabated, suggests that even though they were aware, they allowed the famine to devastate the Ukraine.

The trauma of genocide affects not only the initial survivors, but also subsequent generations. Hyper-vigilance and alertness to danger are common, as is a fear of extreme poverty and starvation. Survivors and their descendants adopt strategies to protect themselves and those they care about. Guilt and shame about being victims and even about not dying can torment those who were targeted. Furthermore, there is grief and sadness about lives lost and communities that were destroyed.

We must record and accurately document the testimonies of survivors, with every verbal inflection and emotion being noted in context. We must preserve and share these accounts as part of our duty to the past, to the present, and to the future. As Elie Wiesel said: 'When you listen to a witness, you become a witness'. Understanding genocide should be a requirement of education. We are the custodians of history and should treat it like a treasured possession of our identity, wherever we come from, and whatever our connection to the events.

Crimes against humanity and genocide are part of a continuum. That continuum starts with hate, disdain and contempt for our fellow human beings. It manifests itself in the language and rhetoric of politicians and those with influence.

It spreads like poison and is heard in words that dehumanise people by referring to them as a collective 'other', 'them', 'they', or through terms such as 'cockroaches', 'rats', 'vermin', 'a cancer', 'a disease', 'a pestilence' or 'an invasion'. Once others are denied their humanity the road to harm is open and free for the haters to roam.

We must be alert to hate. We must challenge it. We must support those who are in need, or who may be vulnerable to harm due to their minority status or weakness against the powerful. We must recognise and embrace the humanity of others, even if louder voices implore us to do otherwise. We know from the lessons of history what hate can result in. We must use the wisdom of that knowledge and show that we have learned from the past. Martin Luther King wrote in his letter from Birmingham Prison that it was right to challenge unjust laws of oppression. He taught us that we are duty bound to stand up to injustice.

To understand the wrongdoers does not excuse them, but it does empower us to help prevent harm occurring. Forgiveness is in the gift of the individual. Reconciliation is open to many. We cannot condemn those who live today for the crimes of their ancestors. Gandhi is reported to have said of vengeance that an eye for an eye makes everyone blind. Mandela told us that hate must be taught, but that love comes more naturally to the human heart.

In these times when voices of division are loud, it is also good to remember the words of Jo Cox MP, in her maiden speech to parliament, when she told us that we have far more in common with each other than things that divide us.

I would like to finish by telling you about two friends of mine. Ben Lesser is a Jew born in Krakow. He survived Auschwitz and other camps and now lives in the United States. Rainer Höß is the grandson of the commandant of Auschwitz. He lives with the legacy of his grandfather's crimes. Ben and Rainer have a deep affection for each other and a shared goal of learning from the past and challenging hate today.

In January Ben and Rainer spoke at a Holocaust Memorial Day event in southern Germany. The venue had been used for small Nazi rallies during the Second World War. After an initial introduction and short speech by Rainer, Ben took to the stage. He spoke for over an hour to an audience of more than 600 Germans, most of whom were in their late teens and early twenties. Some of the older people in the audience bore the pain of knowing that their relatives were actively involved in perpetrating the Holocaust. As Ben spoke, the silence was deafening. You could hear a pin drop. He did not forgive the wrongdoers of the Nazi era who had murdered most of his family, but he stressed that the audience bore no guilt. This elderly Jew, this survivor, this gentle and gracious man, held them spellbound, with many in tears.

As a final gesture he asked everyone to join hands with their neighbours and repeat three times the words 'never again'. It was electrifying. When he finished, the applause was spontaneous and loud. And then the queue formed, a huge queue, of young Germans wanting to meet and shake the hand of the Jewish survivor. In those moments it was proven that Hitler and his hateful regime had failed. We can all learn from people such as Ben and others who have emerged from the hell of genocide and dedicated their lives to building a better world. The past cannot be changed, but we can do something about the present and the future.

Thank you

