Holocaust Memorial Day 2023
Theme vision

HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL DAY TRUST

“Ordinary People”

Genocide is facilitated by ordinary people. **Ordinary people** turn a blind eye, believe propaganda, join murderous regimes. And those who are persecuted, oppressed and murdered in genocide aren’t persecuted because of crimes they’ve committed – they are persecuted simply because they are **ordinary people** who belong to a particular group (eg, Roma, Jewish community, Tutsi).

Ordinary people were involved in all aspects of the Holocaust, Nazi persecution of other groups, and in the genocides that took place in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur. **Ordinary people** were perpetrators, bystanders, rescuers, witnesses - and **ordinary people** were victims.

In every genocide, those targeted faced limited choices – 'choiceless choices' (Lawrence Langer) but in every genocide the perpetrators have choices, **ordinary people** have choices. Sometimes, these choices were limited too, sometimes they had to make life-threatening decisions. And **ordinary people** were the ones who made brave decisions to rescue, to hide or stand up. But **ordinary people** also made decisions to ignore what was going on around them, to be bystanders, to allow the genocide to continue.

There are also extraordinary people in every genocide, remarkable and unusual people, who went to extreme lengths to help, to rescue, to save, and in every genocide there were extraordinary people, who went to extreme depths to cause harm, to persecute, to murder.

Our theme this year, though, highlights the **ordinary people** who let genocide happen, the **ordinary people** who actively perpetrated genocide, and the ordinary people who were persecuted.

Our theme will also prompt us to consider how **ordinary people**, such as ourselves, can perhaps play a bigger part than we might imagine in challenging prejudice today.

Survivors, like 'little Renee' are often portrayed as extraordinary individuals. But she was an ordinary child, who survived, not because she was extraordinary or remarkable.

Ordinary People: Railway workers during the Holocaust

'And as a five year old, I could stand at the edge of the clearing where the trains were being loaded. People like sardines in those wooden trucks. And the people loading them in – they were railway men, they didn't look terribly different from the railway men who check my tickets these days – they looked like ordinary people.'

Dr Martin Stern MBE, **Holocaust survivor**

A member of the German SS supervises the boarding of Jews onto trains during a deportation action in the Krakow ghetto.

© United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Archiwum Dokumentacji Mechanicznej

These railway workers, who looked so ordinary, were indeed **ordinary people** from all across Nazi-occupied Europe, working as train drivers, conductors, signal men. Some of these **ordinary people** were perpetrators, driving Jewish people to concentration camps; some were rescuers, hiding Jews.

Henryk Gawkowski was a conductor who gave testimony to Claude Lanzmann for his film, *Shoah*. Henryk estimated that he transported approximately 18,000 Jews to Treblinka extermination camp. It is estimated that 800,000 people were murdered at Treblinka. Henryk said that he drank vodka all the time because it was the only way to make his job bearable.

Railway workers: Ordinary people

Perpetrators as ordinary people

Perpetrators were **ordinary people**, in positions of power, who took advantage of a set of circumstances, or who created a set of circumstances, that allowed them to abuse their power and discriminate, persecute and murder people.

Many studies have also explored how some perpetrators were **ordinary people** not in positions of power. Watching the trial of Adolf Eichmann, Hannah Arendt coined the phrase 'the banality of evil' meaning that evil acts are not necessarily perpetrated by evil people, rather they are the result of **ordinary people** obeying orders.

Ordinary people were policemen involved in rounding up victims, secretaries typing the records of genocide, dentists and doctors carrying out selections, ordinary people were neighbours wielding machetes in Rwanda, school teachers turned concentration camp guards in Bosnia.

Jean Louis Mazimpaka, a survivor of the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, recalls that

'When the killing started, to be honest, **everyone was involved**. Our neighbours, friends, but we didn't know the killings were to the extent of what happened.'

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Rescuers as ordinary people

Rescuers are also often portrayed as extraordinary, or superhuman, with amazing bravery and skill. This may be true in some instances, but many rescuers describe themselves in very simple terms, highlighting the circumstances that enabled them to save others. Sometimes they were able to provide food to others who needed it, sometimes they hid people. **Ordinary people** who did **extraordinary** things, risking their lives, their livelihoods, their families to help others.

Sir Nicholas Winton, a young stockbroker, rescued 669 children from Czechoslovakia, bringing them to the UK thereby sparing them from the horrors of the Holocaust.

He said:

'Why are you making such a big deal out of it? I just helped a little, I was in the right place at the right time.'

Sir Nicholas Winton, who rescued 669 children from Czechoslovakia during the Holocaust
© Matej Divizna / Getty

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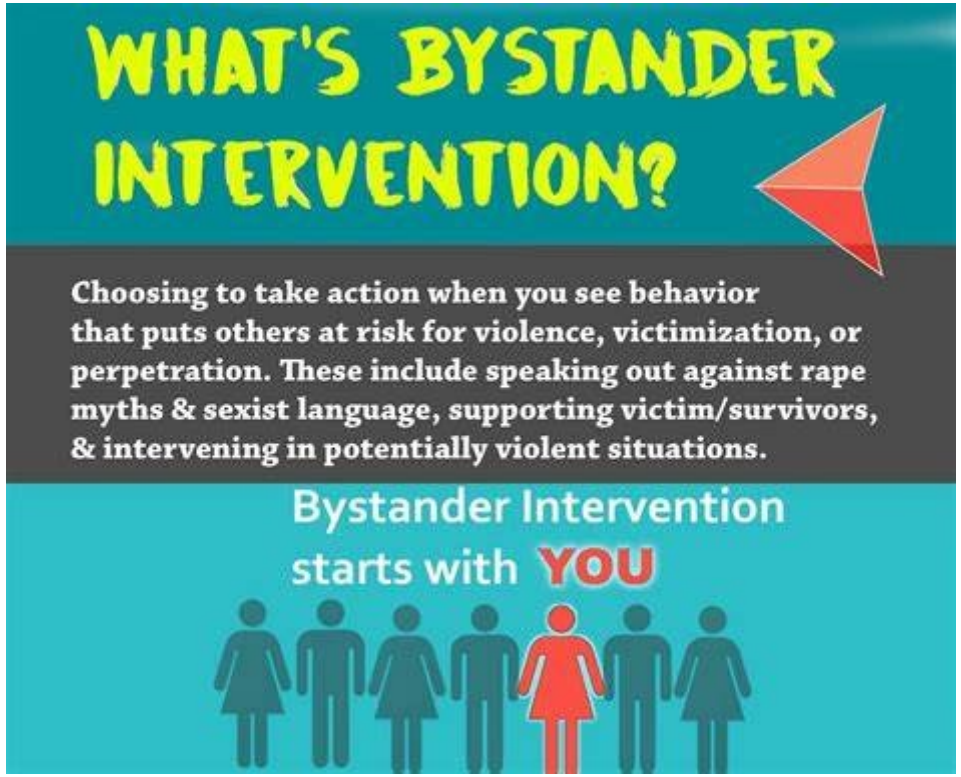
Do not be a bystander!



STOP HATE UK®

Today

We are all **ordinary people** today who can be extraordinary in our actions. We can all make decisions to challenge prejudice, stand up to hatred, to speak out against identity-based persecution, to shop responsibly.

Ordinary people are also the ones who drive Holocaust Memorial Day, who lead on community commemorations, who support and encourage everyone around them to take part in remembrance and education projects.