

# The 'Crime Committed in France, by France' by François Hollande

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AP Photo/Jacques Brinon Pool

French President François Hollande, center, arrives at the Jewish memorial prior to ceremonies to mark the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the Vel d'Hiv roundup, Paris, July 22, 2012

*The following is the speech given by President François Hollande to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the Vel d'Hiv Roundup on July 16 and 17, 1942, when the French police arrested 13,152 Jewish men, women, and children from Paris and its suburbs, and confined them to the Vélodrome d'Hiver, a bicycle stadium in Paris. They were later deported to German concentration camps. Eight hundred and eleven survived the war. President Hollande delivered his speech at the original site of the demolished velodrome on July 22, 2012.*

Prime Minister, President of the National Assembly, ambassadors, Mayor of Paris, President of the Representative Council of Jewish Institutions of France, Chief Rabbi, representatives of the religions, ladies and gentlemen:

We've gathered this morning to remember the horror of a crime, express the sorrow of those who experienced the tragedy, and speak of the dark hours of collaboration, our history, and therefore France's responsibility.

We're also here to pass on the memory of the Holocaust—of which the roundups were the first stage—in order to fight the battle against oblivion and testify to new generations what barbarity is capable of doing and what resources humanity may possess to defeat it.

Seventy years ago, on July 16, 1942, early in the morning, 13,152 men, women, and children were arrested in their homes. Childless couples and single people were interned in Drancy, where the museum created by the Mémorial de la Shoah will stand in the autumn.

The others were taken to the Vélodrome d'Hiver. Thrown together for five days in inhuman conditions, they were taken from there to the camps of Pithiviers and Beaune-la-Rolande.

A clear directive had been given by the Vichy administration. "The children must not leave in the same convoys as the parents." So, after heartrending separations, they departed—the parents on one side, the children on the other—for Auschwitz-Birkenau, where the deportees of Drancy had preceded them by a few days.

There, they were murdered. Solely for being Jews.

This crime took place here, in our capital, in our streets, the courtyards of our buildings, our stairways, our school playgrounds.

It was to prepare the way for other roundups, in Marseille and throughout France—in other words, on both sides of the demarcation line. There were also other deportations, notably of gypsies.

The infamy of the Vel d'Hiv was part of an undertaking that had no precedent and has no comparison: the Holocaust, the attempt to annihilate all the Jews on the European continent.

Seventy-six thousand French Jews were deported to the death camps. Only 2,500 returned.

Those women, men, and children could not have known the fate that awaited them. They could not even have imagined it. They trusted in France.

They believed that the country of the great Revolution and the City of Light would be a safe haven for them. They loved the Republic with a passion born of gratitude. Indeed, it was in Paris in 1791, under the National Constituent Assembly, that Jews had become fully fledged citizens for the first time in Europe. Later, others had found in France a land of welcome, a chance at life, a promise of protection.

Seventy years ago, this promise and this trust were trampled underfoot.

I would like to recall the words that the [future] chief rabbi of France, Jacob Kaplan, wrote to Marshal Pétain in October 1940, after the introduction of the despicable Statute of the Jews. "As the victims of measures that undermine our human dignity and our honor as Frenchmen, we express our profound faith in the spirit of justice of the Eternal France. We know that the ties uniting us with the great French family are too strong to be broken."

Therein lies the betrayal.

Across time, beyond grief, my presence this morning bears witness to France's determination to protect the memory of her lost children and honor these souls who died but have no graves, whose only tomb is our memory.

That is the purpose of the requirement set by the Republic: that the names of those martyred victims should not fall into oblivion.

We owe the Jewish martyrs of the Vélodrome d'Hiver the truth about what happened seventy years ago.

The truth is that French police—on the basis of the lists they had themselves drawn up—undertook to arrest the thousands of innocent people trapped on July 16, 1942. And that the French gendarmerie escorted them to the internment camps.

The truth is that no German soldiers—not a single one—were mobilized at any stage of the operation.

The truth is that this crime was committed in France, by France.

To his great credit, President Jacques Chirac recognized this truth, in this very spot on July 16, 1995.

“France,” he said, “France, country of the Enlightenment and human rights, land of welcome and asylum, France, that day, was committing the irreparable.”

But the truth is also that the crime of the Vel d’Hiv was committed against France, against her values, against her principles, against her ideal.

Honor was saved by the Righteous, by all those who were able to rise up against barbarism, by those anonymous heroes who hid a neighbor here, helped another there, and risked their lives to save those of innocent people. By all those French people who enabled three quarters of France’s Jews to survive.

France’s honor was embodied by General de Gaulle, who stood up on June 18, 1940, to continue the struggle.

France’s honor was defended by the Resistance, the shadow army that would not resign itself to shame and defeat.

France was represented on the battlefields, with our flag, by the soldiers of the Free French Forces.

She was also served by the Jewish institutions, like the Oeuvre de secours aux enfants [Children’s Welfare Organization], which secretly organized the rescue of more than five thousand children and took in orphans after the Liberation.

The truth does not divide people. It brings them together. In that spirit, this day of commemoration was established by François Mitterrand, and the Foundation for the Memory of the Shoah was created under Lionel Jospin’s government. Set up under that same government, with Jacques Chirac, was the Commission for the Compensation of Victims of Spoliation Resulting from Anti-Semitic Legislation in Force During the Occupation, whose aim was to put right what still could be put right.

In the chain of our collective history, it now falls to me to continue this common duty of remembrance, truth, and hope.

It begins with passing on the memory. Ignorance is the source of many abuses. We cannot tolerate the fact that two out of three young French people do not know what the Vel d’Hiv roundup was.

The Republic’s schools—in which I hereby voice my confidence—have a mission: to instruct, educate, teach about the past, make it known and understood in all its dimensions. The Holocaust is on the curriculum of the final primary and junior school years and the second *lycée* year.

There must not be a single primary school, junior school, or *lycée* in France where it is not taught. There must not be a single institution where this history is not fully understood, respected, and pondered over. For the Republic, there cannot and will not be any lost memories.

I personally shall see to this.

The challenge is to fight tirelessly against all forms of falsification of history: not only the insult of Holocaust denial, but also the temptation of relativism. Indeed, to pass on the history of the Shoah is to teach how uniquely appalling it was. By its nature, its scale, its methods, and the terrifying precision of its execution, that crime remains an abyss unique in human history. We must constantly remind ourselves of that singularity.

Finally, passing on this memory means preserving all its lessons. It means understanding how the

ignominy was possible then, in order that it may never recur in the future.

The Shoah was not created from a vacuum and did not emerge from nowhere. True, it was set in motion by the unprecedented and terrifying combination of single-mindedness in its racist frenzy and industrial rationality in its execution. But it was also made possible by centuries of blindness, stupidity, lies, and hatred. It was preceded by many warning signs, which failed to alert people's consciences.

We must never let our guard down. No nation, no society, nobody is immune from evil. Let us not forget this verdict by Primo Levi on his persecutors. "Save the exceptions, they were not monsters, they had our faces." Let us remain alert, so that we may detect the return of monstrosity under its most harmless guises.

I am aware of the fears expressed by some of you. I want to respond to them.

Conscious of this history, the Republic will pursue all anti-Semitic acts with the utmost determination, but also all remarks that may lead France's Jews even to feel uneasy in their own country.

In this area, nothing is immaterial. Everything will be fought with the last ounce of energy. Being silent about anti-Semitism, dissimulating it, explaining it already means accepting it.

The safety of France's Jews is not just a matter for Jews, it is a matter for all French people, and I intend it to be guaranteed under all circumstances and in all places.

Four months ago, in Toulouse, children died for the same reason as those of the Vel d'Hiv: because they were Jews.

Anti-Semitism is not an opinion, it is an abhorrence. For that reason, it must first of all be faced directly. It must be named and recognized for what it is. Wherever it manifests itself, it will be unmasked and punished.

All ideologies of exclusion, all forms of intolerance, all fanaticism, all xenophobia that seek to develop the mentality of hatred will find their way blocked by the Republic.

Every Saturday morning, in every French synagogue, at the end of the service, the prayer of France's Jews rings out, the prayer they utter for the homeland they love and want to serve. "May France live in happiness and prosperity. May unity and harmony make her strong and great. May she enjoy lasting peace and preserve her spirit of nobility among the nations."

All of France must be worthy of this spirit of nobility.

To tirelessly teach historical truth, to scrupulously ensure respect for the values of the Republic, to constantly recall the demand for religious tolerance, within the frame of our *laïque* [secular] laws never to give way on the principles of freedom and human dignity, always to further the promise of equality and emancipation. Those are the measures we must collectively assign ourselves.

In thinking of the lives never allowed to blossom, of those children deprived of a future, those destinies cut short, we must raise still further the demands we make of our own lives. By refusing indifference, neglect, and complacency, we shall make ourselves stronger together.

It is by being clear-sighted about our own history that France, thanks to the spirit of harmony and unity, will best promote her values, here and throughout the world.

Long live the Republic! Long live France!

*August 18, 2012, 9:35 a.m.*

