**Open Letter to the Participants of the**
**1st International Workshop on Nakba Narratives as Language Resources**
**on January 20 2025 at COLING 2025 in Abu Dhabi**

**Hans Uszkoreit**

As a computational linguist and member of the International Committee of Computational Linguistics (ICCL), I am delighted with the topic of your workshop, because for our field, the use of language technology to support collective memory and contemporary historical research is a challenging and promising area of application. The same applies to utilizing these narratives as research data.

A mindful approach to memory can help us draw lessons from the past and create a better world. Conversely, the irresponsible misuse of memory can contribute to preparing the human catastrophes of tomorrow. It is actually quite simple: If the preserved memory of the suffering of ancestors is used to prevent future aggression and violence, then that is an honorable endeavor. This is the goal of the Shoah Project, the World War II memorials, and the commemorative sites for Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and 9/11. However, memory must not be misused to incite hatred, propagate retaliation against the descendants of former adversaries, or demand violent changes to borders. The horror of October 7, 2023, would not have been possible without the years-long misuse of Nakba memories.

I am very concerned that the scientific character of the workshop and the reputation of our conference could be damaged by emotional reactions to current political events and the political misuse of Nakba narratives. My earnest request to you is to read and reflect on my following thoughts about this issue.

I grew up in divided post-war Germany. Only after fleeing from one Germany to the other was I allowed to study, as I had already been imprisoned as a teenager in East Germany for protesting against the military invasion into a neighboring country.

My father came from a town near Königsberg, today Kaliningrad, which has belonged to Russia since 1945. My paternal ancestors had lived for centuries in German towns that now belong to Russia and Poland. At the time of the Nakba, 1948 and 1949, the last German families had to leave these hometowns, which were then taken over by Polish and Russian resettlers.

Around the time of the Nakba, eleven million Germans were expelled from their towns and villages, which are now located in Poland, Russia, and the Czech Republic. Over two million expelled people lost their lives, the majority of them civilians, as most German men were prisoners of war at the time.

During my childhood and youth, I heard stories about the experiences and fates of the women and old people who had lost all their belongings and then, hungry and freezing, had to travel hundreds of kilometers with their children, sometimes even on foot, to reach the remaining parts of Germany.

In the same years, seven million Hindus had to leave their homeland in Pakistan, and seven million Muslims their homeland in India. And these were just some of the largest humanitarian catastrophes of the post-war years. The consequences of World War II and decolonization also caused expulsions and refugee flows of horrendous proportions in many other countries.

Two world wars, the Holocaust, the Nakba, and several Middle Eastern wars can neither be undone, nor can we correct history. The collective memory of these horrors must be preserved, but it must be maintained in such a way that there are no repetitions or continuations of these horrific events. And it must be preserved and shared in a way that allows hatred to end with the memory, rather than being continuously fueled.

The Nakba is part of a defeat, as in 1948, the five Arab states failed to eliminate the new Jewish state that had been legitimized by the United Nations. More than 600.000 Arab people consequently lost their homeland. Such a defeat is horrible; my home country had to experience this more than once.

The Israeli part of the mandate territory lost many inhabitants during the Nakba but then took in approximately half a million Jewish refugees who, as a result of the same war, had to leave their Arab home countries. Several hundred thousand more homeless Jewish refugees from various countries were also taken in, displaced persons who before 1949 had been stranded on their way to Palestine—often in Cyprus—because the British mandate administration, under Arab pressure, had denied them entry. This process of population swap is somewhat reminiscent of what happened on the Indian subcontinent, where a much larger population exchange occurred at almost the same time. And there were several more cases. Worldwide, the long overdue end of colonialism was accompanied by terrible wars and expulsions.

Unfortunately, the victims of the Nakba often had little luck in the countries of their refuge because, unlike the German, Indian, Pakistani, and Jewish refugees, they were not integrated into the societies of their host countries. The descendants of the German refugees from the East are permanently at home where they live today. They can visit the homeland of their ancestors and meet the people who now live there. I undertook such a journey with my father and uncle. We met and befriended the Russian family residing in the former house of my grandparents. It would never occur to us to condemn these people or dispute their right to the houses in which they were born and raised.

We also do not argue about guilt for the tragedies of the last century. Neither they nor we were involved in the atrocities of the war and its consequences—a war that our country had started. And the question of guilt is so complex anyway that even historians have no simple answers: Who bears how much guilt for the victims of Dresden and Hiroshima, and who is really responsible for the victims of Baghdad and Gaza?

The situation of the refugees from the First Palestine War is entirely different. With the approval and support of the international community, they were forced to retain their tragic refugee status and even pass it down to their children and grandchildren. These descendants deserve our solidarity, because more than 75 years after the Nakba, many of them are still not made to feel at home where they were born and raised. I cannot imagine what would have happened if the descendants of the German refugees from the eastern territories were still living in refugee camps today. We would most likely not have stable peace with our eastern neighbors.

European integration is one of the great success stories of our time. Centuries of bloody hostilities between European nations were only successfully overcome because today no participating nation makes territorial claims against its neighbors. It is not about historical justice, on which there can never be unanimous agreement anyway, but about living in peace, which then fosters a life of prosperity and happiness. An indicator of the success of this model is the large number of immigrants from the Middle East and Africa who, despite linguistic, religious, and cultural differences, prefer to live in Europe.

Preserving the memory of the Nakba should contribute to ensuring that today's descendants of all those involved, work to *peacefully* overcome the long-term consequences of the catastrophe. We have painfully witnessed over the past fifteen months where attempts at *belligerent* solutions can lead.

May you be successul in safeguarding the scientific and humanitarian nature of the workshop and in sharing novel research results and intellectual insights. In this spirit, I wish your workshop great success, both as a computational linguist and as a citizen of a society that has managed to draw fruitful lessons from the horrors of its past.

18 January 2025