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# The One and the Many



*On Comparing the Holocaust*

James Loeffler

The world's oldest Holocaust archive sits nestled inside an unassuming Georgian rowhouse in London's elegant Bloomsbury district. Founded in 1933 in Amsterdam by exiled German Jewish leader Alfred Wiener, the Jewish Central Information Bureau recorded the Nazi crimes in real time. On the eve of World War II, Wiener relocated his institute to London, where it grew into the world-renowned Wiener Library for the Study of the Holocaust and Genocide, dedicated to "supporting research, learning, teaching and advocacy about the Holocaust and genocide, their causes and consequences."

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Given this history, I was unsurprised on my last visit to the Wiener to see the familiar face of Raphael Lemkin, the Polish Jewish lawyer who coined the word “genocide” and championed the idea of a UN Genocide Convention, emblazoned on the wall of the reception hall. In the large black and white photograph, he sits at a desk, pen in hand, clothed in a dark, double-breasted suit and tie. His eyebrows are arched ever so slightly, his lips pursed, a thin shadow darkening one side of his face as he stares placidly into the camera.

I do not know whether Lemkin’s portrait still graces the Wiener wall. If it does, the effect would now be sadly ironic. Not long after my visit, the institute dropped the word “genocide” from its name to simply become the Wiener Holocaust Library. With this new name, they explain on their website, we clarify “the centrality of the Holocaust” to our work without altering our “commitment to furthering the study of genocide.”

Removing “genocide” may seem like a minor semantic gesture, a slight rebranding. A Holocaust archive has every right to re-center the Holocaust in its work. But every name-change is also an act of renunciation. Some person or some idea is no longer deemed valid. An historical error requires a symbolic correction. History must leap forward, or, in this instance, shift into reverse.

In the case of the Wiener, the name-change signals a subtle but unmistakable retreat from the task of relating the Holocaust to other genocides, as if the word “genocide” compromises its former companion, “Holocaust.” The two must be distanced, their connection recalibrated. The universal lessons of the Holocaust can evidently still be taught, but the event itself cannot be too closely linked to the broader category of genocide. What must be avoided, in other words, is the specter of comparison.

### AN AGE OF ANALOGIES

Ours is an age of analogies. The Holocaust and the Syrian genocide. The Holocaust and American slavery. The Holocaust and the Nakba. It isn’t hard to spot both the allure and the danger in each of these provocative couplings. Such conceptual linkages command our attention, rouse us from our apathy, and compel us to clarify our ethical commitments. Still, comparisons also flatten history. They force us into undignified arguments over scales and degrees of suffering. They

lead us down facile paths of analogy that often culminate in the dead end of relativism. Worse still, they supply cheap ammunition for contemporary political skirmishes.

Evidence of this problem is in ample supply today. In Eastern Europe, rightist governments have criminalized Holocaust research on the grounds that it besmirches national honor and supplants their own genocides at the hands of Nazi and Soviet regimes. In Western Europe and the United States, the Holocaust is routinely de-Judaized, sometimes out of ignorance, sometimes in malice, in order to universalize its import. One thinks of former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn’s proposal to replace England’s Holocaust Memorial Day with “Genocide Memorial Day,” or former President Donald Trump’s White House commemorative statement that failed to mention Jews or antisemitism. The pandemic has now produced its own brand of

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Holocaust abusers who sport yellow stars and liken vaccination to Nazi medicine. In the Middle East, the politics of Holocaust memory reach their nadir, as genocide accusations and Nazi analogies routinely detonate in every direction in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Some of these cases represent willful weaponizations of Holocaust memory to press political claims. Others merely evince lazy moral reasoning or rhetorical opportunism. Given the range, it is tempting to disavow all comparisons, concentrating instead on telling just one story in all its detail.

Yet comparison is not only inevitable, it is also necessary. The logic of public Holocaust remembrance, after all, dictates that one atrocity helps explain another, especially in the high-minded realm of genocide prevention. The pursuit of the Holocaust’s “causes and consequences” only matters if there are relevant lessons that apply to the rest of history and to other events, past and present. “Never again” is an invitation to compare.

The Wiener Library is hardly alone in this regard. The study of the Holocaust, says the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, should inspire us “to do for the victims of genocide today what the world failed to do for the Jews of Europe in the 1930s and 1940s.” We must “remind the world of the lessons to be learnt from the Holocaust in order to help to prevent future acts of genocide,” declares Israel’s Yad

Vashem. Even the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, better known these days for its controversial antisemitism definition (see Isaac Luria's essay on the topic in this issue), ties its mission of "Holocaust education, research and remembrance" to "global initiatives for genocide prevention." Its motto suggests a basic moral process at work: "A world that remembers the Holocaust. A world without genocide."

The causal link in all these cases is clear. Holocaust remembrance *will* prevent future genocide. But the definitional relationship remains murky. Is the Holocaust just one instance of the broader phenomenon of genocide, one among the many? Or is it the sole standard against which all others must be judged? What, finally, is the relationship between the words "Holocaust" and "genocide"?

#### LEMKIN'S LAMENT

Law begins with generalization. To stop a crime requires naming it, giving it a formal moniker that renders it universally legible. The specific act must become part of a larger category of offense.

So it was with "genocide." The term slipped into parlance with the appearance of a nearly 700-page legal tome, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in 1944. "New conceptions require new terms," wrote then forty-four-year-old Raphael Lemkin:

By "genocide" we mean the destruction of a nation or of an ethnic group. This new word, coined by the author to denote an old practice in its modern development, is made from the ancient Greek word *genos* (race, tribe) and the Latin *cide* (killing), thus corresponding in its formation to such words as tyrannicide, homicide, infanticide, etc.

Despite the focus on murder, Lemkin explained, "genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation... It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves." What were those foundations? His list was long and broad:

political and social institutions... culture, language, national feelings, religion, and ... economic existence ... personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and even the lives of the individuals belonging to such groups.

This capacious definition of the ultimate crime—far beyond mass murder—grew out of Lemkin's own experiences in interwar Poland. Born in 1900 on a small farm in then Russian-controlled Poland, today Belarus, he came of age in an era of wars, revolutions, and pogroms. After World War I, he studied law in Lwow and Warsaw and threw himself into Polish legal circles and Jewish communal life.

Even as he rose to prominence as a state prosecutor and legal scholar, Lemkin spent years defending Polish Jews from antisemitic street violence, ominous political rhetoric, crippling economic boycotts, anti-Jewish quotas in higher education, and a raft of other restrictive laws and policies designed to exclude them from Polish society. He made a name for himself as a legal advice expert, penning a column for *Haynt*, the Warsaw Yiddish-language daily, in which he counseled his readers on how to navigate the rapidly shifting terrain of Polish law.

In the late 1920s, Lemkin even tangled publicly with Poland's leading scholar of ancient Christianity, Tadeusz Zieliński, who accused Jews of barbaric tribalism and moral parochialism. Biblical Judaism was too vengeful and violent to have produced the universal creed of Christianity, Zieliński argued in his six-volume *Religions of the Ancient World*. Instead, he credited ancient Hellenistic religion alone for the origins of Christian theology and ethics. When Lemkin called out Zieliński's antisemitism, the Catholic scholar responded with a denunciation of Jewish chauvinism and mercenary self-interest.

The same dynamic repeated itself in 1933, when Lemkin approached the League of Nations with a proposal for an international law to defend minorities from the rising threat of fascism. He framed his legal vision as a universal device for the protection of vulnerable groups. Yet the unsuccessful effort triggered a Polish conservative backlash with similar accusations that the call for global justice was really a self-serving Jewish plot. The affair led to Lemkin's exit from governmental service. He spent the rest of the decade working in private practice and teaching law at Warsaw's Tahkemoni Orthodox rabbinical seminary.

After a dramatic 1940 escape from war-torn Poland, and an extended sojourn in Sweden, Lemkin resumed his project in the United States, with a specific focus on the Nazi war crimes then in progress. Even as he searched for news of his family, most of whom were murdered during the Holocaust, he took his ideas about genocide to the postwar

Nuremberg Trials, where he urged the American authorities to incorporate this crime into their legal charges against Nazi war criminals. He brought the same idea to the United Nations, where he lobbied for the adoption of what became the UN Genocide Convention, and for its ratification by governments around the world.

Lemkin was long regarded as a kind of Jewish universalist determined to transcend the parochial boundaries of his people's suffering to create a new moral creed for the entire world. That Lemkin, the non-Jewish Jew, appealed to generations of Western intellectuals who sought a cosmopolitan origin story for genocide prevention, one of the key planks in the charter of liberal internationalism. More recently, Lemkin has been accused of being a secret Zionist propagandist, determined to elevate the Holocaust to pride of place in order to deny the Nakba and other crimes of Western colonialism.

The truth is that Lemkin's early Zionist convictions fired his imagination and shaped his view of the contours of minority identity, but by no means defined the whole of his ethics. His politics surely matter, especially if we wish to understand the intellectual sources of modern Jewish moral thought beyond the

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twin clichés of *tikkun olam* and the “Judeo-Christian tradition.” But neither Lemkin's political commitments nor his ideological blinders explain as much about his model of genocide as does his biography as a Polish Jew who confronted the core modern Jewish dilemma, or what is really the core dilemma of modernity: how to extrapolate outwards from one particular experience into a universal ethics.

From the outset, Lemkin intended “genocide” to encompass all manner of atrocities. Acutely aware of the Holocaust's singular character, he also recognized that other peoples had suffered similar catastrophes. In preparing his never-completed definitive history of genocide, Lemkin scoured world history for other examples of large-scale atrocities. He cited events as diverse as the ancient Roman massacre of early Christians and destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, European and American colonial crimes, the World War I-era massacres of Armenians, the 1930s anti-Assyrian brutalities in Iraq, and the Nazi and Stalinist onslaughts against Christian Poles.

Only through comparison could common features be identified. If every tragedy was unique, scrutiny revealed patterns that could be used to predict and prevent the worst kinds of human barbarity. Comparison was thus the essence of Lemkin's endeavor. For that reason, he avoided the term “Holocaust,” even as he fathomed its enormity. Lemkin lost nearly fifty members of his family to Nazi murder, and he did not shy away from referencing his personal loss. Yet he recognized that for better or worse the Holocaust had to be related to a larger universal story of genocide to acquire significance for global justice.

Ultimately, he understood comparison, even with its attendant dangers, as an inescapable means of articulating moral universalism. Just because the idea of “genocide” could be abused did not mean it should remain unused. Ultimately, the threat of destruction was a human concern. “Is this merely a matter of Jews, Arabs, Catholics, Protestants or Buddhists?” he wrote in a 1952 Hebrew-language essay in an Israeli newspaper. “We are speaking here of the fate and security of all religions and all peoples.”

Lemkin's plaintive optimism waned over the course of the 1950s. Over time, he concluded that genocidal violence showed no signs of abating. What had begun to ebb, instead, was the very memory of the Holocaust. In a remarkable Hebrew poem published in 1957, he presented a sober ode to the murdered Jews that linked the particulars of the Holocaust to larger threats of atrocities. In somber Hebrew rhyme, he wrote of the massive suffering and loss of Jews—individually and collectively—in the form of stolen lives and destroyed cultural artifacts, ruptured families and vanished memories, ruined landscapes and shattered survivors. Lemkin titled his poem not “Shoah,” “Hurban,” or “Holocaust,” but “Genocide.” The choice spoke to his conviction that the one and the many must be related together, so that no one—Jewish or other—should ever again face the threat “on account of race [or] religion.”

At the time of Lemkin's death in 1959, many of his contemporaries shared his sense of despair. Global political gridlock stemming from the Cold War and decolonization blocked the use of the Genocide Convention to address ongoing atrocities. Scholars evinced little interest in studying the Holocaust or other historical genocides. Lemkin's name fell into obscurity.

That situation changed dramatically with the end of the Cold War. As democratic capitalism and human rights norms expanded globally, genocidal violence exploded in Europe and Africa. That stark conjunction spawned a new interest in the Holocaust. The adjacent enterprises of Holocaust Studies and Holocaust remembrance rose to prominence as part of a larger search for “lessons and legacies” that could help foster a global commitment to human rights and atrocity prevention. The Jewish slogan “Never Again” popularized Holocaust memory as an all-purpose global warning signal.

At the same time, the 1990s also saw the rise of comparative Genocide Studies. Newly opened archives yielded new information about the large-scale atrocities committed by both Communist and Western regimes. The belated creation of an International Criminal Court provided new possibilities for the punishment of perpetrators. A generation of Western activists recuperated Lemkin’s life as a model heroic individual action on a global scale, while a new crop of scholars sought to push for a more critical view of how the Holocaust should be related to other global genocides. In doing so, they took inspiration from Lemkin’s own effort even as they rightly questioned the hagiography that now surrounded his name.

#### TO COMPARE OR NOT TO COMPARE?

Today, fierce public debates still erupt about the relationship between the Holocaust and other genocides and colonial atrocities beyond Europe’s borders. Critics allege that Holocaust remembrance merely perpetuates a form of Jewish exceptionalism. Jewish voices respond by decrying comparative genocide studies as akin to soft denialism. As a result, institutions of Holocaust research and remembrance now face a conundrum. To compare or not to compare?

Let’s return, finally, to that exhibition hall at the Wiener Library in London. We always tell the story of the past in the present. Our choice of topics and our interpretative frames arise from the needs of our moment. That does not mean that we automatically invent facts or manipulate reality, only that we build narratives out of pressing questions about our origins, our present, and our future. Lemkin’s mission to prevent atrocity—first before the Holocaust, then after—demonstrates how difficult and yet essential it is to build bridges between the islands of the past.

If we isolate the Holocaust from other historical atrocities in a sphere of incommensurability, we not only risk losing the context that explains the event, but also sacrifice the chance to make the past speak clearly and directly to the present. When we decline to explain its meaning in relation to other atrocities for fear of accommodating appropriation, we risk committing the sin of exceptionalism. Then we also forfeit the capacity to make any larger statements about its import for ethics and justice in our world. To sharply partition genocide from the Holocaust is to signal a retrenchment that we can ill afford in our world of overlapping ideological hatreds.

Not all Holocaust scholarship must be comparative, but we cannot dismiss wholesale the comparative study of genocide if we wish the Holocaust to bear moral meaning. Behind this imperative is a hard truth. In our globalized society, we have more access than ever to information about the Holocaust. Yet in this new global landscape

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claims about Holocaust universalism must explain their relationship to other historical stories and to the very idea of genocide.

Comparison is not only about establishing equivalence; it is also about recognizing difference. The Holocaust is not the Armenian

genocide. Nor is it the same as the Syrian genocide, American slavery, or the Nakba. Each of these historical traumas, which haunt generations down to the present, deserves to be studied on its own terms. It is our duty to point out both the similarities, but also, and even more importantly, to distinguish between historical events. Comparisons carry the risk of false moral equivalencies and tempt political opportunism. Yet they remain fundamentally necessary to the endeavor of historical inquiry—and moral action. We can only learn when we compare, as painful as that process can prove to be. Comparisons are the lifeblood of both historical inquiry and moral reasoning. Only by placing ideas and events beside one another can we make sense of what they share and how they differ. Making justice out of trauma, it turns out, requires a willingness to compare catastrophes.

“The function of memory is not only to register past events, but to stimulate human conscience.” Raphael Lemkin wrote these words in a draft of his unfinished autobiography. When I recall that image of



Lemkin's photograph, I see a man gazing in two directions at once, towards the past and towards the future. Genocide is a crime derived from the past and defined by its own history, but it is also a warning to the future. When we remember the Holocaust today, we too gaze in two directions: backward to the event with its attendant traumas, and forward to the world that offers scarce respite from new perils. Even as we commemorate loss, we search for lessons that can guide us in the present. Even as we ponder the future, we borrow images from the past to imagine the shape it may yet take. That double-vision can deceive us, but it can also inspire us. ■

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