

THE NAMELESS CRIME: REFLECTIONS ON THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT OF GENOCIDE

Narek Poghosyan

Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute Foundation, Armenia

Abstract

The term “genocide,” introduced by Raphael Lemkin, represents a groundbreaking milestone in the conceptualization and prevention of mass atrocities. Genocide is uniquely defined by the deliberate intent to annihilate specific human groups, earning its designation as the “crime of crimes” due to its profound legal and moral implications. Lemkin’s work unified disparate historical and linguistic precedents into a comprehensive legal framework, addressing the prior absence of a formal term for such heinous acts.

Although genocide was once referred to as “a crime without a name,” historical evidence reveals that many cultures and languages had long acknowledged and described this phenomenon using terms such as *Völkermord*, *folkmord*, and “the murder of a nation.” Lemkin’s true innovation lay in synthesizing these fragmented concepts into a single, cohesive definition, firmly rooted in international legal discourse to promote recognition and accountability.

This study explores the historical, linguistic, and legal evolution of the term “genocide,” emphasizing its enduring universal relevance and the challenges surrounding its classification in modern international debates.

Keywords: Raphael Lemkin, mass atrocities, barbarism, vandalism, legal terminology, linguistic precedents, *Völkermord*, *folkmord*.

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Introduction

The creation of the term “genocide” by lawyer Raphael Lemkin is one of the most pivotal developments in the field of genocide studies. Central to this concept is its distinction from other crimes due to the specific presence of intent to destroy ethnic, religious, and racial groups. This intent elevates genocide to the status of a particularly serious international crime, often referred to as the “crime of crimes.”¹

Lemkin emphasized its unique nature, describing it as a crime that targets the foundations of civilization and threatens the collective interests of humanity.² In this regard, genocide is not merely a crime against a single nation or group but one of universal significance. This global dimension explains why genocide is widely regarded as the gravest crime against humanity.³ Given this gravity, the classification of mass atrocities as genocide continues to generate debate. Modern international discussions often revolve around whether specific events meet the legal definition of genocide. Unfortunately, these debates are frequently influenced by political considerations, sidelining the legal and humanitarian dimensions of genocide prevention and punishment.

It’s important to understand the historical and also legal background of this crime and its use. Understanding this historical context is crucial for appreciating the universal significance of the term. The concept of genocide is rooted in a long-standing recognition of the need to protect human groups from targeted annihilation, a principle that transcends political interests and speaks to the shared moral and legal responsibilities of the global community.

From Barbarity to Genocide

Lemkin’s journey toward defining genocide did not begin in 1944; it was shaped by years of observation and study. A key milestone in this process was the Madrid Conference of 1933, where Lemkin introduced proposals concerning the crimes of “barbarity” and “vandalism.”⁴ These terms, which were not invented by Lemkin, served as precursors to the concept of genocide. Lemkin argued for the establishment of a multilateral convention that would categorize the destruction of human groups as an international crime, laying the groundwork for the eventual definition of genocide.

The term “Barbaros” originates from the Greek word “βάρβαρος” (plural: “βάρβαροι,”

1 Robert Cryer, Håkan Friman, Darryl Robinson, and Elizabeth Wilmshurst, *An Introduction to International Criminal Law and Procedure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 203.

2 AJHS, Raphael Lemkin Collection, P-154, Box 7, Folder 3, Stop Genocide Now, 4.

3 Samuel Totten, *Teaching and Learning About Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity: Fundamental Issues and Pedagogical Approaches* (Charlotte, NC: IAP, 2019), 33.

4 Raphael Lemkin, “Acts Constituting a General (Transnational) Danger Considered as Offences Against the Law of Nations,” Special Report presented to the 5th Conference for the Unification of Penal Law in Madrid (14 -20 October 1933), <http://www.preventgenocide.org/lemkin/madrid1933-english.htm> , accessed 01.05.2024.

“barbaroi”). In ancient Greece, it was used to describe those who did not speak Greek or adhere to classical Greek customs. The term extended to include Greeks living on the fringes of the Greek world, who had their own distinct dialects.⁵ The Greek historian Herodotus was the first to provide an explanation of this term, linking it to the linguistic and cultural distinctions perceived by the Greeks.⁶

In Ancient Rome, the term “Barbaros” was adopted and applied to non-Roman peoples and tribes, such as the Berbers, Germans, Celts, Iberians, Thracians, Illyrians, and Sarmatians. By the later period of the Roman Empire, “barbarian” referred broadly to foreigners who lacked Greek and Roman traditions, particularly the tribes that posed military threats to Rome’s borders. Over time, scholars expanded the term’s use to describe attacks on cultures deemed “civilized” by external enemies.⁷

In modern usage, “barbarian” often conveys a metaphorical sense, describing actions considered cruel, savage, or primitive. A “barbarian” thus refers to individuals characterized by ignorance, rudeness, or the destruction of cultural values. This evolution of meaning likely influenced Raphael Lemkin’s adoption of the term. He defined “barbarism” as a crime directed against human life, aimed at destroying a specific national, religious, or social group.⁸

The term “vandalism” similarly carries historical and symbolic weight. It refers to the intentional or senseless damage or destruction of property, both private and public.⁹ This term is rooted in the history of the East Germanic tribe known as the Vandals, who ravaged Gaul, Spain, and North Africa and famously sacked Rome in 455 AD. The Latin term “Vandalus,” is believed by many to have given rise to the modern name of Andalusia, Spain’s southernmost region. The Vandals, ultimately defeated by the Romans at the Battle of Tricamarum in 533 AD, became emblematic of those who destroy objects of cultural or aesthetic value.¹⁰

This historical association with destruction and savagery made the terms “barbarism” and “vandalism” fitting precursors to Lemkin’s conceptual framework. Both terms underscore acts of violence or destruction targeting not just individuals but the cultural and societal fabric of human groups.

During the Age of Enlightenment (17th–18th centuries), the legacy of Rome was idealized, while the Goths and Vandals were vilified as the destroyers of its civilization. In

5 Panagiotis Filos, “The Dialectal Variety of Epirus,” in *Studies in Ancient Greek Dialects: From Central Greece to the Black Sea*, ed. Emilio Crespo, Georgios Giannakis; Emilio Crespo, Georgios Giannakis, Panagiotis Filos (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 218.

6 Jan Willem van Henten, “Martyrdom, Jesus’ Passion and Barbarism,” in *Violence, Scripture, and Textual Practice in Early Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Ra’anan S. Boustán, Alex P. Jassen, and Calvin J. Roetzel (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), 238.

7 Sarah Pruitt, “Where did the word “barbarian” come from?” <https://www.history.com/news/where-did-the-word-barbarian-come-from>, accessed 28.06.2024.

8 Raphael Lemkin, “Acts Constituting.”

9 Oxford English Dictionary, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/vandalism>, accessed 28.06.2024.

10 Julia Cresswell, *Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 472.

1794, French Bishop Henri Grégoire de Blois coined the term “vandalisme” to describe the widespread destruction of artworks during the French Revolution. The term quickly gained traction, adopted by journalists across Europe within months and officially included in the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* by 1798. By the early 19th century, “vandalism” had become a universally recognized term in all major European languages, symbolizing the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage.¹¹

It is likely that Raphael Lemkin drew upon this historical context when he used “vandalism” to define a new category of crime. At the 1933 Madrid Conference, Lemkin proposed the term to describe the destruction of cultural and artistic works that reflect the unique genius and achievements of a collective in fields such as science, art, and literature. Lemkin argued that the cultural contributions of any group are part of humanity’s collective wealth and that their destruction harms all of humanity.¹² Thus, he asserted, the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage should be recognized as an act of vandalism against global culture.

Despite the depth of Lemkin’s arguments, his proposals were not accepted at the Madrid Conference.¹³ Over the following years, he persisted in advocating for the recognition of such crimes at international legal conferences in Budapest, Copenhagen, Paris, Amsterdam, and Cairo. While his presentations were well-received in academic and legal circles, they failed to result in significant legislative action.¹⁴ Lemkin later attributed this failure to the prevailing view among legal experts that such crimes were too rare to justify new international legislation.¹⁵

Undeterred by these setbacks, Lemkin continued his work to define the destruction of ethnic, religious, and racial groups as a distinct international crime. Even during the Second World War, he persisted in advocating for his proposals on “barbarism” and “vandalism.” In a speech to the North Carolina Bar Association in May 1942, Lemkin argued that adopting his Madrid proposals could help prevent future wars.¹⁶

In June 1942, Lemkin accepted an invitation to serve as chief consultant for the U.S. Board of Economic Warfare, chaired at the time by Vice President Henry Wallace. This position provided Lemkin with a unique opportunity to directly address President Franklin D. Roosevelt. He submitted a one-page proposal advocating for an international treaty

11 Andy Merrills and Richard Miles, *The Vandals* (Chichester, Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 9-10.

12 Lemkin, “Acts Constituting.”

13 Brendan January, *Genocide: Modern Crimes Against Humanity* (Minneapolis, MN: Twenty-First Century Books, 2007), 25.

14 William Korey, “Lemkin’s Passion: Origin and Fulfillment,” in *Rafal Lemkin: A Hero of Humankind*, ed. Agnieszka Bieńczyk-Missala and Sławomir Dębski (Warsaw: The Polish Institute of International Affairs, 2010), 79.

15 William Schabas, *Genocide in International Law: The Crimes of Crimes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 30.

16 Raffael Scheck, “Raphaël Lemkin’s Derivation of Genocide from His Analysis of Nazi-Occupied Europe,” *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 13, no. 1 (2019): 124. <https://doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.13.1.1584124>.

to outlaw “barbarism and vandalism.”¹⁷ Reflecting on this period in his autobiography, Lemkin wrote: “I was urging speed. It was still possible to save at least a part of the people.”¹⁸

President Franklin D. Roosevelt responded affirmatively to Raphael Lemkin’s proposal for an international treaty to address crimes of “barbarism” and “vandalism.”¹⁹ However, with World War II raging, Roosevelt advised patience, as the creation of such a treaty would take years. Lemkin, however, was far from satisfied. In his autobiography, he expressed his frustration, writing: “When the rope is already around the neck of the victim and strangulation is imminent, isn’t the word ‘patience’ an insult to reason and nature?”²⁰

During this same period, from 1942 to 1944, Lemkin was writing his seminal book, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*.²¹ Published in November 1944 by the Carnegie Foundation for International Peace, the work marked a significant shift in Lemkin’s approach. In this work, he introduced the term “genocide” as a replacement for the crimes he had previously described as “barbarism” and “vandalism.” Lemkin explained in the book: “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).”²²

Lemkin’s linguistic background²³ likely influenced this shift. Having studied philology at the University of Lviv in 1920 before specializing in law, Lemkin believed in the transformative power of language.²⁴ The term “genocide,” with its brevity and stark implications, was designed to shock and resonate deeply with audiences. Lemkin likely recognized that this new, concise term would have a greater impact than the more abstract concepts of “barbarism” and “vandalism.”

What is particularly notable is that, with the introduction of “genocide,” Lemkin abandoned his earlier proposals related to “barbarism” and “vandalism.” This shift is evident in a 1946 article in which Lemkin argued that, prior to his definition, the crime

17 Paul R. Bartrop, *Modern Genocide: A Documentary and Reference Guide* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2019), 6.

18 Raphael Lemkin, *Totally Unofficial: The Autobiography of Raphael Lemkin*, ed. Donna-Lee Frieze (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 114.

19 Paul R. Bartrop, *Genocide: The Basics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 2.

20 Lemkin, *Totally Unofficial*.

21 Steven L. Jacobs, “Raphael Lemkin,” in *Encyclopedia of Human Rights*, ed. David P. Forsythe (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 425.

22 Raphael Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation - Analysis of Government - Proposals for Redress* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944), 79.

23 John Cooper, *Raphael Lemkin and the Struggle for the Genocide Convention* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 15.

24 Raphael Lemkin grew up speaking Russian, Yiddish, and Polish as his first languages. During his early childhood, he became fluent in Hebrew and German, along with local dialects of Russian and Belarusian. By early adulthood, he had expanded his linguistic repertoire to include French, English, Spanish, and Italian, showcasing his exceptional aptitude for languages. See Douglas Irvin-Erickson, “Raphaël Lemkin, Genocide, Colonialism, Famine, and Ukraine,” *East-West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 8, no. 1 (2021): 194.

of genocide had no name. He even referenced Winston Churchill's description of the atrocities committed during World War II as a 'crime without a name.'²⁵

From the History of Word “Genocide”

Raphael Lemkin sought to justify the creation of the term “genocide” by highlighting the absence of a precise definition for the crime it represented. He argued that, prior to his efforts, such atrocities lacked a distinct name, which hindered their recognition and condemnation. Following its introduction, the term “genocide” quickly gained traction, being translated and adopted into multiple languages, thereby solidifying its place in both legal and public discourse.

However, this raises a critical question: Was this crime truly “without a name,” as Lemkin suggested, or were there existing definitions of similar crimes prior to 1941, during and even before the Second World War? Lemkin's assertion was supported by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill's famous statement during a radio broadcast in August 1941, in which he declared, “We are in the presence of a crime without a name.”²⁶

This evolution underscores Lemkin's strategic adaptation to ensure that the destruction of human groups would be recognized as a distinct international crime. The creation of the term “genocide” not only solidified his legacy but also laid the groundwork for future legal and humanitarian efforts to prevent and punish such atrocities.

Even during the Armenian Genocide, the actions of the Ottoman Empire against the Armenians were described as crimes. On May 24, 1915, in a joint declaration, England, France, and Russia used the term “crime against humanity” to define these atrocities.²⁷ Similarly, the U.S. ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, Henry Morgenthau, remarked, “I am firmly convinced that this is the greatest crime of the ages.”²⁸

Years before Winston Churchill's famous broadcast in 1941 referring to a “crime without a name,” he had already characterized the Armenian massacres as a ‘holocaust.’²⁹ In 1929, Churchill described these events as an “administrative holocaust” and noted, “This crime was planned and executed for political reasons. The opportunity presented itself for clearing Turkish soil of a Christian race.”³⁰ Churchill's remarks demonstrate that he had been addressing the atrocities committed during the Armenian Genocide since their occurrence.

25 Raphael Lemkin, “Genocide,” *American Scholar* 15, no. 2 (1946): 227-230, <http://www.preventgenocide.org/lemkin/americanscholar1946.htm>, accessed 25.06.2024.

26 John Heidenrich, *How to Prevent Genocide: A Guide for Policymakers, Scholars, and the Concerned Citizen* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2001), 3.

27 Edita Gzoyan, “From War Crimes to Crimes against Humanity and Genocide: Turkish Responsibility after World War I,” *Genocide Studies International* 15, no. 2 (2023): 81, <https://doi.org/10.3138/GSI-2022-0020>.

28 Vahakn N. Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasus* (Providence and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2003), 421.

29 Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis*, vol. 4, *The Aftermath* (London: Thornton Butterworth 1929), 98.

30 Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis*, vol. 5, *The Aftermath* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), 158.

Furthermore, historical evidence indicates that the actions of the Ottoman Empire against the Armenians had already been defined in terms consistent with the concept, even before the term “genocide” was coined. Descriptions of the destruction of a people, nation, or race appeared in reports and accounts of the massacres and deportations of Armenians. Remarkably, such formulations were not limited to the genocide of 1915 but were also used to describe the mass killings of Armenians during the Hamidian massacres of 1894–1896, which were called “crimes against humanity and civilization.”³¹

These early characterizations reflect the recognition, even at the time, of the systematic and targeted nature of the atrocities committed against the Armenian people. They underscore that the concept of genocide, though unnamed, was already understood and articulated in descriptions of the Armenian Genocide and earlier mass atrocities.

The German equivalent of the term “genocide,” *Völkermord* (derived from *das Volk*, meaning “people” or “nation,” and *der Mord*, meaning “murder”), has a history predating Raphael Lemkin’s coining of the term “genocide.” The concept and terminology were already in use by the late 19th century. The term *Völkermord* was used in 1831 by the German poet August von Platen-Hallermünde to describe the brutal suppression of the Polish revolution by the Russians.³² Notably, in 1896, the German Protestant theologian Willibald Bäschelag, a professor at the University of Halle-Wittenberg, referenced the term in the magazine *Deutsch-evangelische Blätter*. In his article, Bäschelag wrote: “However much one wants to subtract and doubt, it is not possible anymore to deny that for some years now the Turkish government and population have undertaken a bloody endeavor that at least comes close to the attempt at *Völkermord*.”³³

By the late 19th century, the term had entered political discourse. For example, in 1899, Mustafa Reshid, a prominent Young Turk in exile in Europe, condemned the actions of the Ottoman Sultan, describing his regime as a *volkmörderischen Regierung* (genocidal government) in German. Reshid explicitly included the massacres of Armenians among the genocidal actions perpetrated by the Ottoman authorities.³⁴

During World War I, German diplomats used the term *Völkermord* to describe the atrocities committed by the Ottoman Empire against Armenians.³⁵ In 1919, the German clergyman, public figure, and orientalist Johannes Lepsius used the term in the preface to the revised edition of his 1916 report *Der Todesgang des armenischen Volkes* [The Death March of the Armenian People]. Lepsius wrote: “However bad our plight may seem in

31 Gzoyan, “From War Crimes to Crimes against Humanity and Genocide,” 81–82.

32 Kurt Jonassohn and Karin Solveig Björnson, *Genocide and Gross Human Rights Violations: In Comparative Perspective* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 140.

33 Stefan Ihrig, *Justifying Genocide: Germany and the Armenians from Bismarck to Hitler* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2016), 55.

34 Matthias Bjørnlund, “‘The Big Death’: Finding Precise Terminology for the Murder of the Armenian People,” April 23, 2015, *The Armenian Mirror-Spectator*, https://mirrorspectator.com/2015/04/23/the-big-death-finding-precise-terminology-for-the-murder-of-the-armenian-people/#_edn2, accessed 20.06.2024.

35 Wolfgang Gust, ed., *The Armenian Genocide: Evidence from the German Foreign Office Archives, 1915–1916* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2014), 126.

our country, it cannot be compared to this Völkermord (genocide) on the conscience of the Young Turks.”³⁶ Even today, *Völkermord* remains the standard term for genocide in German.

Lemkin was well aware of the term *Völkermord* and used it when appropriate. He even considered it synonymous with “genocide.” This equivalence is evident in the German version of Chapter IX of his book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, where Lemkin uses *Völkermord* in parentheses to clarify the meaning of “genocide.”³⁷ However, rather than adopting the term directly, Lemkin sought to establish a new designation with his own authority.

Remarkably, the term *Völkermord* continues to be widely used in German to describe genocide. This is evident in the German Bundestag’s resolution on June 2, 2016, recognizing the Armenian Genocide.³⁸ The resolution exclusively employs *Völkermord* without referencing the term “genocide.” Similarly, on April 23, 2015, German President Joachim Gauck referred to the massacres of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire as genocide, using *Völkermord* and describing the Armenian tragedy as part of the “genozidale dynamik” (genocidal dynamics) of the Ottoman Empire.³⁹

Before Lemkin’s creation of the term “genocide,” equivalent expressions also appeared in Swedish. The term “*folkmord*,” the Swedish equivalent of genocide, was used by Swedish writer and missionary Maria Anholm in her 1906 book *Det dödsdömda folkets saga* [The Story of the Condemned People]. In this work, which recounts the Hamidian massacres of Armenians (1894–1896), Anholm observed: “The fairy tale of Armenia is written with blood and tears. The *folkmord* we have witnessed is only the last act of a great bloody drama, the end of an age-old battle for faith and freedom. Until today, an Armenian die for his faith.”⁴⁰

Swedish politician Carl Hjalmar Branting, who served as Prime Minister of Sweden from 1920 to 1925, also employed the term *folkmord*. During a rally in Stockholm on March 26, 1917, Branting described the persecution of Armenians as an “organized and systematic *folkmord*, worse than anything ever seen in Europe.”⁴¹ The significance of

36 Hans-Lukas Kieser, “Johannes Lepsius: theologian, humanitarian activist and historian of “Völkermord”: an approach to a German biography (1858-1926),” in *Logos im Dialogos: Auf der Suche nach der Orthodoxie*, eds. Anna Briskina, Armenuhi Drost-Abgarjan, and Axel Meissner (Berlin: LIT Verlag Münster, 2011), 225.

37 AJHS, Raphael Lemkin Collection, P-154, Box 5, Folder 8, “Axis Rule in Occupied Europe,” by Lemkin, Chapter 9 of Manuscript (German) on Genocide, 1944, 1.

38 Deutscher Bundestag, “Erinnerung und Gedenken an den Völkermord an den Armeniern und anderen christlichen Minderheiten in den Jahren 1915 und 1916,” <https://dserv.bundestag.de/btd/18/086/1808613.pdf>, accessed 01.06.2024.

39 Joachim Gauck “Worte des Gedenkens im Anschluss an den ökumenischen Gottesdienst anlässlich der Erinnerung an den Völkermord an Armeniern, Aramäern und Pontos-Griechen,” April 23, 2015, <https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Joachim-Gauck/Reden/2015/04/150423-Gedenken-Armenier.html>, accessed 07.06.2024.

40 Maria Anholm, *Det dödsdömda folkets saga* (Stockholm: Aktienbolaget Ljus, 1906), 3.

41 Vahagn Avedian, red., *Armeniska Folkmordet 1915: Frågor och svar. Armeniska riksförbundet i Sverige* (Lund: Lund University, 2010), 29-30.

this usage was later highlighted in the Swedish Parliament's March 11, 2010 resolution recognizing the Armenian Genocide, which explicitly credited Branting as the first person to use the term *folkmord* before Lemkin.⁴²

During World War I, the Swedish military attaché to the Ottoman Empire, Einar af Wirsén, witnessed the Armenian Genocide firsthand. In his 1942 memoirs, Wirsén dedicated a section titled *Mordet på en nation* [Murder of a Nation] to the organized destruction of Armenians, detailing the methods and systematic nature of the killings.⁴³

Lemkin's connection to Sweden further underscores the influence of Nordic perspectives on his work. After fleeing Poland following the Nazi invasion, Lemkin relocated to Sweden via Lithuania. From 1940 to 1941, he lived in Stockholm, where he taught at a local university college and learned Swedish, becoming proficient enough to lecture in the language after only five months. During his time in Sweden, Lemkin collected significant material for his seminal work, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*.⁴⁴ This exposure to Swedish legal and cultural contexts likely deepened his understanding of terms like *folkmord* and their implications, contributing to his development of the concept of genocide.

In 1917, Norwegian literary historian Christen Collin wrote:

They (the Turks) were not content with driving a whole people from their dwellings into a foreign country, but they killed and sometimes even tortured the grown men, robbed and sold into slavery the most attractive women and children, and drove the rest into deserts or marshes, where the vast majority were to die. Read the story of this 'folkemord' (genocide) that began in April 1915.⁴⁵

That same year, Norwegian writer Arne Garborg used the term "folkemorde" in his published diaries to describe the Armenian Genocide.⁴⁶

Danish intellectual, linguist, and geographer Åge Meyer Benedictsén also employed the term "folkemord" in 1925.⁴⁷

In Poland, before Raphael Lemkin's introduction of the term "genocide," similar expressions were already in use. In 1943, Krystyna Witulska, a member of the Polish resistance and the Polish Intelligence Service, described German atrocities in Poland as a cold-hearted genocide. She used the German word *Volksmord* and the Polish word

42 Swedish Parliament Resolution, March 11, 2010, http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/Sweden_Parliament_Resolution.php, accessed 07.06.2024.

43 Einar af Wirsén, *Minnen från fred och krig* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1942), 220-226.

44 Mark Klamberg, "Raphaël Lemkin in Stockholm – Significance for his Work on 'Axis Rule in Occupied Europe,'" *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 13, no 1 (2019): 64-87.

45 Christen Collin, *Verdenskrigen: og det store tidsskifte* (Kristiania, København : Gyldendalske, 1917), 161.

46 Arne Garborg, *Dagbok 1905-1923* (Oslo: H. Aschehoug & Company (W. Nygaard), 1926), 81.

47 Bjørnlund, "The Big Death."

ludobójstwo.⁴⁸ In Polish, *ludo* means “people” and *zabójstwo* means “murder.” Notably, *ludobójstwo* was employed even before World War II and later became widely used in Poland during trials of German war criminals after Lemkin’s term “genocide” gained international recognition.⁴⁹

The phrase “The Murder of a Nation” also appeared in English in 1918, when Henry Morgenthau, the U.S. ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, titled the 24th chapter of his memoir with this expression.⁵⁰ Morgenthau’s accounts of the Armenian Genocide, including his attempts to save the Armenian people, were profoundly influential on Lemkin. After emigrating to the United States, Lemkin referenced Morgenthau’s work in his lectures at Duke and Yale universities. He frequently drew historical parallels to explain Hitler’s plans to conquer territories and annihilate populations, citing the Armenian Genocide as a key example.⁵¹

The Greek term for genocide, *γενοκτονία* (*Genoktonia*), has ancient linguistic roots.⁵² Derived from the word *γένος* (*genos*),⁵³ meaning generation, family, nation, or race in ancient Greek, and *κτονία* (*ktonía*),⁵⁴ meaning to kill, the term reflects a deep historical and cultural understanding of the concept of exterminating a group. Influential Swiss eugenicist Zurukzoglu defined *Geneoktonie* as the “elimination of a generation (or an important family) before achieving its optimal reproduction.”⁵⁵

In the early 20th century, the term *Genoktonia* was commonly used in Greece to describe the persecution and massacres of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire.⁵⁶ Over time, it also came to define the systematic extermination of Greek populations during the same period. Known as the *Genocide of the Greeks* (*Γενοκτονία των Ελλήνων*, *Genoktonia ton Ellinon*), this term encompasses the atrocities committed against Greeks in the Ottoman Empire from 1914 to 1923.⁵⁷

48 Krystyna Wituska, *Inside a Gestapo Prison: The Letters of Krystyna Wituska, 1942-1944*, tr. and ed. Irene Tomaszewski (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006), xiii.

49 Grzegorz Motyka, “Were the Massacres of Poles in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia in 1943–1945 Genocide? A Discussion about the Legal Classification of the ‘Anti-Polish Operation’ Conducted by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army,” in *Social Engineering in Central and South-East Europe in the Twentieth Century Reconsidered* (Warszawa: Politycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2017), 58.

50 Henry Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau’s Story* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1918), 301.

51 Narek Poghosyan, Հայոց ցեղասպանության խնդիրը Ռաֆայել Լեւոնիկի ուսումնասիրություններում [The Problem of the Armenian Genocide in the Studies of Raphael Lemkin] (Yerevan: AGMI, 2020), 44-45.

52 Jeremy Sarkin, *Colonial Genocide and Reparations Claims in the 21st Century: The Socio-Legal Context of Claims under International Law by the Herero against Germany for Genocide in Namibia, 1904-1908* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2009), 109.

53 WordSense Dictionary, “γένος,” <https://www.wordsense.eu/%CE%B3%CE%AD%CE%BD%CE%BF%CF%82/#Greek>, accessed 08.05.2024.

54 WordSense Dictionary, “κτονία,” <https://www.wordsense.eu/-%CE%BA%CF%84%CE%BF%CE%BD%CE%AF%CE%B1/#Greek>, accessed 09.07.2024.

55 Sevasti Trubeta, *Physical Anthropology, Race and Eugenics in Greece (1880s–1970s)* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), 251.

56 Ibid.

57 “Hellenic (Greek) Genocide,” <https://www.greece.org/genocide/>, accessed 07.06.2024.

These historical uses of terms analogous to “genocide” underscore that the concept of systematic mass murder was recognized well before the coining of the term. Lemkin’s introduction of “genocide” unified these scattered expressions, providing a precise and universal term for the crime that had long been acknowledged in various forms and languages.

The concept of genocide has equivalents also in languages of indigenous peoples. For example, in the Zulu language of South Africa, the term *izwekufa* emerged as early as the 1830s.⁵⁸ From 1810 to 1828, the Zulu Kingdom, under Emperor Shaka Zulu, conducted one of history’s most extensive campaigns of expansion and destruction. Shaka built a formidable military force that ravaged large regions of present-day South Africa and Zimbabwe. By 1828, he ruled over 250,000 people and commanded an army of 40,000 warriors, reportedly responsible for the deaths of up to 2 million people during his reign.⁵⁹ Genocide scholar Adam Jones highlights that the scale of destruction and extermination under Shaka was so vast that relatively little historical evidence remains, with most accounts preserved through the oral traditions of the affected peoples.⁶⁰ Historian Michael Mahoney characterizes Shaka’s actions as genocide, emphasizing that the Zulu military’s objective extended beyond defeating enemies to annihilating them entirely. This included entire armies, prisoners of war, women, children, and even dogs.⁶¹ The term *izwekufa* composed of *izwe* (nation, people, politics) and *ukufa* (death, dying) – was used in the Zulu language to describe Shaka’s campaigns, reflecting the totality of destruction inflicted.⁶²

In the Turkish language, the term for genocide is *soykırımı*, which translates to “racial extermination.”⁶³ However, some Turkish scholars and intellectuals engaged in “discussions about the Armenian Genocide” often prefer the term *kırım* [extermination], removing the ethnic component of *soykırımı*. This approach reduces the interpretation of the events of 1915 to “slaughter” or “massacre,” often employing the term *katliam*, which is roughly equivalent to “pogrom” in meaning. This linguistic choice is used to minimize the systematic and ethnic nature of the atrocities.⁶⁴

Interestingly, in Ottoman Turkish, the term *taktil* (meaning “massacre”) was used during the trials of Young Turk leaders. On July 5, 1919, a military court in Istanbul convicted several leaders of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) in absentia,

58 Jeremy Sarkin, *Colonial Genocide*, 109.

59 “Shaka Zulu and His Deadly Spear,” *Africa Defense Forum*, 31 January 2022, <https://adf-magazine.com/2021/12/shaka-zulu-and-his-deadly-spear/#:~:text=By%201828%2C%20Shaka%20ruled%20250%2C000,genocide%2C%20even%20after%20his%20death>.

60 Adam Jones, *Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 7.

61 Michael R. Mahoney, “The Zulu Kingdom as a Genocidal and Post-genocidal Society, c. 1810 to the Present,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 5, no 2 (2003): 254.

62 Ibid., 255.

63 Tureng multilingual dictionary, <https://tureng.com/en/turkish-english/soykirim>, accessed 02.06.2024.

64 Fatma Müge Göçek, “Turkish Historiography and the Unbearable Weight of 1915,” in *The Armenian Genocide: Cultural and Ethical Legacies*, ed. Richard Hovannisian (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2007), 338.

finding them guilty of *taktil*. Modern Turkish scholars have sometimes translated *taktil* into *soykırım* (“genocide”) to align with contemporary legal and historical interpretations of the crime.⁶⁵

The development of the term “genocide” by Raphael Lemkin also drew upon linguistic traditions of naming crimes, such as “homicide” and “fratricide.”⁶⁶ However, similar terms existed well before Lemkin’s time. During the French Revolution in 1794, Gracchus Babeuf coined terms like “populicide,” “plebiscite,” and even “nationcide” in his book *La Guerre de la Vendée et le système de dépopulation* [The War of the Vendée and the System of Depopulation].⁶⁷ Babeuf analyzed the massacres in Vendée,⁶⁸ describing how troops sent from Paris executed an extermination plan aimed at eradicating the populations of the region.⁶⁹

Thus, while Winston Churchill famously referred to genocide as a “crime without a name,” the reality is that this crime had long been characterized by various terms across languages and cultures. The critical difference, however, was the lack of a unified legal definition. Lemkin’s innovation lay not only in creating the term “genocide” but also in attempting to provide a comprehensive legal framework to define and prosecute this crime. By abandoning his earlier proposals on “barbarism” and “vandalism,” Lemkin synthesized existing concepts describing the murder of peoples and races into the term “genocide,” ensuring its place in both legal and historical discourse.

Conclusion

The formulation of the term “genocide” and its legal definition by Raphael Lemkin was shaped by significant historical and linguistic precedents. Lemkin justified the necessity of creating the term by asserting that such crimes, despite their catastrophic scale and impact, lacked a formal name – a point underscored by Winston Churchill’s 1941 description of genocide as “a crime without a name.” Lemkin’s efforts aimed to bridge this linguistic and legal gap, providing not only a new term but also a comprehensive framework to address these atrocities.

However, historical evidence challenges the idea that genocide was entirely nameless

65 Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 415.

66 James Martin, *The Man Who Invented Genocide: The Public Career and Consequences of Raphael Lemkin* (Torrance: Institute for Historical Review, 1984), 3; Raphael Lemkin, “Genocide - A Modern Crime,” *Free World* 9, no. 4 (1945): 39-43, <http://www.preventgenocide.org/lemkin/freeworld1945.htm>.

67 Stéphane Courtois, “Raphael Lemkin and the Question of Genocide under Communist Regimes,” in *Rafal Lemkin: A Hero of Humankind*, ed. Bienczyk-Missala A. and Sławomir Dębski (Warsaw: The Polish Institute of International Affairs, 2010), 127-128.

68 War in the Vendée was a royalist counter-revolution of 1793-1796 in the Vendée region of France during the French Revolution.

69 Douglas Irvin-Erickson, *Raphael Lemkin and the Concept of Genocide* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 83.

before Lemkin. Various terms describing the systematic destruction of peoples and nations existed across different languages and contexts long before the mid-20th century. For instance, during the Vendée Wars in late 18th-century France, terms like “populicide” and “nationcide” were used to describe the revolutionary government’s actions against the Vendéen population. In German, *Völkermord* had been coined as early as 1831 and was widely used to describe atrocities, including the Armenian Genocide, during World War I. Similarly, terms like *folkmord* in Swedish, *izwekufa* in Zulu, and *ludobójstwo* in Polish reflect a recognition of the crime’s nature, albeit in diverse linguistic and cultural contexts.

Of particular importance is the way the atrocities committed by the Ottoman Empire against the Armenians were characterized. Long before the term “genocide” was introduced, these crimes were described in various languages as the systematic murder of a race or people. For example, the German term *Völkermord* and the Swedish *folkmord* were used explicitly to refer to the Armenian Genocide. In English, expressions like “The Murder of a Nation” appeared in contemporary accounts, such as the writings of U.S. Ambassador Henry Morgenthau. These linguistic examples illustrate that the crime of genocide was not truly nameless but instead lacked a unified legal definition and terminology.

Lemkin’s innovation lay in synthesizing these historical and linguistic precedents into a single, universally recognized term. By coining “genocide,” he provided not only a name but also a legal framework for identifying, condemning, and preventing such crimes. His work built upon centuries of implicit acknowledgment of genocide, transforming a fragmented understanding into a cohesive concept with profound legal and moral significance.

In summary, while Lemkin sought to address the absence of a formal name and legal definition for genocide, the historical record reveals that the phenomenon had already been recognized and described in various languages and contexts. Lemkin’s achievement was not in creating the concept of genocide but in formalizing it and embedding it within international legal discourse, ensuring that such crimes could no longer evade recognition or accountability. His contributions remain a cornerstone in the ongoing global effort to confront and prevent genocide.

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About the Author

Narek M. Poghosyan, PhD in History, is a researcher at the Comparative Genocide Studies Department of the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute Foundation. His research focuses on Raphael Lemkin’s study of the Armenian Genocide, the implications of technological progress on the risks of committing genocide, and the study of other genocides, including those in Bangladesh, Cambodia, East Timor, and the Anfal campaign. His work also extends to comparative genocide studies and the concept of eliticide.

E-mail: poghosyan.narek@genocide-museum.am