

## From the Editor: Lemkin Redux: in quest of a word

When Raphael Lemkin struggled to find an appropriate term to encompass the phenomenon of existential killing, he did so in full knowledge of a range of terms in other European languages, in particular English, French and German. But, for a variety of reasons that can only mostly be guessed, he rejected them all as inappropriate, deciding instead to coin his own term: hence the neologism “genocide.” What he meant precisely by the word is still, over half a century later, cause for heated disputation in both academic and legal circles, despite, perhaps even because of, Lemkin’s voluminous explanatory writings—both published and unpublished—in which he often seemed to change his mind and occasionally even contradict himself.

Lemkin’s challenge was to distinguish between degrees of large-scale killings, of which there are several varieties. One of the oldest terms in the European context is “slaughter,” applied both to the killing of numerous soldiers and civilians. Slaughter usually implied defeat: either by inflicting a crippling blow on an army, or by unleashing a punitive decimation of a non-combatant population after the collapse of resistance. The medieval German “Schlacht”—before it denoted almost exclusively a major battle (regardless of the casualties inflicted)—is the equivalent. In both words the idea of a high number of killing is very visible, but stops short of implying killing on a genocidal scale. In a major battle the military unit, the army, sustaining large human losses, is eliminated; but, significantly, after the slaughter, there are still many survivors, often captured and held as hostages. In a case of outright genocide, all prisoners of war would be killed. The same applies to the civilian population: after the slaughter there were always enough survivors to repopulate the devastated villages and towns. When not—such as in the case of the cataclysmic invasions of the Huns and the Mongols—there was no specific word in the then vocabularies to convey the difference in kind of the mass killings. It is this gap which Lemkin sought to fill with a more nuanced or precise distinction of mass killings.

The concept “mass killing” was already well ensconced in several European languages, in particular in German as “Massenmord” (mass murder). Clearly, killing is a weaker term than murder. The former is more descriptive and implies killings, not necessarily criminal; whereas the latter is accusatory and suggests guilt. But, like slaughter, mass murder only hints at the existential indirectly; one can have both slaughter and mass murder without necessarily crossing into the genocidal zone.

Equally unsatisfactory is the powerful French word “massacre.” Indeed, it was often used by Lemkin during his search for an appropriate term. Massacre contains many of the limitations of slaughter and mass murder. Over the centuries it has been associated, for example, with the 1572 St. Bartholomew Day Catholic plot to expunge all Calvinists from the Kingdom of France. The overt intention was to eliminate the entire Protestant population, but that is not inherently and automatically conveyed by the term massacre. A more radical term was needed with which to label what was actually intended in that instance, namely, extermination.

A solution seemed forthcoming in late nineteenth century German, especially after the 1871 unification, namely, “Völkermord,” literally the wholesale murder of a nation. Völkermord appears with increasing frequency in contemporary turn of the century reports about the German colonial war against the Herero and Nama people. It occurs again half a generation later during World War I in German and Habsburg sources, both official and private, on the Ottoman Empire’s covert campaign to annihilate its Armenian minority.

So why did Lemkin—a seasoned lawyer, fluent in German—not avail himself of the readymade term Völkermord? Is it not synonymous with genocide? Is not genocide a Greco-Latin mirror image of its German counterpart? Was he loathe to rest his work on a German term? Or did Lemkin see a broader range of meaning beyond the parameters of the older German word? Was he implying that the Final Solution—the term Holocaust was still many years away) and other like criminal acts perpetrated by the Nazis—called for a more encompassing term? Was *genos* more adaptable than *Volk*? Was the *Endlösung* “more” than Völkermord? Lemkin dropped a few hints in his sketchy draft of his sadly unfinished *History of Genocide*. In his tortuous quest for the exact word Lemkin has left a specific ongoing legacy, the responsibility to continue probing for the apt vocabulary to deal with genocides and near genocides past, present and future.

These and other gnawing questions about the inner thoughts, writings and public efforts of Raphael Lemkin underlie the articles in this groundbreaking special topic issue of the *Journal of Genocide Research*. It marks a much needed and timely reexamination of this multifaceted and complex warrior against existential killing. No doubt, 50 years hence, there will be a need for a further reassessment of the continued impact of Lemkin. We are grateful for the efforts of the two Guest Editors, Dominik Schaller and Juergen Zimmerer, for compiling and contributing to this special topic issue devoted exclusively to Raphael Lemkin.

### **A sub-note to the Editor’s note; from Editor to Editors**

And with the appearance of this particular issue of JGR—Volume 7(4)—both Schaller and Zimmerer will join this Editor as permanent Senior Editors. Since 1999—the year the *Journal of Genocide Research* was launched—readers have been badgered and cajoled by these introductory editorials. Their purposes

spoke and speak for themselves and need not be rehearsed here. For seven stimulating years, this solo Editor sought to give direction to the still young field of genocide studies. Now he is joined by two colleagues—Dominik Schaller and Jürgen Zimmerer—who will henceforth share the task and pitfalls of writing the editorial notes. I wish them well and thank the readers for their patiently enduring but one persistent voice for seven years.

*HRH*