

Commemoration of the Armenian Genocide and the Polish Jew Who Criminalized It

by Jerry Gordon (May 2015)



People wait to lay flowers at the Tsitsernakaberd Memorial, on April 24, 2015, in Yerevan,
Kirill Kuryavtsev Getty Images

Pope Francis chose Sunday April 12, 2015 to commemorate the 100th Anniversary of the Armenian Genocide by [Young Turks](#) of the waning Ottoman Empire. He called it “the first genocide of the 20th Century.” The AP [reported](#), that Turkish President Erdogan called the Pope’s remarks “hateful “and “unacceptable.” He immediately ordered the recall of their Ambassador to the Holy See and had the Foreign Minister invite in the Papal Ambassador. The AP wrote:

Pope Francis called the slaughter of Armenians by Ottoman Turks “the first genocide of the 20th century” and urged the international community to recognize it as such, sparking a diplomatic rift with Turkey at a delicate time in Christian-Muslim relations.

“The pope’s statement, which is far from historic and legal truths, is unacceptable,” Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu tweeted. “Religious positions are not places where unfounded claims are made and hatred is stirred.”

Francis, who has close ties to the Armenian community from his days in Argentina, defended his pronouncement by saying it was his duty to honor the memory of the innocent men, women and children who were “senselessly” murdered by Ottoman Turks.

“Concealing or denying evil is like allowing a wound to keep bleeding without bandaging it,” he said at the start of a Mass in the Armenian Catholic rite honoring the centenary.

In a subsequent message directed to all Armenians, Francis called on all heads of state and international organizations to recognize the truth of what transpired to prevent such “horrors” from happening again, and to oppose such crimes “without ceding to ambiguity or compromise.”

April 24, 2015, the 100th Anniversary of the Armenian Genocide was commemorated in Erevan, Armenia. More than a dozen world figures attended the solemn ceremony at the imposing memorial on the Tsitsernakaberd plateau overlooking the capital of Erevan and in the distance the country where the mass Jihad occurred, Turkey. At the commemoration, Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan [said](#) “displacement and annihilation” of Armenians in 1915 by Turkey prefigured the genocides that followed in the 20th century, including the Nazi Final Solution, the murder of six million European men, women and children. Further he [said](#):

The Western Part of the Armenian people, who for millenniums had lived in their homeland, in the cradle of their civilization were displaced and annihilated under a state-devised plan. For 100 years we remember and we demand...The Armenian people will always stand by those who suffer crimes against humanity.

The Commemoration and Controversies over the term “Genocide”

Among world figures attending the commemoration were Russian President Putin, French President Hollande and delegations from the US, headed by Treasury Secretary Jack Lew, and from Israel, headed by Labor Knesset Member, Nachman Shai. Shai [said](#):

Israel must reconsider its position on whether the time has come to recognize the fact that an Armenian genocide occurred. As Jews, we must recognize it. This is especially true during these days, when we mark Holocaust Remembrance Day. Participation in the events in Armenia is a clear and strong statement by the Israeli Knesset, which has repeatedly remembered the Armenian victims, that it is obligated to reopen the matter.

Shai’s comments mirrored those of Aris Shirvanian, the archbishop of the Jerusalem Armenian Patriarchate who told [the AP](#) :

We, the Armenians and the Jewish people, have suffered the same fate, and the Armenian genocide has served as a predecessor to the Jewish Holocaust. So Israel should have been actually one of the first countries to support and recognize the Armenian genocide.

The irony of the US and Israel’s presence was that geo-political concerns prevented them from sending more senior officials, as well as use of the term “genocide” in both instances. The US was [concerned](#) about offending Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, while Israel was [concerned](#) about not offending Azerbaijan which is in conflict with Armenia. Further, Israel is in an alliance with Azerbaijan endeavoring to thwart the genocidal ambitions of Iran seeking to wipe Israel off the map of the world. *The New York Times* [drew attention](#) to the

President's official statement on the commemoration that it was "the first mass *atroc*ity of the 20th century," adding that "the Armenian people of the Ottoman Empire were deported, massacred and marched to their deaths." The President's commented that "I have consistently stated my own view of what occurred in 1915, and my view has not changed." President Obama during his first campaign suggested that the US should recognize the Armenian Genocide.

Congress did recognize the Armenian Genocide in a resolution passed on March 18, 2015. The Congressional Resolution [news release](#) pointed out that 20 countries and EU parliament have also done that. New Jersey US Rep. Frank Pallone said, "now is the time for the United States Government to do the moral thing and recognize these atrocities for what they are... genocide." As we shall see later, Obama appointee, Samantha Power, US UN Ambassador, had written extensively about the Armenian and subsequent 20th Century genocides in her book, [A Problem From Hell: America and the Age of Genocide](#). Israeli PM Netanyahu never ceases to use the term "genocide" when speaking of the Iranian threat of annihilation of the Jewish nation should the Islamic Republic achieve nuclear breakout.

That was not the case with both Germany and Austria. Imperial Germany under the Hohenzollerns had called for jihad by the Muslim Ummah during the early period of the First World War when it published articles in the Turkish Press it controlled and had statements read from mosques calling for jihad extermination of infidels, excepting itself and Austria, allies of the Ottoman Empire. That chilling message is recalled in the [memoir](#) by then US Ambassador to Turkey, Henry Morgenthau, Senior, who witnessed the Armenian Genocide.

On April 24th Germany [introduced](#) a resolution recognizing the Turkish 1915-1916 atrocities against its Armenian population as genocide. The resolution is scheduled for a vote this summer. If the resolution passes the Bundestag, where a majority of delegates support it, Turkey, might withdraw its diplomats. A *Wall Street Journal* [report](#) noted both German President Gauck and Norbert Lauck, a Merkel ally and Speaker of the lower house in the Bundestag, described the Armenian ethnic cleansing as "genocide." The [response](#) from the Turkish Foreign Ministry was the "Turkish people will not forget Gauck's remarks, nor forgive them." The Turkish government [entreated](#) Germany to take an "independent and constructive stance on the Armenian genocide in 1915, or it could have "long term negative repercussions" on diplomatic relations. On Wednesday, April 21, 2015, Turkey [withdrew](#) its Ambassador from Austria expressing possible "permanent damage" as its parliament had no qualms about defining what occurred in Turkey in 1915 as genocide.



Erdogan and the Gallipoli Centenary Commemoration

On the same day a centenary commemoration of the failed Allied Gallipoli campaign in 1915 was held at Canakkale, the site of the battlefield. Delegations from the UK, headed by Prince Charles, Australian, Canadian and New Zealand delegation members joined with President Erdogan to honor the war dead. Erdogan said, "Tens of thousands of youths buried their futures in this land." Australian Prime minister Abbott echoed Erdogan's remarks, saying, "the soldiers lying in this soil are our children."

Erdogan's agenda was two-fold: to offset the narrative of the Armenian genocide commemoration and promote the rise of Turkish nationalism following the demise of the Ottoman Empire. That began with founding President Kemal Ataturk's defense of Gallipoli and the expulsion of the Greek population of Smyrna in the [1919-1922 Greco-Turkish War](#) that resulted in the Turkish Republic with the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. It is this "heroic" nationalist theme that Erdogan is promoting for the upcoming June Parliamentary elections.



Dr. Raphael Lemkin picture taken by Arthur Leipzig

Raphael Lemkin, the Polish Jew who Criminalized Genocide

The paradox is that the term "genocide" was defined by a courageous Holocaust survivor and Polish Jew, Raphael Lemkin, who [coined](#) the term genocide in 1943 while in exile in the US. Raphael Lemkin's legacy for humanity is the [UN Genocide Convention](#) passed in November 1948 by the General Assembly, later ratified in 1957. Lemkin was [born](#) in the Vilnius governorate of Imperial Russia in 1900, the son of a farmer and intellectual mother, a poet. As a child he became a linguistic prodigy ultimately learning over 14 languages, proficient in eight of them.

Lemkin [lost](#) 49 family members and relatives in the Shoah. He had foreseen the impending Nazi Holocaust and urged his family to leave pre-WWII Poland. Lemkin was one of the three international legal experts [selected](#) by UN Secretary General Norwegian Trygve Lie, to draft the international genocide law. He considered the Armenian atrocities during WWI as the first genocide in the 20th Century. He [published](#) a dossier on those Young Turk leaders who gave secret orders for the annihilation of 1.5 Armenians in 1915-1916.



Lemkin was motivated as a young law student at the University of Lvov, then in Poland now part

of the Ukraine, when he asked his professor why there was no international law to prosecute the perpetrators of the Armenian atrocities. Lemkin was prompted by the 1921 [assassination](#) of former Ottoman Interior Minister, Pasha Talaat by a young Armenian student in Berlin. Soghomon Tehlirian was an operative of Operation Nemesis, composed of members of their diaspora. The assassin was later exonerated for his action in a trial in Germany. It was in revenge for the Armenian Genocide. Talaat was instrumental in issuing the secret orders for the forced marches and other atrocities carried out by Turkish military and Kurdish auxiliaries that ethnically cleansed Armenian populations throughout the empire. Talaat was also the Turkish signatory in 1920 of the Treaty at Sevres with the wartime allies that ended the Ottoman Empire. See this *New York Times* [review](#) of Eric Bogosian's chronicle of this episode, *Operation Nemesis*.

Following law school, Lemkin was [appointed](#) a public prosecutor in Poland. In 1932, he [collaborated](#) with Professor Malcolm McDermott of Duke University Law School on the English translation of Polish criminal law published by the Duke University Press. McDermott and Lemkin would see each other again in 1936 and 1937 when McDermott had a visiting professorship at universities in Poland. His interest in a possible international law deepened when he submitted the proposal to a 1933 international criminal law conference in Madrid. In his proposal he identified the Armenian "great catastrophe" and the 1933 jihad against the Assyrians at Simele in Iraq as examples of state-sponsored mass killings. The Polish Foreign Ministry did not want to alienate the new Nazi government in Germany, so he was barred from attending the international criminal law conference in Madrid. Lemkin's proposal had identified Hitler's rise in Germany, arguing that if it could happen in Turkey during WWI, then it could happen again. As [noted](#) in a 2013 *Duke Magazine* profile of Lemkin:

His draft law would outlaw "barbarity," meaning "the premeditated destruction of national, racial, religious, and social collectivities," along with "vandalism," referring to the "destruction of works of art and culture, being the expression of the particular genius of these collectivities."

This was prescient in light of the jihads of the Taliban and the Islamic State in the 21st Centuries.

Given the rising anti-Semitism in pre-World War II Poland, Lemkin was [ousted](#) from his prosecutor appointment and took up private law practice in Warsaw. He had warned his family prior to the German invasion of Poland in 1939 to leave. He [joined](#) the Polish Army and was wounded in the defense of Warsaw. He [escaped](#) to Lithuania, despite his train being machine gunned by the Luftwaffe, and eventually made his way to Sweden, where he worked for his former Swedish clients and lectured at the University of Stockholm. There he compiled Nazi edicts

about destruction of captive populations, especially fellow Jews. That material formed the basis of his book published in the US during World War II in 1944, [*Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*](#). In his book, he defined “genocide “from the Greek root of “genos” for race or tribe and the Latin “cide” for killing. Book reviews in both the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* cited Lemkin’s arguments as evidence of the Nazi systematic and purposeful destruction of Jews and others, described as a monster that “gorges itself on blood.”

Through his friendship with [Professor Malcolm McDermott](#), Lemkin obtained sponsorship of a visa that enabled him to come to the US. That [entailed](#) a 10,000 mile journey. He flew from Sweden to Moscow and across Soviet Russia by train to Vladivostok. From there he took a ship to Japan where he stayed briefly learning about the massacres of Catholics over nearly two centuries. He left Yokohama by ship for Vancouver from where he eventually arrived in Seattle. Upon arrival at Duke in April 1941, he [received](#) a lecturer post at the Law School through the auspices of his friend Professor McDermott. In 1942 he left Duke to go to Washington where he became a consultant with Board of Economic Warfare and the Foreign Economic Administration eventually joining the War Department. He documented Nazi evidence of state-sponsored genocide developing the prototype of what ultimate would become the UN Genocide Convention. He pleaded with President Roosevelt for a treaty to make it a war aim to criminalize state-sponsored destruction of a race or ethnic group. In response to Roosevelt’s counsel of “patience,” Lemkin remarked in his biography:

“[W]hen 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?” He saw a “double murder,” one by the Nazis against the Jews and the other by the Allies, who refused to publicize or denounce Hitler’s extermination campaign.

Immediately following the Nazi surrender, he left for Europe to find his family only to learn of his parents and relatives destruction at the hands of the Nazis. Only one brother and his family survived as captives in Soviet Russia during the War. They ultimately came to Montreal. He then became a consultant to Supreme Court Justice Jackson at the Nuremburg Tribunal where he endeavored to create a brief for conviction of Nazi leaders on grounds that they violated international law as perpetrators of state-sponsored mass killings. He returned to the US and received an appointment as a lecturer at Yale Law School. That enabled him to lobby the UN and the NGOs in the America to adopt his proposal for a Genocide Convention. Ultimately, he was enlisted by UN Secretary General Trygve Lie along with two international legal experts to draft the Convention that passed in November 1948. The Convention was ultimately ratified in 1957. Lemkin was nominated four times for a Nobel Peace Prize. He later held a lecturer post at Rutgers Law School. Lemkin died of a heart attack in 1959. While he

has received post-mortem recognition for his efforts, he never was accorded a suitable international honor. Samantha Powers, US UN Ambassador under President Obama accorded recognition of his international law on Genocide in her Pulitzer-Prize winning book, [*A Problem From Hell: America and the Age of Genocide.*](#)



Lemkin Family members with Ambassador Garen Nazarian, Permanent Representative of Armenia at the UN, December 2013

At a gathering of Lemkin relatives at the UN in December 2013 with the Armenian Permanent Representative, Garen Nazarian, an American-Israeli cousin, Benyamin Lemkin, a lawyer like his noted relative, [said:](#)

There is great dissonance between the UN's official proclamations and professed identification with the principles that Raphael Lemkin promoted and the actual course of action the UN takes day-to-day.

I view the UN as a hotbed of anti-Israel activity. The enemies of Israel, these days most notably Iran, pose a genocidal threat to the Jewish state and the Jewish people. We must remember that the Arab countries in previous years, when they thought they were capable of doing so, sought to liquidate the State of Israel and its Jewish residents. Raphael Lemkin himself considered the Arab riots in the 1920s and 1930s against the Jews in the Land of Israel to be genocidal in nature.

If the UN really wished to live up to Raphael Lemkin's legacy, it would be acting forcefully and unambiguously against the regime in Iran, which is in flagrant violation of the Genocide Convention.

There is a CBS interview with the late Dr. Lemkin by commentator Quincy Howe during which Lemkin recognized the Armenian Genocide precedent that influenced Hitler's Holocaust against European Jews saying:

I became interested in genocide because it happened so many times. First to the Armenians, then after the Armenians, Hitler took action.

Watch the 1949 CBS Interview with Dr. Lemkin:

For a chronology of Lemkin's life and bibliography of his publications and biographies see the [Raphael Lemkin Project](#) of the Rutgers Center for the Study of Genocide and Human Rights.

Also see Jerry Gordon's collection of interviews,