



Raphael Lemkin

WHAT IS GENOCIDE?

The word “genocide” did not exist before 1944. Raphael Lemkin, an international lawyer of Polish-Jewish descent, was horrified when Winston Churchill said of the atrocities being committed by the Nazis that, “We are in the presence of a crime without a name.” He was especially horrified that, after the massacres of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during World War I, there still was no word to describe these mass ethnic murders. Lemkin wanted to give a name and legal definition to these unique crimes against humanity so that international law could be written to prevent and punish them. Lemkin created the word “genocide” from Greek and Latin roots – “geno” for a group of people and “cide” for killing. The killing of an identified group of people was to be made punishable by the new international codes being written after World War II, as well as by each country’s domestic law. On Dec. 9, 1948, the “Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide” was adopted by the United Nations. This document officially defined genocide.

According to Article II, “In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group as such:

- a. Killing members of the group;
- b. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- c. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- d. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- e. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”

The Convention entered into force in 1951, and more than 130 nations have ratified it since then. The United States adopted this convention in 1988. The first time the term was applied by the United States government to an action was in 2004 when then-Secretary of State Colin Powell called the actions in the Darfur region of Sudan “genocide”.

The definition of genocide is controversial and many scholars have sought to broaden the identification of groups that have experienced genocide. In the 20th century, a new scholarly field of comparative genocide studies was instituted. One scholar, Dr. Gregory Stanton, president of Genocide Watch, outlined eight stages in genocide. The stages are noted below; a key aspect of this framework is that preventative measures are possible at each stage. A full description of these stages can be found at Genocide Watch’s Web site.

1. CLASSIFICATION (“Us” vs. “Them”)
2. SYMBOLIZATION (names or symbols)
3. DEHUMANIZATION (denying targeted group’s humanity)
4. ORGANIZATION (formal or informal plans)
5. POLARIZATION (remove middle: “with us or against us”)
6. PREPARATION (identify or separate victims)
7. EXTERMINATION (murder of victims)
8. DENIAL (cover up murders or blame the victims)

Some Resources on this Topic

Books:

- “Century of Genocide,” edited by Samuel Totten, *et. al.*
- “Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction,” by Adam Jones
- “Blood and Soil,” by Ben Kiernan
- “The Enough Moment,” by John Prendergast and Don Cheadle

Web sites:

- <http://www.genocideintervention.net/>
- <http://www.standnow.org/>
- <http://www.enoughproject.org/>
- <http://www.genocidewatch.org/>