

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: WHAT IS GENOCIDE?

The term “genocide” did not exist before 1944. It is a very specific term, referring to violent crimes committed with the intent of destroying a population group. Human rights, as laid out in the U.S. Bill of Rights or the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, concern the rights of individuals rather than groups.

In 1944, a Polish-Jewish lawyer named Raphael Lemkin (1900–1959) sought to describe Nazi policies of systematic murder, including the destruction of the European Jews. He formed the word “genocide” by combining geno-, from the Greek word for race or tribe, with -cide, from the Latin word for killing. In proposing this new term, Lemkin had in mind “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.” The next year, the International Military Tribunal held at Nuremberg, Germany, charged top Nazis with “crimes against humanity.” The word “genocide” was included in the indictment, but as a descriptive, not legal, term.



During the 1994 Rwandan genocide at least 500,000 civilians, mostly members of the Tutsi minority, were murdered. The skulls of hundreds of victims rest at Ntarama memorial, one of dozens of churches where Tutsis sought but failed to receive protection.

Ntarama, Rwanda, photographed November 2007
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

On December 9, 1948, in the shadow of the Holocaust and in no small part due to the tireless efforts of Lemkin, the United Nations approved the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. This convention establishes “genocide” as an international crime, which signatory nations “undertake to prevent and punish.” It provides the following definition:

[G]enocide 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.

While many cases of group-targeted violence have occurred throughout history and even since the convention came into effect, the legal and international development of the term is concentrated into two distinct historical periods: the time from the coining of the term until its acceptance as international law (1944–1948) and the time corresponding with the establishment of international criminal tribunals to prosecute the crime of genocide (1991–1998). Preventing genocide, the other major obligation of the convention, remains a challenge that nations and individuals continue to face.

For more information, please visit the Web site of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s Committee on Conscience. The mandate of the Committee on Conscience is to alert the national conscience, influence policymakers, and stimulate worldwide action to halt acts of genocide or related crimes against humanity.