

# The Lemkin Reunion

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**CENTER FOR CONFLICT  
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# “genocide”



Raphael Lemkin is best known as the man who coined the term “genocide.”

After his family was murdered during the Holocaust, he worked tirelessly to make genocide an internationally recognized crime.

## Raphael Lemkin

Lemkin was born in 1900 on a farm on the outskirts of Wolkowysk in eastern Poland (now Belarus). His father was a farmer. Lemkin’s mother was an educated woman who taught him philosophy, languages, and art. By the age of 14, he spoke nine languages.

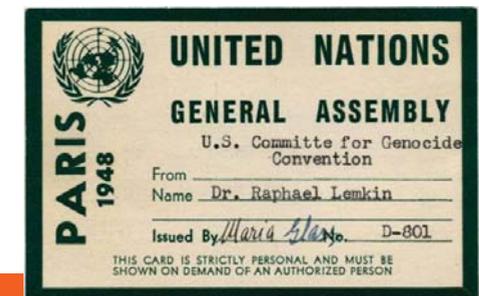
Lemkin became a lawyer and professor in Warsaw, eventually becoming the Public Prosecutor for the district court. By 1933, realizing the threat that the Nazi regime posed, he published papers on mass atrocity crimes, which at the time he called “Crimes of Barbarity.” After the invasion of Poland in 1939, Lemkin joined the Army. A short time later, seeing that the country would be overrun, he fled to neutral Sweden. Later Lemkin was offered a teaching position at Duke University in North Carolina.

Lemkin held several teaching positions before entering public service in Washington, DC serving as a member of the Board of Economic Warfare, and later as a legal advisor to the War Department. In 1944, he wrote *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, which is the first time that the word “genocide” appeared in print. The book described the horrors occurring in Central and Eastern Europe long before they became widely known.

In 1945, Lemkin learned that his parents and 49 other family members had been among the six million Jews murdered during the Holocaust. This knowledge only strengthened his resolve to pursue his campaign to make the crime of genocide punishable under law. He travelled to Nuremberg and convinced the Allied prosecutors to add genocide to the list of indictments against the Nazi command. Following the Nuremberg Trials, Lemkin travelled tirelessly, intent on visiting any city in which the UN Genocide Convention was being discussed. He made his life goal the prevention and protection of people from such atrocities. Thanks in large part to his efforts, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide came into force in 1951.

His task, however, was not finished. With only 20 countries as signatories, Lemkin pushed for further acceptance. Major powers dragged their feet, many in fear of retribution for past events in their own history. The Soviet Union signed in 1954 but Britain (in 1970) and the United States (in 1988) did not sign until after his death.

Lemkin’s entire life was dedicated to the cause of defining and criminalizing genocide. While he never officially worked for the UN, he was a frequent visitor. Guards allowed him to enter the building where he would seek out opportunities to lobby everyone from journalists to ambassadors. With few paid jobs, he still continued to show up at events, with only one thought on his mind. By the late 1950s Lemkin was broke and exhausted. Even then, he continued to push for punishment of past cases of genocide and to raise awareness of the future danger. Lemkin was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize on several occasions, but his work was largely unrecognized during his lifetime. He died in 1959 in New York City. He is now remembered as one of the key figures in the fight to prevent genocide and atrocity crimes.



# “crime without a name”

“Genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation, except when accomplished by mass killings of all members of a nation. It is intended rather to signify 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.”

—Raphael Lemkin

Raphael Lemkin gave us the word for what Winston Churchill called a “crime without a name.” Not only did he coin the term “genocide” by combining the Greek *genos* (“race, people”) and Latin *cīdere* (“to kill”), he also tirelessly worked to ensure that international legal instruments were put in place to prevent and punish genocide. Lemkin responded to the barbarism of his time by drafting the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and lobbied persistently for its ratification.

Henryk Sienkiewicz’s novel, *Quo Vadis*, on Nero’s persecution of early Christians in Rome had a lasting effect on Lemkin’s thinking and career. Long before the Holocaust, it pushed him to embark on a lifelong study of the intentional killing of other groups of people and to believe that international legal instruments could prevent such tragedies.

After his career was interrupted by the Second World War, Lemkin began to study the laws of the German occupation of his native Poland. He was the first scholar to understand the racial aspect of this jurisprudence and to recognize that extermination—the systematic, well organized destruction of an entire people—was at the heart of the program.

In 1946, Lemkin urged the United Nations to adopt a treaty on genocide making it a crime in international law. Unsupported by most governments and with the assistance of only a few individuals, Lemkin nonetheless continued to work to persuade the newly established world body to adopt a resolution on genocide, which the General Assembly did on December 11, 1946. The resolution affirmed that genocide was a crime under international law and directed member states and the Social and Economic Council to draft a treaty to be presented to member states for ratification. From 1947 to 1948, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide was drafted with Lemkin’s consultation.

The draft was presented to the General Assembly and unanimously adopted on December 9, 1948. Genocide, referring to the physical destruction of national, ethnic, racial or religious groups, in times of peace or in times of war, became recognized in international law. Action against an entire or a significant portion of a group of people were both classified as genocide. Perpetrators had to be tried in courts of the state where the crimes took place. At the same time, the groundwork was laid for a future international criminal tribunal.





# Watchers of the Sky

WATCHERS OF THE SKY interweaves four stories of remarkable courage, compassion, and determination, while setting out to uncover the forgotten life of Raphael Lemkin—the man who created the word “genocide,” and believed the law could protect the world from mass atrocities. Inspired by Samantha Power’s Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *A Problem From Hell*, WATCHERS OF THE SKY takes you on a provocative journey from Nuremberg to The Hague, from Bosnia to Darfur, from criminality to justice, and from apathy to action.

Lemkin’s struggle, however, was not over. Although officially adopted by the United Nations, the Convention had to be ratified by 20 nation states. From the moment of its adoption, Lemkin devoted himself to ensuring its ratification. By 1951, 25 nation states had ratified the treaty, and the Convention was officially introduced into international law. Since then, the

Convention has been ratified by a total of 140 countries.

Lemkin was disappointed that his adopted country, the United States, was not among the first to ratify the Convention. The intensifying atmosphere of the Cold War, anti-UN sentiment in the United States, and the emergence of a civil rights movement that accused the US government of genocide against its own

black population blocked ratification.

Lemkin worried that the failure of the United States to ratify the Convention would make it a much less effective instrument. His fears proved to be well-founded. Because the United States did not ratify the Convention, there was no great power to enforce it before the international criminal tribunals for the former

Yugoslavia and Rwanda. It was not until 1998 that the Rome Statute was adopted leading to the establishment of the International Criminal Court to implement the Convention.

Lemkin’s legacy lives on. Although we have not seen an end to genocides or atrocity crimes, it is in large part because of his efforts that international laws exist. The task of today’s activists is to pressure politicians to respect and use these laws as a means to prevent and punish genocide.

“genos/cidere”

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## The Rwandan Genocide

**In just 100 days from April 7 to mid-July, 1994, an estimated 800,000 Rwandans were slaughtered. The genocide, which was planned by members of the political elite, was carried out by individuals from the Rwandan Army, the National Police, the government-backed Interahamwe militias, and the Hutu civilian population. It targeted Tutsi and moderate Hutus of all ages.**

Rwanda's population was made up of Hutus (approximately 85%), Tutsi (14%), and Twa (1%). A Tutsi monarchy that had been favored by colonial rulers was overthrown in 1959. A group of Tutsi exiles formed the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and eventually amassed sufficient strength to launch an invasion from Uganda in 1990. The civil war continued until a cease-fire in 1993. Hutu extremists within Rwanda's political elite blamed the Tutsi minority population for the country's increasing social, economic, and political problems and accused Tutsi civilians of supporting the RPF. President

Juvénal Habyarimana used propaganda and skillful political maneuvers to exacerbate divisions between Hutu and Tutsi. The Hutu remembered past years of oppressive Tutsi rule. Many Hutus also resented and feared them.

The genocide began the day after the plane carrying President Habyarimana was shot down on April 6, 1994. Soldiers, police, and militias quickly executed key Tutsi and moderate Hutu leaders, then erected checkpoints where they checked Rwandans' national identity cards to identify and kill Tutsis.

“to kill”



# “race, people”

“We tried to run together in small teams, to inspire courage in one another. He who was surprised in an ambush, was killed; he who twisted his ankle, was killed; he who was caught by fever or diarrhea, was killed. Every evening, the forest was strewn with dozens of the dead and dying.”

—I. Rwililiza, survivor

These forces recruited or pressured Hutu civilians to arm themselves and kill their Tutsi neighbors and destroy or steal their property. Hutu radio stations and newspapers broadcasted hate propaganda against Tutsis inciting Hutus to kill them. Women were often brutally raped before being killed. Many were encouraged to take refuge in churches, schools, and hospitals but were then killed.

The civil war and genocide only ended when the RPF captured Kigali in mid-July. About two million Hutus, including civilians and those involved in the mass killings, fled to neighboring countries, particularly to the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of

Congo (DRC, then known as Zaire) fearing revenge. The genocide in Rwanda led to two decades of unrest in the DRC. Rwandan forces invaded the DRC twice accusing it of supporting the Hutus leading to the First (1996–97) and Second (1998–2003) Congo Wars. Large Rwandan Hutu and Tutsi populations continue to live as refugees throughout the region.

Although the United Nations knew about plans for a genocide in advance, it did little in response. The United States, which had recently intervened in Somalia, was reluctant to engage; the United Kingdom and Belgium also opposed any action. France was accused of supporting the Hutu regime even after the genocide had begun.

In November 1994, the United Nations established the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) to prosecute individuals charged with genocide and other serious violations of international humanitarian law committed in the territory of Rwanda as well as Rwandan citizens responsible for similar crimes committed in neighboring states between January 1 and December 31, 1994. As of mid-May 2014, the ICTR has indicted 95 individuals.

“The first day, a messenger from the municipal judge went house to house summoning us to a meeting right away. There the judge announced that the reason for the meeting was the killing of every Tutsi without exception. It was simply said, and it was simple to understand.”

—From *A time for machetes. The killers speak.*

By Jean Hatzfeld Pancrease



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