

AVİM
AVRASYA İNCELEMELERİ MERKEZİ
CENTER FOR EURASIAN STUDIES

THE LEMKIN HOLE IN THE SWISS CASE

Tal BUENOS

Blog No: 23
31.07.2014

Tal BUENOS

Daily Sabah; August 1, 2014

"When Raphael Lemkin coined the word genocide in 1944 he cited the annihilation of Armenians as a seminal example of genocide." This is an entirely false statement as Lemkin did not mention Armenians even once.

One name is found at the center of the Swiss case for a review of Perinçek v. Switzerland in the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR): Raphael Lemkin. Lemkin is at the heart of the Swiss claim that the ECHR decision in December 2013 creates artificial distinctions, specifically between the Holocaust and the Armenian tragedy. The distinction between the two sets of events is relevant because the Swiss government is seeking to justify the decision of its Federal Court by pointing out that if Holocaust denial is a crime, then so should there be a reconsideration of the ECHR's ruling against the Swiss decision that Doğu Perinçek was guilty of a crime for rejecting the term genocide as descriptive of the Armenian tragedy.

Through reference to Lemkin - or, more accurately, the popularized unscholarly narrative on the man - the government of Switzerland is hoping to establish in the ECHR's Grand Chamber, for the appeasement of Armenian pressure and to the delight of anti-Turkish institutions in the West, that one man's application of the term genocide somehow blurs the recognizable differences between the Holocaust and the Ottoman reaction to Armenian rebellion in World War I.

According to the Swiss government, "The present case is the first case which concerns the massacres and deportations ☀ that Raphael Lemkin had in mind when he coined the term genocide." Furthermore, it notes as significant that "four of the seven judges of the Chamber stressed that Raphael Lemkin had precisely in mind the massacres and deportations of 1915 when he coined the term genocide," as if to suggest that the narrative on Lemkin somehow makes up for there having been no recognition of genocide by an international court in the Armenian case.

The following questions beg to be asked: How is it that European judges and officials express themselves so confidently about what Lemkin had in his mind in 1944? How much difference would it make to learn the actual facts about Lemkin's life-story?

Although he came to fame as an American and died an American, Lemkin is commonly described by the narrators of the genocide story as a Polish Jew, which gives his character a sense of internationality and dissociation from great power interests. According to some secondary sources he was born in 1900 and according to others in 1901. His birth town of Biazvodna in the vicinity of Vawkavysk was a territory of Imperial Russia that went under German occupation during World War I. Meaning, in addition to not being an Ottoman historian at any point in his life, as World War I broke out in 1914, Lemkin was merely a teenager in a rural area in today's Belarus and likely received distorted information on Armenians, Turks, and the war, through channels of Russian propaganda filled with hatred of Turks. Nevertheless, due to existing political influences, there are in the West, textbooks in which young Lemkin's impressions of World War I and Armenian suffering have the capacity to overshadow academic analysis of the complex political developments that explain the nature of the Turkish-Armenian conflict.

The spotlight on an image of one individual, Lemkin, is designed to give the appearance that the term genocide and its use were the authentic hand-made creation of a morally committed Jew, thereby leaving in darkness any discussion on the political origin and utilization of the term, and in particular the political advantages gained by establishing an artificial connection between Armenian and Jewish suffering.

While there are thousands of references to how genocide was "coined" by Lemkin in a book that he published in 1944, "Axis Rule in Occupied Europe," the actual big-name publisher of the book is typically either omitted or downplayed: the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Who was Andrew Carnegie? For a time, he was the richest man in the world. He made his wealth thanks to the booming steel industry, and during a long period of retirement between the 1880s and World War I he invested a huge amount of money in trust funds

that were aimed at changing global politics through a number of organizations. Being a Scottish-born American - and a close friend of Britain's most prominent politician, William Gladstone, and main organizer of the Armenian rebellion, James Bryce - he endeavored to use his money to establish an Anglo-American control of the international economy by employing "peace" as a mechanism to halt any other power's growing ambitions.

In 1898, Carnegie wrote that the Anglo-American nation "would dominate the world and banish from the earth its greatest stain - the murder of men by men ☀ Such a giant among pigmies as the British-American Union would never need to exert its power, but only to intimate its wishes and decisions." To him, this was Britain's only chance to maintain a status quo that is favorable to its imperial success: "The only course for Britain seems to be reunion with her giant child, or sure decline to a secondary place..."

It was in Carnegie's mind, surely not Lemkin's, where the blueprint for laws of international peace were first drawn, and it was meant to extend imperial dominance; it was Carnegie's fortune that built the Peace Palace "so nations shall appeal to the Court at the Hague."

Who set up, and was the first to lead, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in 1910? Unites States Senator, Elihu Root, a former secretary of war and secretary of state, whose idea it was that Carnegie create trusts for political and educational organizations, which would have an unprecedented influence on international politics. When "Axis Rule in Occupied Europe" came out under Lemkin's name, the head of the endowment's International Law Division was George A. Finch, who started off as a State Department employee. In the book, Lemkin thanks Eleanor Lansing Dulles, a career State Department woman, who at the time served as an economic officer in the Division of Postwar Planning, and whose brothers were Allen Dulles, director of the Central Intelligence Agency from 1953 to 1961, and John Foster Dulles, the chairman of the board for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace before serving as secretary of state under Dwight Eisenhower. Another person thanked by Lemkin is Florence J. Harriman, who served as the U.S. ambassador to Norway, and moved to Sweden following the German invasion in 1940. She may have been the liaison who facilitated Lemkin's move from Stockholm to America in 1941.

Robert R. Wilson, an advisor to the State Department, was also thanked by Lemkin in the book. Wilson was a recipient of the Carnegie fellowship in international law until earning his Ph.D. at Harvard University. When Lemkin first arrived in the U.S., he was offered a position at Duke University where Wilson was the chair of the department of political science. Already in 1939, five years before "Axis Rule," Wilson wrote in detail on the same topic of post-war reclamation in consideration of Germany's foul wartime conduct in Carnegie and Root's American Journal of International Law, stating that: "The taking of drastic measures against individuals as a matter of policy in certain countries, whether for reasons of racial origin or other motives, raises a new questions of the possible significance of these developments from the standpoint of international law."

Lemkin's book simply echoed the writings of this distinguished government-affiliated professor who guided him into full-time employment by the U.S. government in 1942.

Are we to believe that, despite this overwhelming association with professional policy-makers in the foreign affairs of the U.S. government, the book "Axis Rule" and the term genocide are in fact Lemkin's? Any reasonable person who has ever bothered to read through the book would be of the opinion that this is the work of several native speakers of English, and not the work of one foreigner who did not live in an English-speaking country until his 40s. Oddly, even an article written in perfect English under Lemkin's name in 1942, a mere year after his emigration to the U.S., - "The Treatment of Young Offenders in Continental Europe," in Law and Contemporary Problems - does not credit anyone for translating, proof-reading, or editing the work. It seems that Lemkin's real value lied in his image as a Polish Jew, for such a figurehead must have added much credibility to the Anglo-American campaign to establish international law according to Carnegie's vision.

Lemkin began his government work as a chief consultant on the U.S. Board of Economic Warfare and Foreign Economic Administration before transitioning into being an eminent government lawyer who held offices in the Pentagon and the War Department. For this he received an annual salary, which today would near six figures in U.S. dollars. After parting ways with the U.S. government in 1947, he took a position at Yale in 1948 and helped pass the United Nations Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide.

In the 1950s, during a time of personal desperation marked by an unpublished autobiography, Lemkin became isolated from the government in his efforts to apply "genocide" around the world - such as calling the potato famine in Ireland a genocide - and reportedly became obsessed with its promotion as it became attached to his own name and reputation. It was during this time that he received interest and support from Christian groups. In return, he began to condemn as genocide the past treatment of Christian Armenians by the Ottoman state and Christian Koreans by Japan in order to find favor with nongovernment Christian lobbies of missionary agendas and enhance his legacy in this manner. In this state of mind, he claimed that he always had the Armenians in mind.

Yair Auron of the Open University in Tel Aviv is often quoted for stating that "When Raphael Lemkin coined the word genocide in 1944 he cited the annihilation of Armenians as a seminal example of genocide." This is not even a half-truth, but an entirely false statement: The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace publication under Lemkin's name in 1944 did not mention Armenians even once. If the honorable European judges in the Grand Chamber elect to structure their decision on the fables of promoters of genocide scholarship such as Auron - who suddenly began to write profusely on the Armenian issue in the 1990s, 15 years after the completion of his doctoral dissertation on a completely different topic of Jewish youths in France - then there should be a much publicized questioning of their intellectual integrity.

The Lemkin hole in the Swiss case is an important reflector of an overall imprudent

statement by the Swiss government that the distinction between the Holocaust and the Armenian tragedy is "questionable." The suffering of many Armenian communities is known as tragic because of the sense of inevitability brought about by the persistent attempts of the Entente and the irresponsible nationalist leaders of the Armenian people to utterly destroy the Ottoman state. For the European judges at the ECHR's Grand Chamber to say that there is no distinction between the German Jewish leaders during the Holocaust and the Ottoman Armenian revolutionaries in World War I would be inaccurate, insensitive, and, quite frankly, unnecessary.

The story of genocide is not Lemkin's own story, and it must find itself a new symbol, which shall no longer project inaccuracies that conceal its real roots in powerful political minds. Only then, may the context of the Armenian pressure in the U.S. and Europe be revealed.

* *University of Utah*

http://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/2014/08/01/the-lemkin-hole-in-the-swiss-case

About the author:

To cite this article: Tal BUENOS. 2026. "THE LEMKIN HOLE IN THE SWISS CASE." Center For Eurasian Studies (AVİM), Blog No.2014 / 23. July 31. Accessed October 31, 2026. https://avim.org.tr/public/Blog/THE-LEMKIN-HOLE-IN-THE-SWISS-CASE

Süleyman Nazif Sok. No: 12/B Daire 3-4 06550 Çankaya-ANKARA / TÜRKİYE
Tel: +90 (312) 438 50 23-24 • **Fax**: +90 (312) 438 50 26
@avimorgtr
https://www.facebook.com/avrasyaincelemelerimerkezi
E-Posta: info@avim.org.tr
http://avim.org.tr

© 2009-2025 Avrasya İncelemeleri Merkezi (AVİM) Tüm Hakları Saklıdır