

Bernard Lewis, Abe Foxman, Genocide, and `Genocide'

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by Daniel Koffler, November 12, 2007

The concept `genocide' picks out does not merely encompass its archetypal instance, the Holocaust, but any acts of a relevantly similar nature that are to be absolutely forbidden among civilized nations.

If you follow the Wikipedia article on Lemkin, you'll see that his struggle to have an international law banning genocide began in earnest in 1933, well before the Nazi attempt to exterminate the Jewish people had begun. In fact, the connection between Lemkin's conceptual invention and the crime Ottoman Turkey perpetrated against its Armenian population is not merely theoretical; the Armenian genocide and its aftermath were Lemkin's direct inspiration. As Samantha Power recounts in her excellent book *A Problem from Hell*, in March 1921, in a pleasant neighborhood of Berlin, Soghomon Tehlirian, a young Armenian man whose family had been slaughtered by the Turks and who had been conscripted into a revanchist band of assassins, gunned down Mehmed Talaat, the former Ottoman Minister of the Interior who oversaw the murder of one million Armenians and acted as the Turkish government's principal obfuscator on the international stage.

Lemkin, a linguistics student at the University of Lvov, read about Talaat's assassination and the events surrounding it in a newspaper. I'll let Power take over:

Lemkin was intrigued and brought the case to the attention of one of his professors. Lemkin asked why the Armenians did not have Talaat arrested for the massacre. The professor said there was no law under which he could be arrested. "Consider the case of a farmer who owns a flock of chickens," he said. "He kills them and this is his business. If you interfere, you are trespassing."

"It is a crime for Tehlirian to kill a man, but it is not a crime for his oppressor to kill more than a million men?" Lemkin asked. "This is most inconsistent."

Lemkin was appalled that the banner of "state sovereignty" could shield men who tried to wipe out an entire minority. "Sovereignty," Lemkin argued to the professor, "implies conducting an independent foreign and internal policy...Sovereignty cannot be conceived as the right to kill millions of innocent people...."

Lemkin was torn about how to judge Tehlirian's act. On the one hand, Lemkin credited the Armenian with upholding the "moral order of mankind" and drawing the world's attention to the Turkish slaughter. Tehlirian's case had quickly turned into an informal trial of the deceased Talaat for his crimes against the Armenians; the witnesses and written evidence introduced in Tehlirian's defense brought the Ottoman horrors to their fullest light to date. The *New York Times* wrote that the documents introduced in the trial "established once and for all the

fact that the purpose of the Turkish authorities was not deportation but annihilation" [attn: Bernard Lewis - DK]. But Lemkin was uncomfortable that Tehlirian...had acted as the "self-appointed legal officer for the conscience of mankind." Passion, he knew, would often make a travesty of justice. Impunity for mass murderers like Talaat had to end; retribution had to be legalized.

The ironies here are numerous, and one I'll mention just in passing is that while the New York Times was not under any illusions about the nature of the Turkish atrocities as far back as 1921, the establishment press of 2007, following conventions of supposed objectivity that in general do more to throttle truth than disseminate it, can't quite seem to figure out what the fact of the matter is regarding the Armenian genocide.

The bottom line, pace Bernard Lewis, is that the crime of genocide was originally conceived to describe what Turkey did to the Armenians. Just as it is a priori that a meter stick is one meter long, so it is a priori that the Turkish mass-murder of Armenians was genocide, and a denial of this fact is not merely an expression of ignorance, and not even, strictly speaking, false. To say "there was no Armenian genocide" amounts to what the logical positivists called *vocus flatus*, a syntactical and seemingly articulate string of symbols that nevertheless is literally meaningless, due, in this case, to its containing an analytic inconsistency. "There was no Armenian genocide" is not a false sentence because it is not even a sentence. It's like trying (and failing) to refer to "the married bachelor."

One further irony that deserves notice is the role of Jews in alerting the world to what the Turks had done to the Armenians long before the Jews themselves were victims of a genocide, and how the profiles of Lemkin and others compare with cravenness of Abe Foxman and the ADL. Lemkin was not the first nor the most prominent Jew to assume the plight of the Armenians as his own. Henry Morgenthau, an emigrant from Germany to the US, was ambassador to Ottoman Turkey during the First World War, who began to plead with his superiors to come to the aid of the Armenians as early as February 1915. "There seems to be," Morgenthau wrote to Washington, "a systematic plan to crush the Armenian race." Power again:

Local witnesses urged [Morgenthau] to invoke the moral power of the United States. Otherwise, he was told, "the whole Armenian nation would disappear." The ambassador did what he could, continuing to send blistering cables back to Washington and raising the matter at virtually every meeting he held with Talaat. He found his exchanges with the interior minister infuriating. Once, when the ambassador introduced eyewitness reports of slaughter, Talaat snapped back: "Why are you so interested in the Armenians anyway? You are a Jew, these people are Christians...What have you to complain of? Why can't you let us do with these Christians as we please?" Morgenthau replied, "You don't seem to realize that I am not here as a Jew but as the American Ambassador...I do not appeal to you in the name of any race or religion but merely as a human being."

Morgenthau's efforts cast the issue rather starkly, I think. If the Anti-Defamation League cannot call genocide 'genocide', for fear that

to do so is impolitic, then the Anti-Defamation League does not need to exist. At the very least, Abraham Foxman and whichever other ADL officers are responsible for the organization's behavior on this matter should resign, not just from the ADL, but from public life entirely; whatever moral stature the ADL retains depends upon them doing so.

Lastly, we should not forget that Morgenthau's response to the Turkish Eichmann --- for once the comparison is apt --- was an American, not a Jewish response. Morgenthau was begged to "invoke the moral power of the United States"; if the government of the United States cannot be bothered to state the truth simply and forthrightly, then it has no such moral power.