

Abstract

This paper addresses the reality of the term genocide as created by Raphael Lemkin and adopted by the United Nations. Introduced in order to address the atrocities that were committed by the Nazi party during World War Two, the word genocide has overwhelmingly failed to capture the uniquely horrific nature of each individual atrocity that has been determined to constitute genocide. However, it is through comparison and further study of these atrocities through the framework established by the word genocide that genocide finds its true meaning in my eyes. This paper argues that one word has failed to properly encompass all that has occurred within an atrocity that has been determined to constitute a genocide. However, the study of past and present atrocities determined to be genocide within the study associated with this word results in genocide being a powerful tool. This enables us as a society to learn, grow, and change in order to properly address or avoid similar atrocities in the present or future.

When the word genocide is mentioned, most people likely think about the Holocaust. In truth, the word genocide owes its origins to the Holocaust itself. Dr. Raphael Lemkin, the creator of the word genocide, was a Polish Jew who faced the terrors of the Holocaust firsthand. As written in a brief biographical sketch of Lemkin, “It was in Axis Rule that the term ‘genocide’ first appeared in print. Dr. Lemkin coined the phrase after hearing Winston Churchill refer to Nazi atrocities as ‘a crime without a name.’”¹ This idea of a crime without a name inspired Lemkin to give a name to his own suffering, something he would present to the United Nations.

¹ Gilkerson, Christopher. *Raphael Lemkin A Brief Biographical Sketch*. Yale Law School, 1989.

When the United Nations finally adopted the term genocide, after constant pressure from Rafael Lemkin in the wake of World War II, they sought to create a term that properly encompassed the events of the Holocaust. Lemkin was searching for one word that could convey the true horrors of one of the most devastating atrocities to ever occur in human history. Raphael Lemkin sought to bring justice for his people. He wanted to give a voice to the voiceless, so that those who had suffered and had lives ripped away would never be forgotten. However, despite his best efforts, Lemkin failed to create a term that could be applied to future atrocities while still properly addressing the horrific events that were occurring within these atrocities. The faults of the term genocide can be seen most clearly through the faults in the study of comparing genocides. Many scholars contend that genocide comparison limits the ability to properly analyze and learn from past atrocities as the word genocide provides little consideration for the unique circumstances and happenings of each individual atrocity. Yet it is in contrast to this belief that I find what the word genocide truly means to me. The strength of the word Genocide lies not in its ability to properly address the events of a particular atrocity, but in the space it provides for study of atrocities within the context of similar atrocities, while acknowledging that each atrocity is unique.

The difficulties in determining a word to properly encompass all that occurred within the Holocaust was a uniquely difficult task. As written in the article *An Unfulfilled Promise: The Genocide Convention and the Obligation of Prevention* by Zachary Karazsia,

The United Nations drafted the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide... in the aftermath of near universal recognition that Adolph Hitler's Nazi Germany attempted to systematically exterminate the Jewish population and other

minority, so-called, “pariah” groups in Nazi occupied lands during the Second World War.²

This passage alludes to the nature of the Holocaust and the truly horrific events that took place. It positions the creation of the word genocide within this context, showing that while it was made to address all similar atrocities, it was also a direct response to the Holocaust itself. This resulted in an, “...elastic definition of genocide...”³ being created. While Lemkin and the United Nations were able to ensure that this definition would address the legal aspects of what had occurred during the Holocaust, it would become increasingly clear that the definition was deeply flawed when attempting to apply it to other atrocities. This is made evident through Clemantine Wamariya’s views on genocide and genocide comparison as displayed in *The Girl Who Cried Beads*, as well as through Wamariya’s explored connection to the text of Elie Wiesel’s *Night*.

Wamariya falls firmly in the camp of those who dislike the term genocide and feel it is severely lacking. According to Wamariya, the word genocide fails to properly encompass and address the happenings and atrocities that have occurred during events labeled as genocide. She explains, “The word genocide cannot articulate the one-person experience – the real experience of each of the millions it purports to describe. The experience of the child playing dead in a pool of his father’s blood. The experience of a mother forever wailing on her knees. The word genocide cannot explain the never-ending pain, even if you live.”⁴ The word genocide is lacking when it comes to providing a complete description of what truly occurs during and what

² Karazsia, Zachary A. “An Unfulfilled Promise: The Genocide Convention and the Obligation of Prevention.” *Journal of Strategic Security*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2018, pp. 20–31. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26627191>. Accessed 16 Feb. 2024.

³ Karazsia, Zachary A. “An Unfulfilled Promise: The Genocide Convention and the Obligation of Prevention.” *Journal of Strategic Security*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2018, pp. 20–31. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26627191>. Accessed 16 Feb. 2024.

⁴ Wamariya, Clemantine, and Elizabeth Weil. *The Girl Who Smiled Beads: A Story of War and What Comes After*. First edition. New York, Crown, 2018.

individuals experience as a result of atrocities that have been labeled as genocide. The result is that the term genocide feels clinical and lacking the proper emotion needed to properly address these atrocities. This is the major factor fueling many such as Wamariya, to dislike and distrust systems of comparing genocides.

It is the view of Wamariya and like-minded individuals that the comparison of genocides relies too heavily on viewing atrocities through the lens of what a genocide is traditionally viewed as. There are many events that are traditionally called genocide, but every situation isn't the same. Labels and numbers cannot completely describe and acknowledge what people faced. Wamariya explains,

There's no label to peel and stick that absolves you, shows you've done your duty, you've completed the moral project of remembering. This-Rwanda, my life-is a different, specific, personal tragedy, just as each of those horrors was a different, specific, personal tragedy, and inside all those tidily labeled boxes are 6 million, or 1.7 million, or 100,000, or 100 billion lives destroyed.⁵

When you compare genocide, you generalize and remove the victims from the experience and reduce them to statistics. This can cause people to think a genocide is worse or more of a toll on humanity than others, invalidating the victims further and worsening their pain. This would suggest that Wamariya feels that comparison of genocide, much like the term genocide itself, overgeneralizes and sanitizes the experiences dealt with by individual victims. However, the comparisons that are drawn between Wiesel's experiences during the Holocaust and her own

⁵ Wamariya, Clemantine, and Elizabeth Weil. *The Girl Who Smiled Beads: A Story of War and What Comes After*. First edition. New York, Crown, 2018.

during the Rwandan Genocide help to present a way in which comparison can be useful while still accounting for the individual experiences of victims.

In order to properly understand the most useful framework of comparison for events labeled as genocides, and how Wamariya implements it within *The Girl Who Smiled Beads*, it is important to introduce the context and content of Elie Wiesel's *Night*. Wiesel was a teenager during the outbreak of World War II and the Holocaust. In his book, *Night*, Wiesel chronicles his life throughout this period, including being sent to Auschwitz, subsequently being sent to Buchenwald, the death of his father, and his eventual liberation. He experiences a tremendous amount of suffering and heartbreak during this period, with many of his experiences being unique to those who fell victim to the Holocaust. One of the most unique experiences is seen only after his father eventually passes away. Wiesel writes, "I did not weep, and it pained me that I could not weep. But I was out of tears. And deep inside me, if I could have searched the recesses of my feeble conscience, I might have found something like: Free at last".⁶ This experience, and the feelings associated with it, reflect the unique circumstances of the Holocaust. They could not have manifested the same way under different circumstances. Throughout his book, Wiesel experiences a number of these unique moments, with many destroying parts of who he is. He ends his book by describing himself looking into a mirror for the first time after being liberated. He writes, "From the depths of the mirror, a corpse was contemplating me. The look in his eyes as he gazed at me has never left me."⁷ This presents the Holocaust as an event that not only tortured Wiesel, but destroyed everything that he was until he was unrecognizable. These events, and the effects they had on Wiesel and those who experiences them, are strictly unique

⁶ Wiesel, Elie, and Marion Wiesel. *Night*. Hill and Wang, 2006.

⁷ Wiesel, Elie, and Marion Wiesel. *Night*. Hill and Wang, 2006.

and cannot be properly summed up with a single term, such as genocide. However, despite this, and despite her stated dislike and distrust of genocide comparison, Wamariya finds a large amount of connection to the experiences of Wiesel.

In her book, *The Girl Who Smiled Beads*, Clemantine Wamariya describes her experience throughout the Rwandan Genocide, from fleeing Rwanda with her older sister, finding her way throughout African countries and refugee camps, and eventually making it to the United States. Throughout the book, Wamariya attempts to grapple with and keep her life together while dealing with a myriad of unique struggles and horrors as a result of the Rwandan Genocide and its lasting impact on her life. Despite the unique nature of her experiences, she finds a great deal of value within her book in comparing her experiences with those of Elie Wiesel. While still struggling to reconcile her past and who she is in a world after the Rwandan Genocide, she finds *Night* by Elie Wiesel. She finds much of what she had been searching for within the pages and through comparison with her own experiences. This allows her an avenue to explore her emotions, her trauma, and the way these might shape her interactions with the rest of the world. She writes that *Night*, "comforted me ... The main character was not a curiosity, not a member of that strange category—'martyr'. Wiesel was white, European, male, and Jewish. Wiesel was me. He expressed thoughts I was ashamed to think, truths I was afraid to acknowledge."⁸ This comparison and connection to the words and experiences of Wiesel is extremely powerful for Wamariya. For the first time, she sees herself within another's experience. While their experiences were largely unique and they might be very different individuals, there was common ground between them that Wamariya could see and identify with. She writes, "He described

⁸ Wamariya, Clemantine, and Elizabeth Weil. *The Girl Who Smiled Beads: A Story of War and What Comes After*. First edition. New York, Crown, 2018.

walking in the snow-the cold, the mouthfuls of bread and the spoonfuls of snow, an injured frozen foot that felt like it was no longer his.”⁹ Despite their differences, Wamariya is able to see that they are largely similar through this comparison. This brings her reassurance and helps her to deal with the emotions and thoughts that had plagued her for years, with no clear outlet or method to acknowledge them. This connection brings her comfort in that it not only teaches her ways to confront her own emotions, but it shows that she is not alone and that there are others that may share similar emotions and trauma but continue to move forward.

While it may seem contradictory for Wamariya to both be against genocide comparison and believe strongly in the value of comparing her own experiences with those of Wiesel, it is important to note the differences in the framework that Wamariya applies. Comparison of genocide often relies on assumptions of what genocide is based on its definition instead of thorough analysis of an event. This leads to a clear lack of acknowledgement of the unique circumstances and atrocities within a particular genocide. However, if events that are normally labeled as genocides are compared in the absence of assumptions of what they are like and instead based on the unique circumstances and experiences present, there is a great deal of value that can be extracted. This value could come in the form of comfort for victims such as Wamariya finding comparison to the experiences of other victims validating and relatable. These comparisons could also broaden the global view on what constitutes a genocide and who this matters to. Wamariya speaks on this by saying, "All those countries that ended World War II by saying never again turned their backs. We Africans could kill each other if we wanted. We were not anybody else's problem.”¹⁰ This quote reflects a lack of care for Africans experiencing

⁹ Wamariya, Clemantine, and Elizabeth Weil. *The Girl Who Smiled Beads: A Story of War and What Comes After*. First edition. New York, Crown, 2018.

¹⁰ Wamariya, Clemantine, and Elizabeth Weil. *The Girl Who Smiled Beads: A Story of War and What Comes After*. First edition. New York, Crown, 2018.

genocide. By comparing genocide in the absence of assumptions, world powers would be more likely to see the true nature of events and do more to put a stop to them, especially for those powers who had experienced similar traumatic events in their own history.

This clearly shows that while the term genocide and the concept of genocide comparison lack the ability to properly account for the unique and traumatic experiences and events that occur during atrocities labeled as genocide, through careful comparison of these atrocities in the absence of any assumptions of what genocide is supposed to look like, it is possible to find a great deal of valuable knowledge and support the victims of previous genocides. This is what genocide has come to mean to me. Genocide is not a word that completely encompasses every unique aspect of each individual atrocity that is labeled a genocide. Instead, it is a word that can be applied to an atrocity to bring said atrocity into the existing realm of genocide studies. This allows for the prevention of future genocides and the development of anti-genocide strategies based on increased knowledge of shared factors that might lead to or affect genocides. These strategies could be used in situations such as the on-going Israeli-Palestinian conflict in order to help limit or stop the violence altogether and rebuild healthy relations within the area. This also allows for better treatment of and support for genocide survivors, something that has been lacking for many years in modern society. In the wake of the Cambodian Genocide, there were many issues causing counselors and therapists to fail to properly address the trauma that genocide survivors had gone through and the way in which this was impacting them in the present. Through careful comparison of the circumstances and reactions to trauma experienced by genocide survivors across the globe, it would be possible to develop a more thorough and effective strategy to confront and sooth the pain felt by victims, given a deeper understanding of the trauma they had suffered. These ideas show the truth behind the word genocide. To me,

genocide is not a word that that you can apply to an atrocity and immediately know what tragedies had occurred and how to properly address them. The word genocide is a tool. It carries with it a tremendous amount of weight. It matters. Applying the word genocide to an atrocity isn't about encompassing all the pain in one word or equating it to another atrocity. It is about bringing an atrocity into the field of genocide studies. This allows us to use the techniques and resources gained from and used in the study of other atrocities to better understand and address an atrocity in question. No two atrocities are exactly the same, but we can learn and grow from each one. If you look at each atrocity in a vacuum, you'll limit yourself to what you can learn from that one unique situation. If you compare and study these atrocities, acknowledging the similarities and differences among them, you can draw meaningful conclusions on things such as motives and tactics. This brings with it the ability to take action. Action saves lives. Action brings justice to victims. You don't get action without conclusions on how to act, you can't draw conclusions without comparison and study of atrocities, and you won't know what atrocities to compare and study without a proper label, and that label is the word "Genocide."