Through a Lens Darkly

Films of Genocide, Ethnic Cleansing, and Atrocities

Edited by John J. Michalczyk & Raymond G. Helmick, SJ
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John J. Michalczyk

Appalling as is the subject of genocide and the viewing of the graphic images that document it, it is the positive hope that many other scholars who contribute to this text wish to understand and then express their ideas on this topic, in order to make the book a rewarding venture. Raymond Helmick, SJ and I are grateful to the cohort of writers who have generously provided a myriad of fresh ideas in this collection of essays. These authors come from a host of disciplines that can help us understand the tragic phenomenon of man’s inhumanity to man in the genocidal behavior depicted here. The solid contributions of all of the authors represented in this work will perhaps raise more questions than can be answered, but it is a noteworthy start to the pursuit of comprehending human behavior in crisis.

Kelly Fleming assisted with the close reading and proofing of the manuscript. Jordan Jennings, who first served as Teaching Assistant for the course “Genocide and Film” at Boston College in the fall of 2011, has served as a most valuable guide and sounding board throughout the process of creating this text. The students in the course with their own personal reflections offered many new perspectives on genocide. We are grateful for the research assistance that Boston College has provided us with both funding and student assistance, not to mention a much needed sabbatical to publish this book. Aileen Bianchi collected the images necessary to illustrate the essays, while Ben Heider, a member of the “Genocide and Film” class, developed the bibliography required for further research. Kerry Burke of the Graphics Department assisted with the retouching of photos, especially the Armenian original photo, graciously provided by the Armenian Library and Museum of America. Joanne Elliott, the Administrative Assistant, and Jefferly Howe, Chair of the Fine Arts Department, supported our scholarship in a multitude of ways. Adeane Bregman and Eugenie M’Polo of the O’Neill Library were most instrumental in obtaining a very significant number of films, some almost impossible to locate, for our scholarly research. Sharon Rivo of the National Center for Jewish Film at Brandeis University offered important insights into the Holocaust film.

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Foreword

Raymond G. Helmick, SJ

The idea for this collection of essays arose while John Michalczyk and I offered a course on the topic of genocide and ethnic cleansing during the fall term of 2011 at Boston College. The course had a double focus: a study of the many instances of genocide and the usefulness of film to the topic. The course was consequently listed under two departments of the university: Theology for its ethical dimension and Fine Arts for its film aspects. The students had to attune themselves to these two dimensions. I brought to it my extensive experience as mediator in many violent conflicts while John was the filmmaking specialist. It was during the making of many documentary films about peace-making over the years, beginning in 1997 in Northern Ireland, that we realized we shared one another’s concerns.

Genocide is a term invented by Raphael Lemkin, first used in his Axis Rule in Occupied Europe, a book published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in November 1944. Lemkin, a Jewish student at the University of Lwow, had become fascinated by the trial of Soghomon Tehlirian, a young Armenian who in 1921 had assassinated Mehmet Talaat, the former Interior Minister of Turkey and organizer of the killing, by firing squad, bayonet, bludgeon and starvation, of over a million Armenians in 1915. It seemed bizarre to Lemkin that the assassin should stand trial for murder in a court that had no quarrel with mass murder by the agent of a sovereign state. To put an end to what he called “universal repression,” murderous assault on a whole race of people, Lemkin, by 1929, was drafting an international law to prohibit the targeted destruction of ethnic, national or religious groups. In 1933, he brashly presented his case to a League of Nations legal conference in Madrid and was appalled to see his colleagues evade the topic.

Lemkin had to escape under peril when the Nazis invaded Poland in September 1939. The war’s vicissitudes eventually brought him to the US, where the War Department took him on as an international legal expert in 1944. Still, he found no responsiveness to his horror stories. Torn by the recognition that the mass killings of Jews was “a crime without a name,” he combined the Greek term genos, or race, with the Latin cide, a derivative from caedere, the verb to kill, in order to designate it: Genocide.
Films attempting to depict the Holocaust or the Shoah have been in great part responsible for educating society about the most horrific genocide of the twentieth century. As we consider the evolution of the Holocaust film in a chronological fashion, we can detect certain patterns as well as certain clichés in an endeavor to represent the unrepresentable. Although imperfect, the films each contribute to a dialogue about the unparalleled phenomenon that drove Raphael Lemkin to put a name to the human tragedy.

The Holocaust can be viewed as the product of a “perfect storm”: the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe, the need for a scapegoat after the downfall of Germany in WWI, and the ascendency of Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich in 1933, lasting until 1945 with its increasingly racist policies. Film, with its new technological developments in the hands of Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels and director Leni Riefenstahl, brought to the screen *Triumph of the Will* (1935): marching Nazis, idealistic Hitler Jugend, and crowds in Nuremberg, cheering on their new messiah. Their further collaboration in *Olympia* (1938) revealed a superior Aryan race in the third “illustrious” empire following those of Greece and Rome. At the same time, the burgeoning political medium also filled the screen with images of virulent anti-Semitic narratives of lecherous Jews in *Jud Süss* (1940) and rat-like creatures in the pseudo-documentary *The Eternal Jew* (1940). Both films paved the way for accepted graphic depictions of what the Nazis viewed as a lice-infested race that plagued Germany (and Europe) and that had to be exterminated.

Since much of the film footage shot by the Nazis to document their activities was destroyed or lost, with some exception, we primarily learn visually about moments of the Holocaust such as camp life primarily from the Allied liberation of the camps. With well-known directors like George Stevens and Billy Wilder, and the assistance of the US Signal Corps, the images of the victims of the Nazis' evil actions came to light, and were made especially known to the German public. As with the Soviet documentation of the aftermath of Auschwitz, and the British filming of the liberation of Bergen-Belsen, after the discovery of camps such as Dachau, Buchenwald,
Ethnic Cleansing

Raymond G. Helmick, SJ

Analyzing the course of genocide in the twentieth century with the appearance of a new term in the discussion—ethnic cleansing, in the 1990s—calls for explanation.

Precedents abounded. Stalin had “purged” the Soviet Union—of dissidents, for political reasons, but of the whole class of Kulaks in the 1930s. “Cleansing” had been a standard part of Nazi language as they conducted their murder campaigns, first against the mentally disabled and homosexuals, then against Jews and other “inferior” peoples. Americans also had spoken much of “cleansing” the Western plains of the Indian tribes during the years of frontier expansion.

Removal of populations, with more or less killing involved, was a long established custom. The Carnegie Foundation for International Peace, reporting on the largely forgotten Balkan Wars of 1912–1913, takes it for granted that when territories changed hands the people would have to go.¹

But the term “ethnic cleansing,” as such, gained popularity, with governments and with the international media, basically as a convenient diversion from having to define an action as genocide during the crises of Bosnia and Rwanda. Genocide, according to the UN’s Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, had been defined so broadly that it covered actions that did not look like Auschwitz, and it provided sanctions. The High Contracting Parties to the Convention bound themselves (once they actually ratified the Convention) to prevent genocide, making a breach in the long-standing prohibition of interference in the internal affairs of other nations. Any one of the parties might “call upon the competent organs of the UN to take such action under the Charter of the UN as they consider appropriate for the prevention and suppression of acts of genocide.”² Not surprisingly, in an age of “political realism,” nations preferred to evade such obligations if they did not coincide with their own national interests.

The battle of definitions was carried on in government or the Security Council over both these cases, as reported by Samantha Power.³ She gives both cases extensive analysis, as figures of the US State Department squirmed and twisted in the effort to define the gruesome happenings, whether in Bosnia or in Rwanda, as something other than genocide. She
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