It's been said that the Holocaust is unique among all genocides. Is it really? If so, how? And why does it matter?

The term genocide was coined by Raphael Lemkin, a Polish Jew. Most of his family was murdered during the Holocaust. In his younger years, Lemkin was troubled by the intentional mass murder of the Armenians by the Turks in 1915 and later the slaughter of Christian Assyrians by Iraqis in 1933. Lemkin dedicated his life to furthering the acceptance of the word genocide – and the need of the world community to ban its practice – after painstakingly documenting the brutal Nazi treatment of conquered populations throughout Europe in World War II.

In addition to their war against the Jews, the Nazis committed war crimes against a number of other groups, with the genocide of the Poles and the Gypsies (Roma and Sinti) being the most often-cited examples. The 20th century has, sadly, been ripe with yet other genocides – Armenia (in the Ottoman Empire), Cambodia, Rwanda and Darfur are among the clearest examples.

Yet, as many have said, there is no point in comparing suffering. Jews were murdered in gas chambers, Ukrainians were starved to death on their farms, Poles were exiled to camps, Africans were thrown overboard on slave-trader ships in the Atlantic during the Middle Passage from Africa to the Americas – but how can one possibly measure who suffered more, and what would be the purpose of doing so?

Is the Holocaust unique?

Special to The CJN

Eli Rubenstein

It's the main point: the victims of the various genocides involve a dispute over land, resources, or a desire to exploit or enslave another group or people for obvious material gain or to forcefully implement a specific political system. The Nazi genocide against the Jews was a pseudo-scientific and quasi-religious belief that maintained the very redemption of the world relied upon the “extermination” and the “extermination” of every last Jew, to finally and totally rid the world of this contemptible “virus.”

No course of action of any kind by the victim – supplication, conversion, bribery, slavery or exile – could ever suffice or placate the Nazi agenda.

Nazi anti-Semitism and its concomitant racial theories had only one ultimate solution to the Jewish problem – “The Final Solution” – mass death for the entire Jewish People.

No other mass murder or genocide was ever conceived or implemented on the basis of such an absolutist, maniacal worldview. In light of all this, Bauer argues that, on the continuum, the Holocaust is the most extreme form of genocide and should be the starting point of any attempt to understand genocide – not because Holocaust victims suffered more than others, but because of its unprecedented nature.

“The Nazis were looking for Jews, for all Jews”

What makes the Holocaust “unique” in Bauer’s words, (later, Bauer preferred the term “unprecedented”), is the combination of all three of these conditions: it was driven by ideological rather than pragmatic (land, resources etc.) reasons; it was global in reach, and the intended target was the entire Jewish people (from infancy to old age).

“The Nazis were looking for Jews, for all Jews,” in his words.

When one understands this, one comes face to face with the utter irrationality of the Holocaust. Most genocides involve a dispute over land, resources, or a desire to exploit or enslave another group or people for obvious extremist Islamist rhetoric and in other subtler forms of antisemitism.

There can be no doubt, as one writer observed, that “the Holocaust has become the ‘master narrative’ for suffering, shaping discussions about every-present conflict over genocide and human rights.” But is the Holocaust different in a substantial way from other examples of genocide? Does the Holocaust warrant more recognition, study and commemoration? How does one account for the enormous visibility that the Holocaust seems to have gained over the last number of decades?

Certainly, at first glance, there are aspects that seem to make the Holocaust stand out, even though all genocides are unique in their own way. The Holocaust is “uniquely unique” as some have described it, not just because of the staggering number of victims (indeed there are larger examples of mass murder), but because of the machinery of death created by the Nazis in pursuit of their goal. The sheer efficiency and the usage of modern technology to create assembly lines of death, where the “by-products” were Jewish women, men, women and children, and the “finished product” was ash (while the side products were plundered Jewish possessions and bodies – gold teeth, hair etc.), cannot not help but cause one to shudder. Perhaps these factors have caused the Holocaust to symbolize the level of ultimate evil to which humanity can descend and to garner the attention it has received.

More importantly, one may argue, is that conceptually, the Holocaust was different than all other genocides.

Here it’s useful to draw upon what I once heard from Prof. Yehuda Bauer about what differentiates mass murder, genocide and the Holocaust.

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