

FROM HOLOCAUST TO GENOCIDE

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By Prof. Katchatur I. Pilikian, London UK, 7 January 2010 Strange as it might seem, some people are trying to redeploy archaic, even antiquarian terms to de-throne Raphael Lemkin's superb trove denoting the ultimate inhuman act of state total terror. The jurist and linguist Lemkin knew well all about those terms whether the religiously charged Greek word **Holocaust=Whole-Burnt**, or the Hebrew **Shoah=Catastrophe**, just to mention a few. Lemkin was adamant why he had to find a new, more precise, politically pristine and religiously unbiased word **Genocide**. Yes, the word **Holocaust** was used even during the massacres of the Armenians in 1890's, to underline the religious aspect of the tragedy—Christian Armenians massacred by Moslem Turks and Kurds --as a large mass of Armenians were burnt alive in the Urfa Cathedral in 1895. Hence the word **Holocaust** was used by the noted missionary Corin Shattuck to visualize and characterize the horrible event.

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In the Armenian language the translation of the word **Holocaust = Voghchagizoum** was used in literature quite often, throughout many centuries. After Lemkin's coinage of Genocide, the better understanding of the political and economic implications of that inhuman act, let alone its aspect of religious intolerance, necessitated for the Armenians too to find its precise equivalence in their own language, hence the word **Tseghasbanoutyoum** was coined. Ancient and modern Armenian translations of the Holy Scriptures have, nevertheless, kept the word **voghchagizoum = holocaust** in all the constituent books, faithful to the Word's exclusively religious meanings; particularly in Leviticus—The Third Book of Moses, deciphering the rituals related to the act of Holocaust, its various functions of atonement to forgive sins and as an offering **"of a sweet saviour unto the LORD"**

Bearing in mind the total terror that genocide causes, I find it absurd to refer back to archaic terms, especially those with religious connotations of atonement/forgiveness, as with **Holocaust**. Etymologically, **Holocaust** means 'whole-burnt' and is intrinsically linked with the act of sacrifice--a sacrificial offering which is completely consumed by fire whereby cleansing from sins and ultimately

purification is expected to be attained.

Does genocide 'taketh away the sins' of the murdered community whether massacred, gassed or burnt? Or does it perhaps cleanse the sins of the murderers for the bliss of purification? God forbid.

German Nazis, like their proto-models in Congo, Namibia, Ethiopia's Italian Fascists and the 'Young Turks', committed the ultimate crime against humanity rightly expressed as **Genocide**. With all respect to all concerned, I must say that **Holocaust** is an erroneous and misleading coinage of the reality it is hoped to illustrate and define. More importantly it is unfair to the millions of the Jewish victims of the ultimate Nazi crime-Genocide.

The Assyrians, moreover, are now trying to emulate the Hebrew **Shoah** by using their own archaic **Seifo = Sword**, hence '**Hacked by Sword**'. It seems, the Assyrians too are, unwittingly, 'singling' out their boundless tragedy with the usage of **Seifo**, just as the Jews with the Holocaust or its wrong synonym **Shoa**.

Moshe Machover, the emeritus professor at King's College, London, has this brilliant abstract on the misuse of the word **Shoah** itself. In a personal letter, on January 6th, 2010, commenting on the subject in question, Prof Machover wrote:

"I would add that in the case of "Shoa" there is an additional ideological motivation. As you know, I have argued that use of this term is designed not only to single out the genocide of Jews by the Nazis, but also to harness it in the service of Zionism. The point is that it is a word in Hebrew, the language spoken in the State of Israel, but not the language of the victims—mostly Yiddish."

I humbly believe that adopting the word **Genocide** from the resources of our own languages is a challenge worth taking with scholarly passion.

In 2007, I attended the event in remembrance of 59th Anniversary of **Nakba** (PALSOC-SOAS-LSE SU, Khalili theatre, 21st May). Interesting though the discussion was, there seemed to me an intellectual hangover around **Nakba**, which in Arabic means Calamity, Disaster, Catastrophe, exactly as in Hebrew **Shoah**. It reminded me of the usage of **Seifo** in Assyrian.

I did raise the following question to the panel:

*"Why the reluctance to use **Genocide**? I have in mind Lemkin's wide ranging and inclusive spectrum of it's historical significance, when all the 'components' of the tragedy are already and even scholarly demonstrated, such as Ilan Pappé calling it **Ethnic Cleansing**, Moshe Machover draws the parallel not with **Apartheid** but, significantly, with the Americo-Indian **Reservation Camps' annihilation policy**. Hence why **Nakba, Shoah, Seifo**, not to mention the religiously saturated Holocaust?"*

To my astonishment the whole panel was perturbed. They all were adamant that the Palestinian tragedy had nothing to do with **Genocide**, although one of them unwittingly accepted that there were some instances of **genocidal aspects** to it. Finally, Dr Prof Haim Bresheeth came to rescue the

situation from the political left, as he claimed, lecturing with zeal that we all should respect what the national culture dictates concerning their own tragedy, that the proof of the matter is that even **Intifada** is now used internationally as a unique concept of struggle, hence the persistence of **Nakba** for more than half a century should be enough for us to keep it alive and not change it, he advised complacently.

That meant, for me at least, that the Jewish resistance/uprising in Warsaw ghetto, perhaps now to be coined as the ghetto intifada, permits us not to use the word **Genocide!**

Two weeks later, on June 5, 2007, during the Q&A session at the Amnesty International's **No Justice, No Peace. The Occupation of Palestine 40 years on**, I raised the same argument about the usage of the word Genocide to denote the tragedy of the Palestinians. Sir Geoffrey Bindman, the main speaker of the day, agreed uncompromisingly, though after a brief hesitation and 'worry' about 'misquoting' him by journalists. Hence, this is what I wrote to him the next morning:

"As I mentioned during my brief encounter with you at AI, I followed with heightened interest and profit your legal arguments concerning the appalling, continued suffering of the Palestinian people, the illegality of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and the blatant, obsessive feel of insecurity of the people of Israel, especially those ca half a million living in the illegal settlements as neo-colonial enclaves in the shadow of ca half a century of bloody conflict."

Just a day later, on June 6th, Sir G. Bindman responded swiftly, gracefully and cautiously: "Thank you very much for sending me this."

All the above notwithstanding, the most puzzling coinage to date is **The Anfal**, now in use for the genocide of the Kurds in Halabja, Iraq.

Chapter 8th of the Holy Qur'an is named as Al-Anfal, which is the name for the spoils and gains, or in fact the bounty taken after what it's called a just, religious war, hence belonging to the Just Cause, as a Divine Gift.

Lo & behold, the late Iraqi despot, Saddam Hussein, while still the staunch lackey of Western imperialism in the Middle East, had the appalling audacity to coin **Anfal** his robbery of Kurdish properties left after his genocidal massacres of the Kurds, as for example in Halabja. With a strange but similar twist of concepts, that same religiously-saturated word continued to be used by the survivors of that genocide and their descendants.

But it's worth remembering that the Holy Qur'an itself makes it absolutely clear that such **"spoils are at the disposal of God and the Apostle"** (IQRA Trust publication, *The Holy Qur'an*, p 415. Surat Al Anfal, 8:1).

Is it too far fetched to assume that the Kurdish survivors and their descendants envisage themselves as The **Anfal** or the true living bounty of the tragedy befallen the Kurdish nation? If so, we might as

well say, fair enough. But the truth of the matter is, strange as it might seem, that **Anfal** is now used to specifically denote **The Genocide of the Kurds** as their national tragedy, not unlike **Holocaust**, **Seifo**, **Shoa** or **Aghed** and **Yeghern** (or more often, **Medz Yeghern = Big Crime/Murder**) of the Armenians.

It may sound strange, but there are a couple of Armenian professors in American universities who prefer, even now, the Hebrew **Shoah=Catastrophe**'s precise Armenian equivalence, **Aghed**, to replace **Tzeghasbanoutyoun=Genocide**.

Poor old Raphael Lemkin! Latter-day sophists are trying to 'by-pass' him, particularly now that concepts such as *Democracy, Socialism, Freedom, Human Rights*, and what not, are made to lose their essential meanings, nay even are made to 'act' as their antinomies in real life through their post-modernist, neo-con and neo-liberal abuse.

Yes, even language is experiencing a collateral damage indeed.

To top it all, the recent and most popular President of the USA since J.F. Kennedy, Barak Obama, chose to use **Medz Yeghern**, in his April 24, 2009 commemorative speech in remembrance of the Genocide of the Armenians, without ever mentioning the word **Genocide**, let alone it's modern and precise Armenian equivalence: Tseghsbanoutyoun. When addressing the American Armenian voters during his presidential campaigns, the word the distinguished Senator Barak Obama always used, was Genocide. Naturally he got most of the American Armenian votes.

As President of USA, militarily the most powerful country in the world, President Obama chose to 'balkanise' Lemkin's coinage of the word, singling out one of its national culture dictated pre-Lemkinian usage, as if unwittingly emulating Dr Prof Haim Bresheeth's advice (mentioned here above), thus avoiding the more precise, politically pristine and religiously unbiased word **Genocide**.

The question remains: Why President Obama's archaic choice?

Although the answer is not hard to decipher from the history of the last century, our turbulent times too will soon teach us new lessons, granted we are willing to learn and act upon it.

Prof. Khatchatur Pilikian's previous contributions to Keghart.com

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