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The Assyrian Simmele Massacre and the Unsung Hero of the Genocide Convention

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Massacre of 1933 pictured in the Khabour region of Syria, 1935. (© Assyrian Policy Institute)

On day 189 of the Nuremberg Trials, French prosecutor Auguste Champetier de Ribes delivered his closing statement. In it, he described the Holocaust as a "crime so monstrous, so undreamt of in history through the Christian era up to the birth of Hitlerism, that the term 'genocide' had to be coined to define it."

Related: [The 1933 Massacre of Assyrians in Simmele, Iraq](#)

The mass, systematic slaughter of six million people was a "crime without a name," as Winston Churchill referred to genocide in his [live broadcast](#) from London in August 1941, two months after

the Germans invaded Soviet Russia. Once news of the pogroms reached the West, leaders there deployed an arsenal of adjectives in attempting to capture the Nazis' depravity, but it would not come to be understood as a genocide [until 1948](#), thanks to the tireless, unheralded activism of one Jewish-Polish lawyer.

In New York City's Mount Hebron Cemetery is a gravestone that is headed with a Hebrew epitaph. The words, "Beloved Brother and Uncle Dr. Raphael Lemkin 1900-1959" follow underneath. In a less imposing font size, "Father of the Genocide Convention" is inscribed yet further down.

Dr. Lemkin was born on a small farm in Poland, and is noted as having had a preoccupation with tales of human wickedness throughout his life. In his autobiography, he recalls that as a twelve-year-old, he was enthralled by an account of Nero's massacres of Christians in ancient Rome, and he told his mother he wanted to become a lawyer to indict those responsible for similarly evil acts in modern times.

When Lemkin was six, pogroms ensued in Bialystok, only a few miles away from his home. His memoir recalls the excruciating stories of anti-Semitic fury that the pogroms unleashed: "A line, red from blood, led from the Roman arena through the gallows of France to the pogrom of Bialystok."

Your browser does not support the video tag.
Interview with Simmele Survivor.

Lemkin's own crusade for justice was similarly linear and unrelenting -- even Sisyphean in its endlessness. He died alone, disheveled, and poor, collapsing at a bus stop on 42nd Street in New York, doomed to remain a historical footnote -- much like the massacre that was his *raison d'être*.

Related: [The Assyrian Genocide](#)

The blood-drenched line that led from the Roman arena to the gallows of France and the pogrom of Bialystok also wove through 63 villages in a region over 2,500 miles away from his hometown, where the long-suffering Assyrian people were massacred by the thousands.

The Assyrians are indigenous to the parts of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria that comprised the ancient, contiguous territory of Assyria, which dates back to 2500 b.c. and appears in the New Testament. They are a distinct, largely Christian ethnic group, having been converted to the faith by St. Thomas, St. Thaddeus, and Mar Mari in the first century.

As many as 6,000 Assyrians were brutally murdered. Pregnant women were bayoneted, while others were lit aflame with burning Bibles.

In August of 1933, [Lemkin learned the news](#) of the aforementioned massacre, in which 63 Assyrian villages in the Dohuk and Mosul districts of modern-day Iraq were attacked by the nascent Iraqi Army. As many as 6,000 Assyrians were brutally murdered. Pregnant women were bayoneted, while others were lit aflame with burning Bibles. According to Elias Haroon Bazi, a survivor of the massacre, during the third day of the killings, [Iraqi soldiers rounded up Assyrians](#) and told them to "either become Muslim or we will kill you."

The most brutal massacres occurred in a town called Simmele, a small, Kurdish-inhabited village repopulated by refugees from the Assyrian and Armenian Genocide of 1915, in which it's estimated that 300,000 Assyrians and 1.5 million Armenians were killed by the Turks. According to the secret report of a British eyewitness in the service of the Iraqi government at the time, what happened in the town was "beyond imagination." Arabs and the Baghdadi government backed the genocide, strewing the returning soldiers with flowers and rosewater in parades, celebrating their "victory" against the Assyrians. In Mosul, Muslim residents erected arches and decorated them with melons pierced with daggers, symbolizing the heads of murdered Assyrians.

Months after the Simmele Massacre, Lemkin created the concept of "genocide" by combining the Greek word for group or families, "geno," with the Latin word for killing, "cide." He made a

presentation to the Legal Council of the League of Nations conference on international criminal law in Madrid, where he prepared an essay demonstrating genocide as a crime against international law.

The Simmele Massacre, despite its incomprehensible violence, has received little utterance in western discourse and academia. In his book, [The Man Who Invented Genocide: The Public Career and Consequences of Raphael Lemkin](#), James Joseph Martin refers to the genocide of the Assyrians as "so obscure and distantly located that even historians could be counted on not to know what [Lemkin] was talking about."

This August marks the 85th anniversary of the unspeakable crime that Lemkin memorialized, and according to Reine Hanna, a co-founder and director of the Assyrian Policy Institute (API), the Assyrian people are still seeking justice, even as the perpetrators' ancestors continue to deny the truth.

"There have been deliberate efforts to erase what happened in 1915 and 1933," Hanna tells National Review. "Both Turkey and Iraq, respectively, took deliberate steps to cover up these genocidal campaigns, and much of the evidence was destroyed."

Assyrians were never afforded the opportunity to heal and properly document what happened to their community. Today, they still don't have a dignified memorial site for those who perished in the massacre. The bones of those who were callously burned in mass graves remain scattered, and can be seen protruding through the dirt in a neglected and haunting ossuary treated as a waste yard. Atop a large, dirt hill overlooking the gravesite is a sign reading "Simmel Archaeological Hill." Trash is carelessly tossed among the bones, and the relatives of the deceased have been prohibited from unearthing the bodies for proper burial.

The historical erasure is so pervasive, [according to the ADI](#), that some Assyrians have become unaware the massacres of 1915 and 1933 ever happened.

In June, Vice President Mike Pence successfully pressured the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to send [\\$10 million in aid to Christian and Yazidi](#) communities in Iraq decimated in recent years by the rampant attacks of Islamist fundamentalists. An additional \$25 million will follow, raising the total U.S. aid given the two minority groups over the course of the current fiscal year to \$100 million.

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While Hanna feels that Pence's initiative is right and genuine, she is also quick to point out its flaws. For one thing, the aid Pence authorized will be delivered to faith-based organizations, where church leaders prioritize rebuilding churches rather than schools, homes, and hospitals, which Assyrians desperately need rebuilt. For another, she says, "Our research has shown that aid distributed through sectarian organizations more often than not results in an uneven distribution of aid between the various church communities."

With an administration receptive to the plight of religious and ethnic minorities in the Middle East, the U.S. has a chance to be an ally to the Assyrians. According to Hanna, hope can be restored if Washington takes an active role in working with the Iraqi government to enable the creation of a self-governed Assyrian province. Currently, Assyrians are at the mercy of the Kurdish Regional Government, whose policies toward them are often arbitrary and discriminatory.

The Nineveh Plain in Iraq is considered an ancient Assyrian heartland and is the last area of significant demographic concentration for Assyrians, whose numbers have been reduced from 1.5 million in 2003 to 200,000 today.

"The Nineveh Plain . . . is ethnically and religiously diverse, meaning it can serve as an example for

the rest of the country and help advance reform in Iraq and promote tolerance and pluralism -- values shared by the United States," Hanna says.

Lemkin worked furiously to give the crimes committed against the Christians under Nero, the Jews under Hitler, the Armenians under the Turks, and the Assyrians today a name. As the 85th anniversary of the Simmele Massacre approaches, it is critical to the survival of the long-suffering Assyrian community that the West honors his legacy as an unsung hero of the darkest era in human history, by recognizing the massacre and continued persecution of the Assyrians as he did.

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