



How Genocide Should Be Represented in the Canadian Museum for Human Rights

by

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Toronto, Canada—The Canadian Museum for Human Rights (“CMHR”) is planning to have twelve permanent zones or galleries. According to the CMHR’s website, there will be a zone devoted to the Holocaust and a “Mass Atrocity” zone, immediately adjacent to it, which will feature detailed information on many other mass atrocities that have taken place worldwide.

The prominence given the Holocaust with its own separate gallery, and the as yet unclear status of the other cases of “Mass Atrocity” is causing considerable concern within some communities. It raises questions as to which cases will be included, how much space will be allotted to each case, what their content will be, if they will have a permanent or only temporary exhibit, and how these decisions are made.

This article discusses these concerns from the perspective of the International Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies in Toronto, a Canadian research institute devoted to human rights and genocide studies and education for nearly thirty years.

The CMHR was the vision of Can West founder Izzy Asper as a place where Canadian students could visit to learn about human rights. He launched the CMHR as a private initiative on April 17, 2003, the 21st anniversary of signing of Charter of Rights and Freedom. On April 20, 2007, Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced the Government of Canada’s intention to make the CMHR a national museum, the first created in over 40 years. Then on March 13, 2008, Bill C-42, An Act amending the Museums Act received Royal Assent in Parliament, with support from all political parties, creating the Canadian Museum for Human Rights as a national museum. The CMHR’s stated mission is, in part, to establish

a national and international destination—a centre of learning where Canadians and people from around the world can engage in discussion and commit to taking action against hate and oppression.... inspiring research, learning, contributing to the collective memory and sense of identity of all Canadians... to explore the subject of human rights, with special but not exclusive reference to Canada, in order to enhance the public’s understanding of human rights, to promote respect for others and to encourage reflection and dialogue.

It is the world’s reaction to genocide and other gross violations of human rights that has helped bring about the modern human rights revolution, culminating in the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide on December 9, 1948, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 10, 1948. Therefore, to explore the subject of human rights, it is critical to examine the gross violation of human rights and its relationship to genocide.

The phenomenon of genocide is complex, and its ramifications are global and devastating for humanity at large. We may approach the subject by studying cases of genocide individually—such as the Holocaust, the Armenian or Rwandan Genocides, or the Holodomor—or we may deal with them comparatively. Individual case studies by nature are narrow. They are self-contained discourse and, as such, are of

limited value for scholarship and education. In their general thrust, they are descriptive, and inherently do not allow for the illustration of common denominators of several cases.

Comparison, on the other hand, is essentially an analytical task. The characteristics of genocide can be brought out in the interplay of such common denominators. Only the comparative approach can yield carefully delimited generalizations about the nature and mechanics of genocide as a general problem of humanity. Even though generalizations distilled from comparative studies reflect the common features and characteristics among the cases being compared, their elaboration does not need to exclude other features that are not common. One need not limit one's self to the quest for common denominators in order to do justice to the comparative method. By taking into account those factors that are rather uncommon, one may in fact underscore the importance of the common features.

Yehuda Bauer, Professor of Holocaust Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and academic advisor to Yad Vashem, noted in a speech given at Clark University on April 23, 2009 that the origins of the UN Genocide Convention,

go back to a Polish-Jewish lawyer and jurist named Raphael Lemkin, who first began writing about all this in the 1930's, before the Shoah of the Jews; Lemkin's model was not Jewish but Armenian, harking back to the Armenian Genocide of 1915 and an earlier genocide against the Herero tribe in southwest Africa in 1903-04. His was truly a comparative approach to genocide.

However, genocide is an extremely emotional issue. Often, people engaged in the field of genocide and human rights have a personal relationship with these traumas. In addition, the members of each group feel that their own trauma is unprecedented, the most important, and tend to inflate their experience to the level of historical uniqueness, as they naturally feel their own pain more immediately. Thus, it is understandable that the reactions to the CMHR's announced allocation of galleries have been polarized and adversarial.

We are aware that the museum is still a work in progress. We also acknowledge its challenges in meeting the desire of various groups to be included in the framework of the museum, as well as the desire of some to exclude others from it. There must be a scientific and scholarly basis for the CMHR's decision-making process, including the designation of its galleries. It is our belief that the comparative approach to various cases of genocide, based on the principle of inclusiveness, provides such a scholarly standard, whereas allocating a whole gallery to only one case, while lumping all others into a single gallery called "Mass Atrocity," relativizes and thereby trivializes those other cases. Moreover, the comparative approach will help those Canadians, who have genocide and the gross violation of human rights as part of their history, share their traumatic experiences with their fellow Canadians and the world at large. The comparative approach will enhance the public's understanding of the complexities of the gross violation of human rights, promote respect for others, and encourage reflection and dialogue.

There is a further benefit, not to say an imperative, to the comparative approach. By exploring genocide in a comparative manner, we can begin to see its patterns. When we see and understand those patterns, we have the ability to predict the conditions by which genocide may occur. Once we have the ability to predict when genocide may occur, then we have the possibility of preventing it.

In conclusion, it is recommended that the CMHR convey, as part of the universal experience, the historical, political and moral lessons of genocide in an inclusive, holistic and comparative manner. Anything less would do a grave disservice to its stated mission and would become of concern to the conscience of all Canadians.

In this respect, we should remember the words of Raphael Lemkin, the man who coined the term "genocide" and struggled for the acceptance of the United Nations Genocide Convention, described in his personal memoir his own involvement in this field:

I understood that the function of memory is not only to register past events, but to stimulate human conscience.

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