In 1941 Winston Churchill spoke of a "crime without a name" about the slaughter of Jews and other human groups by Nazi Germany. "The aggressor ... retaliates by the most frightful cruelties. As his Armies advance, whole districts are being exterminated. Scores of thousands - literally scores of thousands - of executions in cold blood are being perpetrated by the German Police-troops upon the Russian patriots who defend their native soil. Since the Mongol invasions of Europe in the Sixteenth Century, there has never been methodical, merciless butchery on such a scale, or approaching such a scale.

And this is but the beginning. Famine and pestilence have yet to follow in the bloody ruts of Hitler's tanks.

We are in the presence of a crime without a name."\(^1\)

Raphael Lemkin gave that crime a name in 1943. He called it "genocide," -compounded from the Greek genos (race) and the Latin occidere (killing)- and published it as a chapter in his seminal work, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe.* (1944). “New conceptions require new terms. By genocide we mean the destruction of a nation or of an ethnic group. This new word, (is) coined by the author to denote an old practice in its modern development. (...) Generally speaking, genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation, except when accomplished by mass killings of all members of a nation.”\(^2\)

This polyglot lawyer chose to create a linguistic barbarism, it was well adapted to the crime that he called also “mass barbarism”. But he rejected “mass murder” and “murder of a whole nation” or *Völkermord*, which had been used since the beginning of the century to describe the extermination of the Hereros and Namas (1904) then of the Armenians (1915). He prefered the universe of Greeks and Romans and their dead languages to the German one while its Nazis speakers were exterminating the Jews and their language in oriental Europe, the Yiddish.

Lemkin summarized his thoughts in different texts when he was appointed an adviser to the Nuremberg Trial Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson. His life accomplishment was the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, which was adopted by Resolution 260 (III) A of the United Nations on General Assembly on 9 December 1948, in Paris. The 19 articles were following on the international law level the declaration made by the General Assembly in 1946 that genocide was “a crime under international law, contrary to the spirit and aims of the United Nations.”

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\(^1\) August 24, 1941, live broadcast from London. The British had broken the code Enigma and knew a lot about the murders.

Nations and condemned by the civilized world.” It was also a new version of the London agreement text (8 août 1945) where the « crime against humanity » was added to the crime against peace, (article 6 a) and war crimes (article 6b): « namely, murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation, and other inhumane acts committed against any civilian population, before or during the war; or persecutions on political, racial or religious grounds in execution of or in connection with any crime within the jurisdiction of the Tribunal, whether or not in violation of the domestic law of the country where perpetrated. »

The two first articles give the substance of the text:

“Article I: The Contracting Parties confirm that genocide, whether committed in time of peace or in time of war, is a crime under international law which they undertake to prevent and to punish. Article II: In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

(a) Killing members of the group;
(b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
(c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
(d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
(e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”

The man behind that text had devoted his life till then and after to denounce the “evil “ of extermination, hoping that such a crime could never repeat itself. The man had strange sides, he instrumentalized his own biography – mainly in his autobiography, Totally unofficial - and antedated the chronology of his invention, using the word genocide in the description of phenomenon’s anterior to its genesis. He was also too vague on intentions and its consequences, on physical and/or cultural extermination. But he helped us tremendously to progress on the understanding of one of our civilization and modernity mysteries: why is mankind so able to “demodernise” and to “decivilize?” The genocide, he tells, us is different from the other massacres: death is not a mean to obtain something, but the end in itself, the desire to eradicate a part of mankind.

Lemkin organized his thought around two genocides of the XXth century, the Armenians (IWW) and the Jews (Pogroms - in particular the one in Byalistok in 1915- that he retroactively called genocide, and 2WW ); he also went back very far in history. « Since my young days, I was interested in creating international protection for national, racial and religious minorities against extermination. I read in history many examples of such extermination. (…) The history of the Middle Ages and of recent times is written with the blood and tears of Jews. But it is not a matter of the Jews,
or Arabs, or Catholics, Protestants, Buddhists, in brief of all religions and nationalities. Who does not remember the pogroms under the Czar, the destruction of 1,2 millions Armenians in 1915 and who will dare to forget the destruction of 6,7 millions Jews by Hitler?"

It is remarkable that his conclusions on the relations between the 2 world wars have been accepted only by the very new historiography, apart from George Mosses concept of brutalization.

1-The Great War and the Armenian Genocide.

What would much later be dubbed the Armenian “genocide”— a long time after Lemkin coined the term- had, of course, deep historical roots. But then, that was true with all the forms of extreme violence of which the Great War became the great accelerator. It is undoubtedly true that the conditions for many people between 1914 and 1918 turned this period into a laboratory of extreme violence, and thus a base from which to try and understand a century of political murder. In 1949, Lemkin was asked to comment a film on TV where could be seen scenes of Ottoman Turkish soldiers on horseback chasing down and killing unarmed Armenian men, women and children; he said : "Yes, these folks are not playing games. They are running for their lives. Men on horseback. It doesn't matter much who they are. Let's say they are modern cavalry out on orders of their commanders. They are huntsmen out on the chase. Only, the prey doesn't happen to be a fox. The prey is people. These [showing film footage of a group of Armenians] were the victims. They are Armenians and the place is in Asia Minor. But that doesn't matter either. They could be anyone, anywhere. Of course, it mattered to them. Nearly 2 million of them were driven from their homes to perish in the desert or die before they got there.”

Lemkin had forseen what the Second WW would prove and he would study in Axis Rule, that extermination was not an accidental cruelty but the essence of this type of war against civilians, the homogeneisation of people and religions, in particular in the occupation policies. He said about WW2: “The picture of coordinated German techniques of occupation must lead to the conclusion that the German occupant has embarked upon a gigantic scheme, to change, in favor of Germany, the balance of biological forces between it and the captive nations for many years to come. (…) Hitler’s Mein Kampf has essentially formulated the prolegomenon of destruction and subjugation of other nations.” People knew and forgot, from 1915 on…This terrible warning of the Great War years, among others, were almost completely forgotten, although not by Lemkin.

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3 Intéressante comparaison avec la chasse, voir Christian Ingrao les chasseurs noirs.

CBS Programm, 1949, interview with Lemkin.
Nevertheless, the expression “Crime against humanity” had been used in 1915 by the British, French, and Russian allies when denouncing the massacre of the Armenians: “These new crimes of Turkey against humanity and civilization.” The expression was to have a full life ahead of it in the twentieth century. At the time, however, this crime was only a retaliatory formula and not yet a legal injunction, which it became only at the Nuremberg trials after World War II. The massacre of the Armenians is a paradigmatic case of war violence transformed into violence inside the war, the passage from war crime to “crime against humanity” and then to “genocide,” before international law even dealt with such terms.

Crimes against Armenians had been used as a tool of propaganda when these crimes could offer a reason to go on with the war, but then were as quickly forgotten when the war was over: from the “banality of evil” to the “banality of indifference.”ii Secrecy, denial, and the impossibility of judging the guilty were at the heart of the process of annihilation. Amnesia won when, the war being over, the cause lost its utility. Between 1914 and 1918, the peoples of Europe had discovered that war now meant more than conflict between the armies and the patriotic cultures of wholly mobilized nations. But even as they learned this terrible lesson, they forgot too much.

In 1918, persecution returned when the Turks took advantage of the chaos brought on by the Russian Revolution in order to occupy territories in Transcaucasia where thousands of Armenians had taken refuge. In this case, even the Germans, like General Erich Ludendorff and Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg himself, did not hide the atrocities. Nevertheless, in apocalyptic terms, the Turkish press again accused the Armenians of being responsible for the atrocities: “The Armenian organizations have a systematic plan to annihilate the Turkish race. […] But the Turkish race is so strong that it is guaranteed by nature and God from extermination. […] Since the Armenians have been condemned by God to live in the middle of this world, wherever they are will become hell for them.”iii It is accurate to read this “apocalyptic racism” that Philippe Burrin showed for Nazi Germany. We can see there that the Turks would do everything they could for the Armenians not be the victors of this confrontation.”

This incredible denial of the reality and the specificity of the Armenian tragedy had two reasons, I think, the World War itself, and Europeocentrism: « Atrocities in Armenia do not come home to Americans like the destruction of Belgium, or the wrack of Poland or even the desolation of Serbia. The outrages in Turkey, too, while indubitably awful to a degree beyond portrayal, are probably not nearly equal in extent or severity to the things that have been done by the so-called civilized and Christians nations of Europe during the past 15 months.”

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Only after another world war and another genocide, this idea could reverse: in Armenia something exceptional had taken place, and in Belgium, Northern France and even Galicia quite traditional atrocities of a war time. It was in Germany, though, in part because of the wartime alliance with the Ottoman Empire, that more questions were asked: missionaries, starting with Johannes Lepsius, told judges what they had witnessed, in particular at the trial of Soghomon Tehlirian, who had killed ex-Grand Vizier Talaat Pacha in Berlin in 1921. iv At the time, the young Lvov student of linguistics Raphael Lemkin did make use of the lesson. He said that he asked one of his teachers why the Germans had not arrested Talaat, knowing he was in Berlin, while his killer was being judged: “It is a crime for Tehlirian to kill a man, but it is not a crime for his oppressor to kill more than a million men? This is most inconsistent.” v To fight against this inconsistency he decided to become a lawyer. He said later: “A man whose mother was killed in the genocide, killed Talaat Pasha. And he told the court that he did it because his mother came in his sleep... many times. Here, ...the murder of your mother, you would do something about it! So he committed a crime. So, you see, as a lawyer, I thought that a crime should not be punished by the victims, but should be punished by a court, by a national law." vi He thought absolutely vital that an international law could judge such a crime and not the victims themselves, as did Tehlirian in an Armenian plot he was the one to pursue. That’s why Lemkin presented a report as early as 1933 to the Madrid International Conference for the Unification of Penal Law, “to the effect that actions aiming at the destruction and oppression of populations (i.e., what would amount to the current concept of genocide) should be penalized.” vii But with no international success. Inconsistency went on.

At the time, on the contrary the international inconsistency had not escaped a clever, defeated soldier of World War I: Adolf Hitler. As early as 1931, the bitter war veteran linked his desire for revenge to the issue of deportation: “Everywhere, people are awaiting a New World order. We intend to introduce a great resettlement policy [...] Think of the biblical deportations and the massacres of the Middle Ages [...] and remember the extermination of the Armenians.” viii And yet in 1939 the Führer was able to jeer at the failure of Europeans to remember the massacre of Armenians in 1915: “After all, who still speaks today of the elimination of the Armenians?” viii Beyond the confidence of murderers in their impunity, and their belief that the battle of death and memory had been settled once and for all, the denial of specific recollections of the sufferings of the Armenians and the civilians in invaded and occupied territories also contributed to the obliteration of memory. The cynical suppression of memories belonged to totalitarianism, but democracies knew about it and let it go.

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vi Interview télé 1949.
Raphael Lemkin linked his invention of the word genocide to the trial of Telhirian and to other crimes of the 1914-1918 years. This connection was made clear in various parts of his Axis book of 1944. ix
There, he examined in particular forced labor for deportees from Belgium and France and quoted writers who addressed these practices. x In his 1945 article, “Genocide, a Modern Crime,” Lemkin summarized his thoughts. First he quoted Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt “aping the Führer” in 1943: “One of the great mistakes of 1918 was to spare the civil life of the enemy countries, for it is necessary for us Germans to always at least double the numbers of the peoples of the contiguous countries. We are therefore obliged to destroy at least a third of their inhabitants. The only means is organized underfeeding which in this case is better than machine guns.” Then Lemkin continued with his own commentary: "Hitler was right. The crime of the Reich in wantonly and deliberately wiping out whole peoples is not utterly new in the civilized world as we have come to think of it. It is so new in the traditions of civilized man that he has no name for it. It is for this reason that I took the liberty of inventing the word “genocide.” xi

Chronology of an announced disaster, and the moral witness with moral memory:

Lemkin was a typical « moral witness » in the acceptance forged by Avishai Margolit, for the ones who both were victims of inflicted sufferings and were able to perceive the horror of evil and denounce them.
“It became clear to me that the diversity of nations, religious groups and races is essential to civilisation because every one of these groups has a mission to fulfill and a contribution to make in terms of culture. To destroy these groups is to oppose the will of the Creator and to disturb the spiritual harmony of mankind. » 7
The Weight of death and mourning pushed him to intellectual action. He went back to visit his parents for the last time, trying to convince them to follow him in exile when Poland was defeated : « A blue cloud looked at me challengeingly. It seemed to be the symbol of my hope and determination to outlaw the destruction of human groups. ( part seul…) It was like going to their funerals while they were still alive. The best of me was dying with the full cruelty of consciousness. » 8 (…) When I have conceived the idea to outlawing genocide, I hardly could imagine that it will affect me personally. During the war, 49 members of my family perished from Genocide, including my parents. Suddenly I felt that the earth is receding under from under my feet and the sense of living is disappearing. (…)I have transformed my personal disaster into a moral striking force. Was I not under a moral duty to repay my mother for having stimulated me in the interest if genocide. Was it not the best form of gratitude to make a « genocide pact » as an epitaph on her symbolic grave ans as a common recognition that

7 Totally Unofficial, intro générale.
8 TO. Chap varsovie, pp.43-44.
she and many millions did not die in vain? So decides to give this law to mankind “as a relief from my grief in this work.”

His work was done on the name of the Jewish victims of the Holocaust, in a way to grieve personally, but before everything on the name of the entire mankind. In inventing the word genocide, Lemkin goes from his personal fate to the universal.

Lemkin belong to these Central Europeans intellectuals who fought barbary with the creation of new laws. He had this moral imagination but it was not without contradictions. His lack of scientific rigor was compensated by his prophetic aspect. By example in front of the events of 1939-41 in Poland, he amalgamated the oppression of Poles and Jews: “The people would have to become headless or brainless, the intelligentsia liquidated and the bulk of population organised mainly for physical labour. Denationalisation followed by dehuminisation. This would mean the death of a nation in a spiritual and cultural sense. As for the Jews, ominous signs poited to their complete destruction. (...) An entire race being imprisoned and condemned to death.”

He always told dreams, mixing what we could call his trauma and a displaced trauma, where he stands for all the victims and mourners: “I saw myself, like in a procession of mourners, following the bodies of dead nations, but how strange that I was both among the mourners and the dead. How strange to feel the body alive, while the soul was being carried to the grave. This was not a contention between the Jewish people and the German but between the world and itself. (...) All over Europe the Nazis were writing the book of death with the blood of my brethren.” His tome is apocalyptic: “When the rope is already around the neck of the victim and strangulation is imminent, isn’t the word « patience » an insult to reason and nature?”

“« The impression of a terrible conspiration of silence poisoned the air. There was no escape from this feeling. (...) A double murder was taking place. One performed by the Nazis, the other performed by the Allies, who refused to make it known that the execution of nations and races had already started. (...) The silence of murder started the day when the first reports from Warsaw of mass executions reached London late in 1942…until december 44, 2 years. No aknowledgement of the death of a nation which had given the world the belief in one God, whose geatest document, the Bible, was still read on every Sunday in the churches of the allies. It was the murder of the truth, suppression of the notice of murder.”

“Blind World, Silent World”

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9 TO chap intro pp 3-4.
11 Page isolée de Totally Unofficial
12 TO, pp. 5-6, chap. 8.
13 TO, p. 7 chap. 8.
14 Deux expressions récurrentes de Lemkin dans ses écrits sur le génocide.
But the prophets and the victims are faced to the world incredulity, or to the denial; « Would this blind world only see it when it would be too late ? » In 1942 he wrote a Memo for Roosevelt. (one page.) Very crossed he answered so late and asked him to be patient : « How could I compress the pain of millions, the fear of nations, the hope for salvation from death in one page? I suggested the adoption of a treaty which would make genocide a crime, the crime of crimes, which would have to be adopted by the nations of the world. » (bien sûr en 42 le mot n’existe pas.) - So the book will be a way to confront the American people to the reality of the murders in Europe. (Se faire le cassandre écouté de la catastrophe car croit en l’opinion publique d’une démocratie. (autobiographie aussi pour prouver son américainisation.)

And he was flabbergasted to discover that people in America, as in Europe, could not believe to what they thought were rumors. And we are back to the Great War:

« In my agency I found complete unawareness that the Axis planned destruction of the peoples under their control. (...) Washington would not believe it because many still remembered as inventions the atrocity stories told about the Germans in the First World War. I thought bitterly : « these people would have to perish first, so as to prove that their destruction was deliberately prepared as a part of Hitler’s plan. » - refus de croire par foi et Grande Guerre : le boulanger : « In the Great War 1915-1918, we lived 3 years under the Germans. It was never good, but somehow we survived. I sold bread to the Germans; we baked for them from thier floor. We Jews are an eternal people, we cannot be destroyed, we can only suffer. » Admiration and incomprehension of Lemkin.

- He was not totally alone. Cf in 1942, the French philosopher Jacques Maritain who, along with his Jewish wife, was a refugee in Princeton during the war, said: “People don’t like being told of atrocities. They don’t like agonizing problems. They don’t like problems which might perchance result in some self-examination. They would prefer to ignore the problem of antisemitism, yet Nazi ferocity obliges them to confront it. Indeed antisemitism is at the very core of the outburst of barbarity which is today making the world bloody.”

But it is the actors and victims themselves who are able to give us more revealing clues, like Lemkin. In 1942 the Jewish publicist Victor Gollancz published a book in England, Let My People Go, to warn the British public of what was happening in Poland. It opens with two pages in which he had to distinguish between what was truly happening in 1942 and the invention of atrocities in the past.

The same year, the Polish Jew Calel Perechodenk wrote his devastating account of the deportation of his family to Treblinka, Am I a Murderer? Testament of a Jewish Ghetto Policeman although it would be years

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15 Page isolée de *Totally Unofficial*
16 TO, chap.8, p.4
17 TO, chap.8, p.2
18 TO. *Chap. Varsovie*, p.39
before the book appeared, first in Polish and subsequently translated into English. What is particularly strange in Perechodnik's book is the general absence of the Germans. They were the promoters of a fiendish drama in which the actors were principally Polish, particularly Catholics, and Jews, including Perechodnik himself, because as a member of the Jewish ghetto police, he had been forced to shut his wife, his little girl, and his friends, into cattle-trucks departing for the death camp of Treblinka.xv

What is striking, initially as a secondary consideration, and then like a missing link that suddenly falls into its proper place, is the fact that a victim of the Holocaust himself sends us back to the Great War, and in particular to one of its most mythologized, distorted, forgotten, and denied aspects: the "German atrocities." Perechodnik addressed his lost friends and loved ones: “You ran away from Treblinka in order to tell the world untrue things about Greater Germany! You will be preaching Greuelpropaganda [atrocity propaganda]? No, Germans, don't worry about escapees. They will come with a transport of Jews from another town.”xvi

In his memoirs, Gerhart Riegner, the secretary of the World Jewish Congress who, in 1942, sent the first telegram from Geneva warning the world about the “Final Solution,” tried to explain how it was totally impossible to convey what had been going on in Eastern Europe since 1939. In his chapter titled "Why We Failed," Riegner gave a first reason, “a persecution whose scale was with no imaginable precedent,” and then he came to the “Legendary atrocities of the First World War.” “A second factor, little known but devastating, was the number of reports on the German atrocities of World War I, reports that, after the war, had been proven false. This was very damaging to us. People were telling us: ‘All this is invented, exactly as during the First World War.’ We had to make an enormous effort to try to convince them of the truth of our reports about the Shoah.”xvii Thus the inability and the lack of desire to distinguish between truth and lies -- most amazingly, even among the victims themselves -- can be linked to the worst horror of the twentieth century.

Conclusion: No future for the victims of a genocide.

« After a war which is lost, a nation may rebuild its technical and financial resources, and may start a new life. But those who have been destroyed in genocide have been lost forever, while the losses of war can be repaired, the losses of genocide are irreparable. (...) »19

Lemkin became a psychologist to describe the impossibility of going on after a genocide: “The psychological impact of genocide on the victimized group is enormous. It permeates every cell in the psychological fibre of the individual.(…) the refinement of pain,, sorrow, perception of injustice,, and above all, the undescrivable frustration of the

19 NYPL. Reel 2, pages tapuscrites des années cinquante.
impossibility of bringing back to life those who died. This collective grief is hereditary.”

This psychological approach, in a way, makes Lemkin to contredict himself: he was appealed by the forgetness of the Armenians extermination and began to think about the international law to remind the world and now he does not see any issue to get away this “scare” than to forget: “The only psychological protection for the survivors in the generations to come is the carrying out of one of the saddest vows a man ever makes: « lest we forget. »

“This process of perpetuating the psychological scar has a devastating effect on two groups.(…) Members in distant lands, who were saved because they lived apart from the scene of the genocidal massacre, and survivors of these massacres, in which they were personally involved as prospective victims.”

En plus shame and guilt… »But we should not begin to feel that they are the sole or even the main reason for the present attitude of the American Jewry for their suffering brethen. » Volonté d’oubli, ou plutôt de refoulement, honte, culpabilité du survivant…

His psychological insight is incredibly modern, what he said about Armenians and Jews is now carried on about Rwanda: comme la sociologue et rescapée du génocide rwandais Esther Mujawayo que « la puissance d’un génocide c’est exactement cela : une horreur pendant, mais encore une horreur après. Intérieurement il n’y a pas de fin à un génocide. Il y a juste arrêt des tueries, des massacres des poursuites, mais il n’y a pas de fin à la destruction. »

Cf. Jean Hatzfeld, la stratégie des Antilopes. p.3 Premier texte, Claudine, une rescapée –une survivante, une sous-vivante (Soizic Aaaron) témoigne de son mariage heureux… « Grâce au mariage, le présent montre son gentil visage, mais le présent seulement, Parce que je vois bien que l’avenir est déjà mangé par ce que j’ai vécu. »

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20 Ibidem, Perpetuation of the Psychological scar

iii “On frémit devant les tableaux des atrocités commises pas eux […] On ne raisonne pas avec des illuminés et des insensés […] 850 corps mutiles et défigurés […] des enfants de 2 mois, des vieillards de 90ans, des femmes enceintes, des jeunes filles violées, etc. […] Dans cette vaste étendue ils ont tué tous ceux qu'ils ont rencontré, ils ont brûlé les villages, abattu les animaux. […] Aussi parmi les Turcs de Transcaucasie […] C'est ainsi que les organisations arméniennes appliquent systématiquement leur plan d'anéantissement de la race turque […] L'histoire se prononcera certainement un jour sur le compte de ces criminels civilisés. Quant au présent, ces insensés doivent savoir que leurs crimes leur coûteront cher. Ce n'est pas à une poignée d'Arméniens conduits par des officiers anglais et français, qu'il est donné d'exterminer la race turque; celle-ci est si forte qu'elle est garantie par la nature et Dieu même contre l'anéantissement. Tout au plus ces crimes et ces atrocités provoqueront-ils une indignation inoubliable dans le vaste monde qui va jusqu'aux confins de la Chine et comme les Arméniens sont par Dieu même condamnés à vivre justement au milieu de ce monde, quelles que soient les mains dans lesquelles ils se trouvent, il deviendra un enfer pour eux. Voilà le seul résultat auquel peut aboutir tant de crimes!” Hilal, 14 March 1918, Vatican Archives, Guerra 14-18. 244; fasc. 112. 1918.


vi Ibid., 91.


viii Ibid., 406.

ix Lemkin, Axis Rule in Occupied Europe.

x “The enormous scale on which the policy of deportation was carried out and the harsh and indiscriminate, not to say cruel, way in which it was executed, makes it comparable to the slave raids on the Gold coast of Africa in the seventeenth century. It appears to be without precedent in modern wars. […] Not since the beginning of the modern age—not even during the Thirty Years’ war—has any invader seized and virtually enslaved a large part of the civil population in order to carry on his own industries at home and release his own able bodied men for military service.” James W. Gardner, International Law and the World War (New York, 1920),183: quoted in Lemkin, Axis Rule in Occupied Europe, 72.


Perechodnik, Am I a Murderer?, 51.