Genocide

The annihilation of a racial, ethnic, political, or religious group or its destruction to the extent that it no longer exists as a group. The term "genocide" was first used in 1933 at a conference in Madrid by a Jewish judge named Raphael Lemkin. Lemkin proposed to the League of Nations that they create an international agreement to condemn vandalism and barbaric crimes. He then went on to define and analyze the crime of genocide in books he wrote during World War II. He explained that genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate and complete destruction of a group; rather, it may also involve a series of planned actions that are meant to destroy basic elements of the group's existence, including its language, culture, national identity, economy, and the freedom of its individuals.

On December 9, 1948 the United Nations approved the Genocide Convention, an agreement to prevent genocide and punish those who design and carry it out. Lemkin himself played an important part in drafting the convention. The convention lists several actions that are defined as genocide when carried out against a religious, ethnic, national, or racial group in order to destroy part or all of that group: 1) killing people belonging to the group; 2) causing severe bodily or spiritual harm to members of the group; 3) deliberately forcing a group to live under conditions that could lead to the complete or partial destruction of the group; 4) taking measures to prevent births among a group; and 5) forcibly removing children from the group and transferring them to another group. This list of genocide crimes is very similar to those Nazi crimes that were dealt with at the first of the Nuremberg Trials. The crimes brought up at Nuremberg, defined as "crimes against humanity," included murder, cruel treatment, and persecution of a group based on its race or ethnicity in order to destroy the group. However, the Nazis tried at Nuremberg were not accused specifically of "genocide," since that crime was not included in the agreement that launched the International Military Tribunal. The accusation of genocide was included during the later war crimes trials held at Nuremberg and at many of the Nazi criminal trials held in Poland. For
example, in the July 1946 trial of Arthur Greiser, a Polish court convicted him of crimes of genocide committed against the Polish people.

The government of Israel joined the Genocide Convention soon after the State of Israel was established, and in 1950 passed its own Genocide Prevention and Punishment Law. The definition of genocide used in that law was the same as that of the Genocide Convention. The Israeli government also used that definition in another law it passed in 1950, the Nazis and Nazi Collaborators (Punishment) Law. This law included the definitions of "crimes against humanity" and "war crimes," which had been established before the Nuremberg Trials, and also contained the definition of a newly coined crime—"Crimes against the Jewish People." To explain this crime, the Israelis took the Genocide Convention’s list of genocide crimes, but adapted it specifically to the Jewish people. Thus, "Crimes against the Jewish People" consist of any of the following actions, when carried out with the intention of annihilating part or all of the Jewish people: 1) killing Jews; 2) causing severe bodily or mental harm to Jews; 3) deliberately forcing Jews to live under conditions that could lead to their physical destruction; 4) taking measures to prevent births among Jews; 5) forcibly transferring Jewish children to another religious or national group; 6) destroying or desecrating Jewish religious or cultural treasures or values; and 7) inciting others to hate Jews.

"Crimes against the Jewish People" involve the Jewish people only, and relate to a totally unique and unparalleled case. However, the crimes perpetrated against the Jewish people in the context of the holocaust were also crimes that negated the basic principles and values of all humanity. Thus, they affected not only the Jews but also the entire world, in that they tried to remove from the world one of its many fundamental elements.

Holocaust experts all agree that genocide was a part of the Holocaust. However, some scholars also say that what the Nazis did to the Jewish people went beyond genocide for several reasons. The attempt to dehumanize and then murder every Jew, everywhere, regardless of his activities or beliefs, was unprecedented in history. Moreover, the Nazi belief that Jews had to be murdered for the sake of mankind, is a dimension not present in other acts of genocide that were carried out either before or after
the Holocaust. Since the 1980s, the field of genocide studies, which usually includes the Holocaust, has grown considerably.