Pogroms, the Holocaust, and Genocides as Foreign Policy Tools

From Pogroms to Genocide: Analyzing Historical Classifications of Systematic Violence

Since the inception of nationhood, specific groups, ethnicities, and even entire nations have faced threats of displacement, forced migration, or annihilation by other nations or groups throughout history. The underlying causes of these events, the actors responsible, and how they were carried out have been analyzed and categorized into various classifications. Therefore, it is necessary to briefly address some of these classifications.

The term "pogrom" etymologically originated during the era of Tsarist Russia. It is derived from the prefix *no (po)* and the root *громи́ть (gromit')*, which together convey the meaning of destruction or annihilation through coercive means. Over time, Jewish communities emigrating from Russia introduced this word into Yiddish, a German-derived Jewish dialect, thereby spreading the term into all European languages.

"Massacre" refers to acts carried out against defenceless populations. When state elites are involved, it often falls under the category of crimes against humanity. Due to its broad definition, the term massacre can sometimes encompass pogroms as well.

"Genocide" is a term that, while similar to the two aforementioned concepts, specifically involves the intent and action of systematic extermination. Unlike a massacre, genocide affects larger populations and is characterized by its deliberate and organized nature.

The key differences between the three concepts are as follows: In the case of a pogrom, there is an emphasis on suppressing an uprising, meaning that a group must first rebel or

resist. During a massacre, however, no uprising is necessary; one group seeks to annihilate another, often accompanied by territorial occupation. In contrast, the concept of genocide does not involve the aim of territorial occupation but focuses solely on the systematic extermination of a group.

From the First Pogroms to the Holocaust in History

The first known pogroms in the modern period occurred between 1881 and 1883, targeting ethnic Jews in the western regions of Tsarist Russia. Although there are claims that pogroms in Europe were carried out earlier, for example, against Jews in France and Germany in 1819, 1830, 1834, and 1848–49, the term pogrom was not used at the time of these events. Initially, the term pogrom reflected events in which the state was involved, but over time, it evolved to describe a chain of incidents that could occur between two groups. In this context, one of the earliest uses of the term can be found in Maxim Gorky's 1901 work titled "Pogrom". Over time, these pogroms spread westward within the empire and eventually expanded globally. When discussing pogroms, it is essential to categorize them. There are two types of pogroms: (1) Those directed against Jews; (2) Those targeting non-Jewish groups.

The most significant pogroms targeting Jews include the following: (1) Odessa Pogrom; (2) Warsaw Pogrom (1881); (3) Kishinev Pogrom (1903); (4) Kiev Pogrom (1905); (5) Białystok Pogrom (1906); (6) Lwów Pogrom (1918); (7) Kiev Pogroms (1919); (8) Kristallnacht (1938); (9) Farhud (1941); (10) Iashi Pogrom (1941); (11) Jedwabne Pogrom (1941); (12) Tripoli Pogrom (1945); (13) Kielce Pogrom (1946); (14) Aleppo Pogrom (1947); (15) Amsterdam Attacks (2024)[1][2].

Pogroms targeting non-Jews include the following examples: (1) Sikh Pogrom (1984); (2) Gujarat Pogrom (2002); (3) Huwara Pogrom (2023); and other such occurrences.

The pogroms against Jews, particularly those perpetrated by Christians, have historical and theological roots. In Christian belief, the death of Jesus is attributed to the actions of Jews, which over time fuelled animosity and led extremist factions within both religious communities to commit pogroms. The origin of this hatred can be traced to Matthew 27:25, which states: "His blood is on us and on our children!" The community referenced in this verse is the Jewish population of Jerusalem at the time.

This interpretation contributed to centuries of anti-Jewish sentiment, particularly in societies where nationalist and religious ideologies were prominent, such as Tsarist Russia. Later, similar pogroms occurred in newly independent states emerging from colonialism, where nationalist and religious fervour remained strong.

The first five pogroms against Jews occurred during the Tsarist era, with the sixth and seventh in Poland and Ukraine, the eighth in Germany, the ninth in Iraq, the tenth in Romania, the eleventh in Poland, the twelfth in Libya, the thirteenth in Poland, the fourteenth in Syria, and the "fifteenth in the Netherlands". According to this historical pattern, after the Sovietization of Russia and its periphery, anti-Jewish hatred did not manifest in pogroms, as the region distanced itself from Christianity. Instead, the rise of the far-right in Europe and the growth of Arab nationalism in the Middle East created new motivations for pogroms against Jews. Notably, pogroms in the Middle East were not driven by religious motivations related to Jesus Christ but by the hatred stemming from the Arab-Israeli conflicts.

In pogroms against non-Jews, religious motifs often play a central role. For example, the Sikh pogrom targeted people belonging to the Sikh faith, while the Gujarat pogrom was directed against Muslims in the Indian subcontinent. However, the most significant of these is undoubtedly the Huwara pogrom. The Huwara pogrom took place in the West Bank,

where Israelis targeted Palestinians. This event, in a way, created a situation that undermined the central theme of pogroms — the victimization of Jews — as it involved a reversal of roles, with Palestinians becoming the victims.

The Holocaust is more closely related to genocide than to a pogrom, as it involved the deliberate killing of civilians and the imprisonment of victims in concentration camps. The term Holocaust comes from the Greek word meaning "a whole burning" or "total destruction by fire." It refers to the genocide carried out by Nazi Germany between 1933 to 1945, during which Jews, along with other targeted groups, were systematically persecuted and exterminated across Nazi-occupied Europe.

After Germany's defeat in World War I, Jews in the country were increasingly scapegoated as the cause of the loss. This hatred intensified with the rise of the far-right to power. The ideology of the "Aryan" race became dominant, and all other races were regarded as inferior. This culminated in a plan officially known as the "Final Solution to the Jewish Question." Through this plan, crimes such as discriminatory laws based on identity, organized violence, forced displacement, internment, widespread theft and looting, and forced labour were systematically carried out. As a result, approximately 6 million Jews were murdered.

The Development of the Concept of Genocide

The term "genocide" was first coined by Polish-Jewish scholar Raphael Lemkin in 1944. This term was not used solely to describe the Holocaust but also referred to other historical events such as "the destruction of Carthage," "the devastations caused by the Islamic and Crusader wars," and similar instances of mass destruction. Lemkin developed the term to capture the systematic extermination or destruction of entire groups based on ethnicity, religion, or nationality.

Since several centuries had passed since the last instances of “genocide” before the Holocaust, it is understandable that the term genocide is often used interchangeably with the Holocaust. However, the concept of genocide, especially after World War II, began to find its place in legal and scholarly discourse. For the first time during the Nuremberg Trials, genocide was discussed under the category of crimes against humanity. However, at that time, genocide was not included in the Statute of the International Military Tribunal, meaning it could not legally be classified as a crime, although the term was used as a complementary concept and was widely recognized.

Following this period, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide was signed by the relevant parties in 1948. This convention established genocide as an international crime, and its prevention and punishment were mandated, regardless of whether it occurred during times of peace or war. The convention came into force on January 12, 1951. Subsequently, this crime was incorporated into the legal systems of some countries, although others have yet to fully embrace it.

According to Article 28 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, laws generally cannot have retroactive effect. However, this rule does not apply to genocide crimes. In international law, where state consent is a key factor, a state can be held accountable for genocide committed after it has become a party to the Genocide Convention. The primary reason for this is the principle of **nullum crimen sine lege** (no crime without law) and **nulla poena sine lege** (no punishment without law). In other words, if there is no law, there can be no crime, but once a state has agreed to a legal framework, it can be held accountable for crimes committed under that framework, even retroactively.

Considering these principles, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) in 1994 classified the crimes committed against the Tutsis as genocide. Similarly, the International

Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in 1995 recognized the events at Srebrenica as genocide. Srebrenica was also classified as genocide by the International Court of Justice (ICJ). However, aside from these, the atrocities committed against Jews during the Holocaust and the mass killings carried out by the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia are categorized under the specific terms “Holocaust” and “Killing Fields,” respectively, reflecting the unique nature of each tragedy.

The fact that the term genocide is not always used to describe these crimes can be attributed to both legal complexities and the desire to avoid political pressure. However, leaving these crimes unnamed can contribute to the risk of them happening again. Legally, for an event to be classified as genocide, there must be intent behind the crime. This concept of *intent* is quite vague and subjective, making the categorization of such crimes as genocide difficult to establish categorically.

The Concept of Genocide as a Foreign Policy Tool

In the above discussion, we have tried to address the legal aspects of the concept of genocide. Additionally, some states have attempted to classify certain historical events—some of which may not have even occurred—as genocide, using this classification as a tool in their foreign policy. At the forefront of this is, undoubtedly, the Holocaust. While the Holocaust is a real genocide, it remains one of the most significant instruments in Israel’s foreign policy. The Israeli state views this event as the first, only, and ultimate genocide in history.

The primary reason behind this is the principle of uniqueness. By utilizing the genocide policy, the Israeli state has, for decades, positioned itself as the sole victim of such atrocities on the international stage, thus legitimizing itself while, paradoxically, using it as a form of soft power. Another factor is the widespread intolerance towards the existence of a single

Jewish state, particularly from the majority populations of both Islamic and Christian faiths. Through its Holocaust policy, Israel has been able to significantly mitigate this opposition. To maintain this "uniqueness," the term Holocaust is consistently preferred over genocide. This strategic use of language helps reinforce Israel's distinct historical narrative and its position in global discourse.

Apart from Israel, some other states also attempt to instrumentalize the concept of genocide in their foreign policies. One of these is Armenia. The Armenians have developed the term **Meds Yeghern**, which translates to "Great Slaughter," to conceptualize the events of 1915. This is because genocide was not legally recognized as a crime at that time. However, as we emphasized earlier, genocide must involve both intent and mass actions aimed at the destruction of a group. The issue in this case was about suppressing an internal rebellion, making the event closer to a pogrom rather than genocide. However, for a pogrom to occur, the local population and the state must have had a history of hostility. In the Ottoman Empire, Armenians were considered loyal subjects, which suggests that the events do not fit the categories of genocide, pogrom, or massacre. Despite this, the "event" has been used as a foreign policy tool by the Armenian diaspora for a long time.

In addition, events like the Holodomor, Khojaly, and Gaza have sometimes been categorized as massacres and other times as genocides in literature. The Holodomor refers to the forced famine in Soviet Ukraine, where the population was deliberately starved by the Soviet government. The Khojaly massacre involved the killing of over 600 civilians, mainly women and children, by Armenia in Azerbaijan's Karabakh region using inhumane methods. The Gaza events, which resulted in the death of over 40,000 civilians, were carried out by Israel.

In the case of the Holodomor, there was intent but no occupation, and the death toll was large. In Khojaly, there was both an intent to occupy and to commit genocide, but the death

toll was smaller compared to other genocides. For this reason, it is often categorized as a massacre by many countries. The Gaza events, while not yet fully concluded, have characteristics of all three categories. However, these massacres have not been used as political tools as strongly in some cases. However, when geopolitical fractures become more pronounced in the regions where these events occurred, great powers occasionally try to bring them to the forefront. The main reason for this is that the genocide concept is primarily utilized by states with strong diasporas. Both Jews and Armenians have attempted to base their foreign policies on the concept of genocide thanks to their powerful diasporas.

The natural reason for this is that minority communities tend to view themselves as victims, and by constructing events such as genocide and similar atrocities in their histories, they create a foundation for remaining united. Both Jews and Armenians have survived assimilation in this way.

The Use of ‘Pogrom’ Instead of ‘Holocaust’ in Israeli Foreign Policy

Until World War II, Jews primarily used the pogrom concept. However, after the war, the Holocaust became such a pivotal event that instead of referring to multiple repeated pogroms, Israel began to focus on the Holocaust — a singular event that no other group had experienced. Another reason for this shift is that the term “pogrom” evolved from being used only for crimes committed against Jews to also being applied to crimes committed against non-Jews. In a way, the term pogrom became internationalised.

The State of Israel also rebuilt its “uniqueness” through the Holocaust. However, this process began to gradually change after October 7, 2023. Initially, South Africa, on December 29, 2023, accused Israel of committing genocide against the civilian population of

Gaza at the International Court of Justice. Following this, 14 other countries joined the case. The filing of this lawsuit, in itself, pierced Israel's Holocaust narrative. However, it was not effective in persuading Israel to abandon its Holocaust-driven policy.

Israel's policy shift coincided with the match between Tel Aviv's Maccabi club and Ajax in Amsterdam on November 6-7, 2024. After the match, clashes broke out between Jewish fans and Muslims in Amsterdam. Netanyahu exacerbated the situation by labelling the events as a pogrom. The Mayor of Amsterdam initially described the events as pogrom but later expressed regret for this statement.

After the Amsterdam attacks, the Israeli side, in particular, began referencing the Kristallnacht pogrom in discourse, drawing parallels between the violence and the rising antisemitism targeting Jewish communities. In foreign policy, Kristallnacht is considered the most significant destruction after the Holocaust that can be used. It seems that, for now, a middle ground has been chosen between the two terms. However, there are several reasons why the Holocaust discourse might be replaced by pogrom discourse.

(1) *Reframing Victimhood*

Israel's longstanding use of the Holocaust as a symbol of victimhood has become less effective and, in some cases, politically counterproductive. The Holocaust, while unique, carries associations that can complicate its use in contemporary contexts. Pogrom discourse, by contrast, provides a more flexible and relatable framework for presenting Israel as a victim. It offers a way to highlight persecution without invoking the full weight of Holocaust comparisons, which may be seen as excessive in some political circles.

(2) *Declining Soft Power and Isolation*

The second reason is the significant decline in Israel's soft power in foreign policy and the fact that it is approaching a state of isolation. Israel had already built its "uniqueness" based on the perceptions of the Holocaust and Judaism, which were positive associations. However, now, as the state is increasingly isolated in a negative light, it must appear as a victim and resemble others more. The least costly way to do this is through the discourse of pogrom.

(3) *Cost-Effectiveness of Pogrom Narratives*

Pogrom discourse is a less contentious and more adaptable narrative tool. Unlike Holocaust references, which can provoke criticism or backlash, pogroms are widely recognized as historical episodes of ethnic violence that occurred across various societies. This universality allows Israel to present its case with lower political and emotional risks while maintaining its victim status in the face of rising antisemitism.

There are also possibilities that the Israeli state may have provoked the events in Amsterdam. In the Amsterdam incident, the Maccabi club was scheduled to play a football match. One of the most significant events in Jewish history is the Maccabee Revolt, which is sometimes referred to as the first pogrom. Israel's far-right government may have used this rhetoric and symbolism to both unite the Jewish people and attempt to prevent further isolation.

Conclusion

In foreign policy, states use various tools to manipulate, influence, and persuade other actors to align with their interests. Today, Israel is in the process of replacing the Holocaust theory, which it has constructed but is approaching collapse, with the concept of Pogrom before it is completely undermined. The main reasons for this transition have been

discussed above.

In situations where the international system cannot be defined, states generally try to maximise their interests through power. However, states with limited power and resources, like Israel, are not inclined to fully carry out these claims. Therefore, it is not unreasonable for them not to want to be completely excluded from the system or from a situation of anarchy. Israel seems eager to transition to the concept of pogrom until a new system is formed or until exclusion for any other reason is halted. This represents the final level at which Israel (both the state, the diaspora, and the Jewish faith) can appear as a victim without shaking its foundations, and at the same time, it remains acceptable to the system or lack thereof.

Through this political transition, many Jewish groups accuse the Israeli government of devaluing the Holocaust. However, instead of the complete erasure of the Holocaust, transitioning to the concept of pogrom is acceptable to both the diaspora, the Israeli state, and the international community. However, the pogrom concept was also damaged in 2023 due to Israel's actions against the Palestinian people in Huwara. Currently, Israel is forced to choose the lesser of two evils, which is why it may accept having committed this pogrom. Indeed, this is being accepted, as it is a less costly route compared to genocide.

[1] For an event to be considered a pogrom, one segment of the local population must rise up against another segment of the same local population. In this case, while the local population is indeed the one rising up, the opposing side is not entirely local.

[2] The reason this event is categorized under the term "pogrom" is that some state officials have described it as such in their rhetoric. Therefore, whether the Amsterdam Attacks qualify as a pogrom is not definitive; it is a discursive approach.

Source: ConnectiveThink