This important collection of articles is the result of an outstanding international conference organized by the Polish Institute of International Affairs in Warsaw on September 18–19, 2008, on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Edited by Agnieszka Bieńczyk-Missala, a lecturer at the Institute of International Relations at Warsaw University, and Sławomir Dębski, the then-director of the Polish Institute of International Affairs, this book takes its place alongside two related collections recently published: The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies, edited by Dirk A. Moses and Donald Bloxham, and The Historiography of Genocide, edited by Dan Stone. While these three volumes include some overlapping contributions, they differ from one another quite substantially. Given the essentially contested nature of the subject matter, this is hardly surprising.

Those who immediately recognized the greatness of Raphael (as he was known in English) Lemkin, marginalized and forgotten from the 1950s onwards, and sought to memorialize him, had to wait some sixty years for a well-deserved acknowledgment of their hero’s intellectual and personal achievements. One may well speculate that Lemkin could not have imagined upon his untimely death in penury and obscurity in August 1959 that beginning in the 1990s, there would be a constantly expanding corpus of scholarship on his conceptualization of the international crime of genocide. Given that this “return to Lemkin” was a result of the horrendous genocidal outbursts in Rwanda (1994), in the disintegrating Yugoslavia (1990s), and in the Sudanese province of Darfur (since 2003), Lemkin would probably have preferred to remain forgotten than to regain relevancy under such tragic circumstances. Be that as it may, it is this particular volume, initiated and sponsored by the Polish Foreign Ministry, that would have meant the most for Lemkin.

The politics of memory is ever present in discussions on the canon of genocidal events perpetrated during the twentieth century. Almost no one contests the idea that the annihilation of European Jewry during World War II and the annihilation of the Tutsis in Rwanda in 1994 are supreme examples of genocide. However, applying the concept of genocide to other events, such as the mass murder that accompanied the removal of Armenians from Anatolia; the mass killings perpetrated in the USSR during Stalin’s rule; the destruction of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia between
1975–79, or the extirpation of Tibetan culture and way of life in China since 1950 is highly controversial. The varying interpretations of Lemkin’s original concept of “genocide”—a term he coined—always loom large over such discussions and are almost always the point of departure. As Adam Daniel Rotfeld, Poland’s former foreign minister, himself a survivor of the Shoah, noted in his contribution, it was a “new definition for an old crime.” Some scholars regard the way genocide was defined by the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide as a “good-enough” definition that is compatible with Lemkin’s original concept. Others regard the UN genocide convention as a political compromise, created by the power struggles of the emerging Cold War, which diluted Lemkin’s original intentions almost beyond recognition. As could be expected, between those two polarities one finds a multiplicity of nuanced approaches and interpretations, reflecting various sensitivities, methodological controversies, and disciplinary differences.

This volume includes no fewer than three different contributions regarding genocide and Communism: Stephane Courtois on Raphael Lemkin (the English spelling of his name) and the question of genocide under Communist regimes; Anton Weiss-Wendt on the subject of the USSR and the Genocide Convention; and Roman Serbyn on the Ukrainian Holdomor. Moreover, the volume is restricted to depicting genocidal events perpetrated on European soil, effectively ignoring cases of annihilation of indigenous populations in colonial settings, where Europeans (from Western and Central Europe) acted as perpetrators. This is a noteworthy and unfortunate omission, especially given Lemkin’s personal interest and unpublished work about colonial genocide.5

As the Polish historian Ryszard Szawłowski argues in his outstanding article in this volume, Lemkin’s life and career in inter-war Poland are probably the most misinformed and misinterpreted part of his life and political outlook. Some of the key publications on Lemkin tend to erroneously present him as a victim of rampant Polish antisemitism and as one of those “tragic Polish patriots never allowed membership in the nation he actually claimed his own” (p. 38, as he was called by Michael Ignatieff in a paper presented at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in December 2001). Inter-war Poland is most often portrayed as a hotbed of antisemitism—and Lemkin is often seen as its victim. Today, it is recognized that the prevailing antisemitism notwithstanding, there was certainly more to Jewish life in Poland than hostility toward Jews, however widespread. The Jewish community in Poland, of which Lemkin was a product, was not only the largest in Europe, it was probably the most dynamic and creative. Although Jews were largely excluded from certain areas of public employment, such as the civil service and the officers corps (except for the medical and legal sections), and were often depicted as a superfluous element in society who should be compelled to emigrate,
they were free to pursue their own political, cultural, and religious interests and to conduct practically the whole gamut of identity-sustaining practices.

In her pioneering study of the way in which Polish Jews perceived their place within the Polish nation (and their expectations from their Polish compatriots during the German occupation), the Israeli historian Havi Dreifuss Ben Sasson presents a vivid picture of the prevailing feeling among Jews in Poland regarding their organic membership in the Polish nation. Despite the widespread manifestations of antisemitism (especially after the death in 1935 of the much-beloved, though authoritarian, leader Józef Piłsudski) acculturated Jews such as Lemkin did occupy predominant roles in industry, commerce, banking, and the liberal professions and many, like Lemkin, saw themselves as Poles. Lemkin’s life, at least at that stage, before the war, was certainly not a metaphor for suffering. By presenting Lemkin, above all, as a victim of Polish antisemitism as early as the 1920s, his wartime experience actually loses some of its significance. In September 1939, Lemkin saw the horrible ease with which everything, no matter how imperfect, could so unexpectedly collapse.

Lemkin maintained that his own fate, the fate of his family, and the fate of all Jews in Europe was not unique. He was convinced that such suffering could also be inflicted on other social groups under different historical circumstances. In fact, Lemkin knew that mass murder had already been perpetrated on other social groups. Only by understanding that Lemkin was not foolishly deceiving himself during the inter-war years that he was part of the Polish nation can we understand his concept of genocide. Any social group can one day find itself singled out for annihilation as long as there is no international obligation to prevent such a thing from happening. Only if we remember the unexpected ease with which even a person of Lemkin’s social standing found himself devoid of his civil rights, and eventually even the right to live, may we truly ensure that such a thing never happens again. This is what Rafał Lemkin—A Hero of Mankind is all about.

Notes