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The Osgood Center

When Backs Are Turned

The headlines proclaimed it. Henry Morgenthau, the ambassador to Turkey, verified it. So, why does the U.S. continue to behave as if the events that transgressed in the Ottoman Empire from 1915-1922 were ambiguous and do not warrant use of the word genocide?

As is the case with most, if not all areas where ethnic conflict has occurred, the history of the Ottoman Turks is littered with intolerance. Various instances have been recorded since 1048 in which approximately 512,000 minority peoples were massacred and/or enslaved. In 1338, under the second Sultan of Turkey, the system of Janissaries was instituted. Under this system, the Ottoman Government, over a period of 310 years, removed Christian children from their children, raised them as Moslems, and used them to form a significant portion of the Turkish armies.

(Cardashian 142) In this way, the Ottoman Empire could efficiently utilize its human capital and simultaneously keep the Christian minority communities under its thumb by taking the most gifted young minds and bodies. Not unlike the Jewish minority populations across Europe, the Armenians were particularly targeted and bore the brunt of discontent from people in majority demographic not only due to their religious traditions, but because of their, many cases, comparatively high economic standing.

According to noted historian Peter Balakian, from the time Armenians became part of the Ottoman Empire in the fourteenth century, they, as Christian subjects, “were designated under Ottoman law as...non-Muslim subjects living under the protection of the Muslim Turkish ruling order.” (40) For nearly five centuries, the Ottoman Empire was governed by a line of sultans, all of whom consistently upheld deep rooted ties of religion and state. (Klorian xi) The Armenians were granted a degree of autonomy with the ability to govern their internal affairs, civil issues such as marriage, public needs such as schools, etc. However, the cost of being a “protected” non-Muslim minority was so great that the arrangement has been likened to racketeering. (Balakian 40) Many Armenian populations were forced to pay such high taxes that they were forced into abject subsistence. Additionally, the autonomy that was provided was certainly limited. While the Armenians had law enforcement measures within their own societies and had courts with the *ability* to hear civil cases involving a Christian and a Muslim, the Muslim could also apply to have the case heard in a religious court where the non-Muslim’s testimony would carry little, if any, weight. Due to this system, the Armenian population constantly existed in a vulnerable state. The plight of the Armenians was perhaps put most succinctly by P.H. Massy, the British vice-council stationed in Adana, when he wrote, “The Armenian population is everywhere oppressed by a system of government which takes from them the means of circulating freely, of earning a livelihood, and of enjoying a feeling of security to life and property; even on the most frequented highway. Taxes are levied without mercy, even from the poorest. The prisons are

filled with innocent men, who lie there for months without trial.” (qtd. in Balakian 42)

After countless appeals to the Sultan for protection, the Armenian people put their faith in the diplomats of other states who might intercede with the Sultan on their behalf or at least have more bargaining power. This too proved to be fruitless as various hollow agreements by the Sultan to work toward further protection of the Armenian minority, as components of larger treaties, never came to fruition. Armenians, then, began to pursue their own avenues to safety. Progressive ideals of liberty and equality were spreading from Armenian intellectuals and Christian missionaries from the West. As rebellions were galvanizing the people, the Ottoman Empire, long referred to by many as “the sick man of Europe,” was suffering. Sultan Abdul Hamid had a ready made scapegoat in the Armenians.

The Armenians, for centuries a persecuted minority, were now rebelling against the chains of injustice that had so bound them for so long. This actually worked in the Sultan’s favor as it provided him with a seemingly just cause for putting down any rebellion that was a threat to his regime. The Sultan’s paranoid nature disposed him to against many forms of change as that would, could, or may threaten the autocratic governing system of the Ottoman Empire and thus his power and personal security. This was particularly true for any changes that included giving in to the rebellions and would result in more equality for Armenians. As A. W. Terrell, former American minister at Constantinople, described in the November 1897 issue of *Century Magazine*, the Sultan expressed the opinion that the Armenians, drunk with economic clout, exhibited an “ingratitude [that] was shown by plotting

and organizing to destroy the Ottoman Empire.” (133) His sentiment for the Armenian population far exceeded a mere disdain which is reflected in the massacre of 80,000 to 300,000 Armenians between 1894 and 1897. (Armenian estimates run from 250,000 dead to as high as 350,000 massacred while Turkish estimates are a great deal more conservative at 20,000 to 30,000 killed.) Even the word massacre, perhaps, does not do justice to the horrors that were allowed, even encouraged, to take place.

The Armenians again saw a false hope when the Young Turks made their play for power in 1913 with a revolt against Sultan Abdul Hamid II. Although a small minority of Armenians, likely roused by Russians to fight harder for Armenian independence, opposed the Young Turks, the majority supported them. They believed that Young Turk rule would yield reform and bring with it a constitutional government that would include protection for the Armenians and end the contemptible era of repression. To their dismay, the triumvirate: Enver Pasha, Minister of War; Talaat Pasha, Minister of the Interior; and Djemal Pasha, Minister of Marine, were just as committed to keeping power as they were to getting it. They did not institute the liberal reforms they had preached. Instead, the triumvirate consolidated their power and ruled over the bureaucracy. They were obsessed with power and ethnic purity in Turkey. This took even the repressive aspects of Islamic rule under the Sultans a step further. Under Islamic law, they were second-class (or maybe third or fourth) citizens, but under the triumvirate’s vision of a Greater Turkey with all Turkic people united, they were simply non-Turks and thus a threat to Turkish homogeneity. (Kloian xii)

In August of 1914, Enver Pasha signed a secret treaty with Germany pledging Turkey as an ally in the event of war. According to the *Posthumous Memoirs of Talaat Pasha*, as published in the *New York Times* monthly magazine *Current History*, they allying Turkey was a response to the European powers having turned their backs on Turkey after the Balkan war. Thus, when Turkey came back around and was interested in forging a relationship, Turkish policy was still the same and there was good reason to have a strong European ally when Russia was seen as a constant threat. Then, after the treaty was signed, it was clear that war was eminent.

(358) However, the actions of the triumvirate do not reflect such naiveté.

In October of 1914, the Turkish fleet attacked Russian ships. This “fleet” was lead by two German warships with German crews, but presumably under the Ottoman flag. This act was enough to goad Russia, and its allies, England and France, into declaring war on Turkey. In addition to manipulating major European powers, the Young Turks also *manipulated* not only Turkish citizens, but followers of Islam world-wide. According to Kloian, “The Ottoman Empire was the center of the Islamic world, and the Sheikh ul-Islam was the chief religious authority for all Muslims.” The Sheikh was traditionally appointed by the Sultan, but the Young Turks appointed their own candidate, Mustafa Hayim Bey who was not from the religious elite but had served in various political offices, also a departure from tradition. (xii)

Balakian explains a growing frustration for the young Turks when, “only months after the onset of the Young Turk revolution, Austria annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Bulgaria declared its independence...and it fueled their distrust and

dislike of their Christian subjects, in particular their Christian subjects inside Turkey—notably the Armenians.” (145) Compelled by the triumvirate’s political party, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) and Germany, the Sheikh issued a “Jihad,” in November of 1914 and the translated appeal to Moslems for a Holy War appears in the July 1915 edition of *The Missionary Review of the World*. The text specifically calls for Moslems to take arms against the “savage Russians, the traitorous English, the Frenchmen, born of impure parentage yet proud in their baseness.” The Sheikh went on to shame Moslems into action by saying that if they did not fight, they had, “become slaves of the people of the Cross.” He also prescribed the appropriate method to carry out this Jihad saying, “Attack them from every side. Whenever you meet them, kill them...by the fire of your rifles and cannon, and by the blows of your swords and knives.” (Kloin 19) The Ottoman Empire was at war with the English, French and Russians so, they were being killed whether or not it was for a Jihad, and thus the major target of the Jihad within turkey was, of course, the Armenians.

Scholars conservatively estimate that more than a million Armenians were killed, likely between 1.2 an 1.5 million, between 1915 and 1922. While the word “genocide” had yet to be coined by Raphael Lemkin, the world did know, in spite of CUP attempts to keep the information quiet and do away with evidence, that inconceivable amounts of Armenians were being massacred, in some of the most inhumane ways, in the Ottoman Empire. There was a massive humanitarian response from many generous and courageous Americans who felt a kinship with the Armenians as their Christian brethren. News of the slayings was frequently splashed

across the front pages of major periodicals including the New York Times. The government, through interaction with other state governments and through Henry Morgenthau's appeals for action, was aware of the atrocities befalling the Armenians. However, a policy of isolationism yielded government inaction.

A policy of isolationism is a policy of isolationism; sovereignty is sovereignty. So, we have reasons, not valid excuses, but reasons that help us to better understand why the United States, a beacon of democracy whose foundation is justice for all, could stand idly by while over a million persons systematically exterminated. I say they are not valid because policies must change to fit a changing political climate and, in the midst of WWI, the climate was certainly changing. The question could be posed, "Didn't the Young Turks have the right to govern their sovereign state in a manner that they deemed most appropriate?" The answer to this is, "yes," except when this plan includes murder of an entire minority population. As Jeremy Rabkin explained at a discussion of sovereignty at The Heritage Foundation, "There are always exceptions. If your house is burning down and others are in danger of catching fire, people in rubber with axes and hoses will run in and tear the building down if necessary." Those who govern are allowed to do so by consent of the governed. We agree to cede some of our personal autonomy and rights to the government in return for, in our estimation, even more rights or more protection than we could afford ourselves in a state of anarchy. When a sovereign abuses those from whom he/she derives power, his/her sovereignty should also be threatened. Rabkin went on to discuss the matter in terms of individuals saying, "Not every person has *all* rights by virtue of being a person. You must also rise to certain standards and show

that you have the capacity for responsibility deserving rights.” We certainly see this all around us. If a forty-year old man tries to engage in sexual acts with a minor, he may lose the right to live near a school or visit parks. If someone tries to commit suicide or harm themselves, they will usually be checked into a mental health facility, however, this is as an alternative to other recourse for which the law provides as attempted suicide is a crime. According to Rabkin, “The same is true for regimes, they only get to claim sovereignty if they meet international standards.”

Although that nothing can be done to change the inaction of the United States government from the 1890s-1922, the controversy surrounding the Armenian Genocide still involves the U.S. today and maintaining the isolationist policy regarding it is possibly even more deplorable now than it was almost a century ago. While there have been countless scholarly works categorizing the massacre of the Armenians as genocide, the Turkish government has yet to admit that it was in fact genocide. In an event at the Brookings Institution, Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül dismissed mention of the Armenian Genocide saying, “As far as the so-called genocide is concerned, it happened during the First World War...What is genocide? To kill people because of race/religion. That time was under Ottoman rule during a war with three fronts. Unfortunately, some were killed.” This is, as most things are at events where there are time constraints, oversimplified view of the events that transpired. It is also inaccurate and for this, time cannot be an excuse.

Unfortunately, the policy of the Turkish government does not only influence the Turkish people. It also influences the American government. President Clinton, in 2000 blocked the passage of a resolution cited as “Affirmation of the United States

Record on the Armenian Genocide Resolution.” In a letter from the President to the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Clinton expressed concern that consideration of the resolution at that time could have negative effects that would be contrary to U.S. interests. Clinton expanded on this saying, “We have significant interests in this troubled region of the world: containing the threat posed by Saddam Hussein; working for peace and stability in the Middle East ...and developing new sources of energy.” He went on to say that consideration of the resolution would not only have negative effects on those interests, but also on the Armenian-Turkey relations.

That letter was sent over six years ago. Certainly the international climate has once again changed a great deal. The United States has a different administration with a very different approach to international affairs. Saddam Hussein doesn't pose quite the same threat he once did. The development of new sources of energy is not so much a goal as it is a phrase that politicians and the media keep using with out much prospect of making substantial moves toward it. Turkey is a political and economic ally of Israel which should give the U.S. even more clout in the area. However, peace and stability in the Middle East, especially now in the midst of the Israel-Lebanon conflict, does not seem to be on the horizon.

Many of the reasons that President Clinton, and many along with him, has given in an argument to keep current U.S. policy not to officially acknowledge what happened to the Armenians as genocides are no longer applicable or wholly irrelevant. So, how can we still not officially appropriately acknowledge for the Armenian people what befell them under the Ottoman Empire? President Clinton,

kept tradition and commemorated Armenian Remembrance Day on April 24th which mourns the deportation and massacres of innocent Armenians during that era. He also, “challenged all Americans to re-commit themselves to ensuring that such horrors never occur again.” Such vague language would be understandable if we did not have a name for what happened to the Armenians. We would be forced to speak of it in terms of “deportations and massacres,” but this is not the case. Raphael Lemkin provided us with a word: Genocide.

In order to ensure that something doesn't recur, one must know what that thing is. When one *does* know what it is but pretends not to, it unequivocally negates any effort to re-commit oneself to ensuring that it never happens again. One day a year, we, as a nation, remember the Armenians who were victims of a deliberate systematic plan whose end was their extermination from the Ottoman Empire. If we remember what happened to them as anything other than what it was, it is a grave injustice. A massacre, though deplorable, is not genocide; and genocide, though it takes courage, perhaps courage that we, as a nation currently lack, must be called genocide.

President Clinton, the American people, and to an unimaginably greater extent, the people of Rwanda, know the sickening things that people do to one another when backs are turned.

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