

Armenian Massacres by Katie Ott

When Hitler addressed his henchmen on the topic of clearing Poland for more German *lebensraum* (living space) he was speaking of the genocide of the Polish Jews. Seeing the hesitant reaction of some of his generals, Hitler asked them “Who remembers the Armenians?” In fact, Hitler was correct. Although the term genocide had not yet been used, the Turks, in their systematic killing of Armenians in 1915, initiated the practice (Alexander 1). Years later in 1982, the United States Department of State issued this report: “Because the historical record of events during World War I is ambiguous, the United States Department of State does not endorse allegations that the Turkish government committed a genocide against the Armenian people” (Sourain ix). Accounts of the massacres are not only abundant but also verifiable; it is the fragility of foreign relations that allows the United States to avoid laying blame for the Armenian massacres.

Nearly three quarters of a century after the massacres the United States Congress issued their findings on the claims of the Armenian genocide:

The Armenian Genocide was conceived and carried out by the Ottoman Empire from 1915 to 1923, resulting in the deportation of nearly 2,000,000 Armenians, of whom 1,500,000 men, women, and children were killed, 500,000 survivors were expelled from their homes, and which succeeded in the elimination of the over 2,500 year presence of Armenians from their homeland. (“Affirmation”)

Despite these findings, the United States government has refused to publicly hold the Turkish government responsible for the genocide in any form of legislature. Instead, the U.S. has decided to declare a national remembrance day on April 24. Naturally, many Armenians feel as if their struggle was for nothing. Not only is the Turkish government not held accountable, they also refuse to admit that the Armenian massacre ever happened. They claim that the Armenians were an aggressive people and the Turks were simply acting in self-defense.

Donald and Lorna Miller recount these actions of “self-defense” through the stories of many survivors, which they have collected in their book, *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide*. The survivors tell of the atrocities that they witnessed when the Young Turk regime decided to empty the Ottoman Empire of the Armenian race. One survivor from the town of Khapert explains the scenario as her father was taken away, (the men were the first to be killed):

My younger brother, Boghos, who was only three years old, was yelling after him saying, “Daddy let me come with you.” [But he did not return.] They took him [his father and other prisoners] near the River Euphrates, made them sit down as though to eat. The person who had seen this said that my father first bowed his head to pray, and when he was done, the Turks attacked them. I cannot tell you what brutalities they committed. It’s unbelievable and almost cannot be repeated. They used whatever they could [to kill them], from bottles on. He died there and was thrown in the river along with everyone else. (Miller and Miller 67)

This is one story of thousands. Almost two million Armenians were killed in this manner and through deportation. Deportation was the process in which the Turks ordered the remaining

Armenians to leave their towns and march through the desert to Anatolia. This order was made knowing that the Armenians would never make it through the desert, as they were given no food or water. What resulted was the genocide of the Armenian race.

The United States argues that if they were to hold the Turkish government responsible the implications would certainly put America in danger. In a letter of dissent to the United States Congress, Walter Slocombe argues this from his position in the Department of Defense:

We continue to be concerned that passage of H.Res 398 [the document that would implicate Turkey's responsibility in the Armenian massacre] would have substantial negative effects on our strategic interests in the region, complicating our effort to build peace and stability. ("Affirmation")

He further contends that "it is difficult to overstate Turkey's strategic value. The Balkans, the Persian gulf and much of the Middle East are within reach of Turkish bases" ("Affirmation").

Considering the volatility of the Middle East today, Slocombe's argument takes on a new meaning. With the escalating conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, America has a renewed reason for maintaining a friendship with Turkey. Our bases in the area have become ever more valuable. Unsurprisingly, this can strain relations between the United States government and Armenian-Americans. Many of them lost mothers, fathers, siblings, neighbors or friends in the Armenian massacres and they have certainly not forgotten the tragedy of these deaths. As Armenians see the continuing support of Israel by the United States in the religious battles of the Middle East, it is difficult to justify the United State's silence about the Armenian massacres. If the United States can so strongly back another nation in their struggle to regain what they believe is rightfully theirs, why can't the U.S. simply ask a country to acknowledge their history? Doing this would accomplish two things. First, Armenians around the world would have some amount of closure for their struggle, and secondly, Americans would be able to add some truth to their moralist façade of pragmatism.

The Young Turks were able to carry off the Armenian genocide under the veil of World War I. The Young Turks allied themselves with Germany on August 2, 1914; one day after World War I began. They were hoping to defeat Russia with German help and then "gain control of the Turkish populated regions of the Russian Empire" (Zetlian 41). The vision of the Young Turks was "Pan-Turkism" or the spreading of the Turkish Empire, which had greatly suffered in the new multi-polar world. Significantly, this was also the vision of Adolph Hitler twenty years later as he embarked on a takeover of Europe.

Amidst stories of the genocide in Turkey, the European world was unable to do anything, as they were caught up in the most deadly war of their history. Years after the war, the three men leading the triumvirate of the Young Turks were convicted in absentia of "crimes against humanity" and were sentenced to death. All three escaped this sentence by going into exile in Berlin, Germany where they were sure not to be turned over to the world community. This was the extent of action taken against the Turkish government for the death of almost two million people.

In Walter Slocombe's phrase, "our effort to build peace and stability," the United States acknowledges its pragmatism but continues to try and mask it as moralist practices. Certainly the United States subscribes to pragmatism in world affairs, but often the American public can be

misled to believe that we are pursuing world peace rather than American gain. Is it possible that our reluctance to demand an acknowledgement from Turkey could simply be that we want to protect our oil resources and our place in NATO, of which Turkey is an important member? We are certainly guilty of this in the Middle East and many African countries. Our involvement there is primarily for access to those countries' natural resources, namely oil. At this same time it must be understood that current relations with Turkey are indeed fragile, but does this constitute us allowing the government of Turkey to ignore the genocide of a race? (Dadrian 225).

Victor Hugo says it best: "If a man is killed in Paris, it is a murder; the throats of fifty thousand people are cut in the East, and it is a problem" (Dadrian 4). The frailty of international relations is understood but it should never be used as an excuse. The Armenian people deserve to have their suffering acknowledged by those who inflicted it. As the most powerful, and often persuasive, country in the world, the United States should be a leader in this reconciliation.

Of course, this will not be easy, since relations between the United States and Turkey are vulnerable. But future action should be inevitable; hopefully, for Armenians, this future is on the horizon.

Works Cited

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