

## **Distortions of Armenian History and the Armenian Genocide**

**- An open letter to Hershel Shanks, Editor, Moment Magazine**

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I write regarding the article you published on Azerbaijan in your October issue. It contains numerous serious distortions of history, which, taken together, constitute a holocaust-revisionist attack on the Armenian people, a defamation of the worst kind.

A proper response would require an article at least as long as the one under discussion; and I have neither the time nor the intention to write one. A people who have suffered genocide and its continuing effects need not adopt a defensive stance in replying to mendacious calumnies. Nonetheless, the article you printed was so grave a distortion, so egregious an assault upon human decency and historical truth, that a reply of some length is necessary. I hope you will print it, in its entirety.

The article in Moment states (p.68) that during World War I Turkey “undertook a mass deportation of pro-Russian Armenians from areas threatened by Russian invasion.” Charitably, the authors cite the grudging Turkish admission that Armenians were massacred, but that this happened after “hostilities in which Armenian atrocities against Turks also occurred.” The fact is that no such massacre of Turks by Armenians occurred to provoke anything. The revolutionary Party of Union and Progress that controlled the Turkish Government had determined to exterminate the entire Armenian people in order to create a unitary state.

The massacres of Armenians at Adana, long before the War, were a dress rehearsal. The main event was carefully coordinated in advance: friendly Turks and some Armenian men doing military service were shot, or put in slave labor battalions under German supervision. Across the Anatolian peninsula, the Army entered Armenian towns and villages, and either killed women and children on the spot or sent them on death marches into the Syrian desert, hundreds of miles away. Some thousands were herded into caves and burnt alive. Thousands were pushed off cliffs at Kemakh; or herded onto barges which were then dragged out on the Black Sea and sunk. Most Armenians were villagers living hundreds of miles from any battle front who barely knew where Russia was. Most of those who did know, were loyal and peaceable citizens. They were no “fifth column.”

Nor, it grieves me to say, were the massacres a response to Armenian armed hostilities — any more than the Nazi Holocaust was an answer, say, to the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. I sincerely wish the Armenians had been able to foresee the Genocide, protect their homes and families, and to expel the alien Turkish government once and for all from their country. But they were a minority in the Empire, and unarmed; worse, they labored under the dangerous illusion that they were civilians and Ottoman citizens, and they can scarcely be blamed — for the premeditated, systematic extermination of an entire people by its own government had, till then, no precedent in human affairs.

The Armenians *did* have time to organize self defense in the city of Van, though hideous massacres were carried out in its environs; and, thankfully, the Russians conquered that region.

This enabled many Van Armenians to survive, joining the retreating Russians and heading for Erevan, Persia, and Iraq. In most other places, the genocide was entirely successful. Not a stone remains of the huge Armenian district of Kharpert, where the majority of Massachusetts Armenians hail from —no sign Armenians ever lived there at all. And Turkish official and academic literature, in a myriad of ways, has been covering up the tracks ever since, essentially denying that Armenia ever existed at all, even claiming that the ancient Armenian kings were some esoteric variety of Turk.

Though prominent Armenians of Constantinople had been murdered in cold blood, many others were untouched — and war ended before the death transports could start. But in 1922 the Greeks and Armenians of Smyrna —the city you refer to as Izmir —were slaughtered. And in the east, with Russia out of the war and enfeebled, Turkey invaded the tiny republic that the remnants of the Armenian people had established in the northeastern corner of their land. General Andranik’s citizen army beat them back on the very approaches to Erevan —the last Armenian town left, swollen with sick and dying refugees.

General Dro Kanayan’s forces were able to defend the Armenian region of Karabagh from attacks by the Azeri Turks. Turkey invaded northern Iran, too, at this time; and Armenians who did not manage to flee south and east were slaughtered. When the USSR was formed in 1922, both Karabagh and the ancient Armenian province of Nakhichevan, which you call “western Azerbaijan”, were put under the jurisdiction of the Azerbaijan SSR, under Turkish pressure and also, it would seem, in accord with Stalin’s policy of *divide et impera*.

The Armenians were expelled en masse from Nakhichevan; and in the 1980’s their churches and monuments were still being dynamited. As for Sangezur, a strip of mountainous territory that has been Armenian since antiquity, with its own unusual dialect of the language, you claim it was somehow awarded Armenia as though it had ever been someone else’s— as a spiteful way of separating the Azeris from their brethren to the west. Pure nonsense again; and my graduate student, writing his Ph.D. thesis on St. Gregory of Tatev, the mediaeval encyclopaedist whose monastery is at the southern tip of that corridor, will be amused no end to learn that his man, the dean of Armenians scholasticism, didn’t live in Armenia after all.

Those are the facts; but your article presents their exact opposite.

Your authors employ the same Hitlerian tactic of the Big Lie in their discussion of Armenian political activity since the Genocide. The Armenian lobby in Washington is presented as a vast powerful, shadowy network wielding power out of all proportion to its real constituency. Of course, this is precisely what is said, with malice, of the *Jewish* lobby, which has been cooperating, shamefully, with Turkey in blocking US recognition of the Armenian Genocide.

If the Armenians were half as powerful as you claim they are, do you really think their Holocaust would still lack official commemoration in this country? You decry American aid to Armenia, which is “on a per capita basis...second only to [our] aid to Israel,” since Armenia’s allies are Russia and Iran. The words *per capita* neatly mask the fact that the dollar sum is really rather small — nothing like Israel’s giant dollop of US aid money. As for Russia and Iran, well, thank God for both of them. They don’t massacre Armenians and are a lifeline — for Turkey and Azerbaijan have imposed a blockade that has caused appalling suffering and led to the emigration of perhaps as much as a third of Armenia’s already modest population.

Yes, Armenia has recorded astonishing military successes in Karabagh —despite the fact that Azerbaijan’s military enjoys almost unlimited financial resources that pay for Western mercenaries, not to mention Afghan Moslem partisans, and sadly, covert military aid from Israel. The Armenians have at last learnt, like the Jews of Israel, to defend themselves by force, rather than relying on the chimerical conscience of the world to save them. The Azeri spokesman Vafa Goulizade’s fantastic, absurd assertion that US aid to Armenia goes to fund Russian bases is cited with a straight face. That aid is earmarked for humanitarian purposes and is monitored. I have been to Erevan recently; and it was my impression that the staff at our Embassy who oversee such matters are neither idiots nor somnambulists.

Two years ago, the *Forward’s* inimitable Jonathan Mahler wrote that the Armenians had been massacred because they were Soviet agents — two years before the October Revolution. Talk about premature anti-fascism! But then, the Jewish neo-cons so love Red-baiting and McCarthyism that they get carried away, don’t they?

Moment is to be congratulated for its finesse in correcting the picture: my Armenian friends here in Watertown, Massachusetts will be gratified to learn that their grandmothers, who died by the scimitar, or in the waters of the Euphrates, or of typhus, or along dusty roads — that their grandmothers, who parted from their husbands crying, “I will die on this mountain, and you will die on that mountain, but we will not renounce Christ” —were pro-Russian. And it warms my heart as a Jew (yes, and much of my family perished in our Holocaust, and I’ve lived and taught in Israel and go back there whenever I can) to see the three American Jewish organizations pay for an ad on the Op-Ed page of the Sunday NY Times congratulating Ataturk’s fascist state on its 75th bloody birthday —the state that jails and tortures innumerable writers and journalists and parliamentarians, that denies its millions of Kurds fundamental human and civil rights —on its 75th anniversary as a “democracy”. If this neo-Conservative crap is the official line of American Jewry today, then count me out.

Jewish readers ought to know that there is a Jewish community in Armenia. Its members are Armenians citizens. They have close ties to Israel, and feel a deep love and loyalty towards Armenia, too. The community is small, made up mostly of immigrants from Russia or Ukraine who found life easier in Erevan in the Soviet era than in northern climes where anti-Semitism was more virulent. There are many mixed Armenian-Jewish families.

As usual, there is a divide between Reform and Orthodox branches, but it is less of a problem than elsewhere, because the main issues of life in Erevan are food and energy. One of the Jews of Erevan I came to know about is Iosif Zelmanovich Tarashincky, a native of Warsaw. He lives in Erevan because an Armenian family in the Ukraine saved and sheltered him through the Holocaust. He married their cousin, Knarik Shahbazyan, and they moved to Armenia after World War II.

When I was there two months ago, I also met students of the Armenian language from Israel, who were on the first study tour of the country organized by Hebrew University, where my pupil Dr. Roberta Ervine teaches Armenian Studies. Armenian Airlines made its trial flight to Ben Gurion Airport that same month. Last week, the Foreign Minister of Armenia visited Israel, and various agreements were signed.

Armenians in Erevan show special warmth in welcoming a Jewish visitor, since they rightly believe us to be kindred peoples with similar fates. There are occasional anti-Semitic articles in the Diaspora Armenian press, and I have responded to some with all the strenuous anger they deserve. But I must admit they seem minor, compared to the stream of lies that,

outrageously, some Jewish papers have been printing about Armenia and the Armenians recently.

My letter to you will go also to the Armenian-American press, Mr. Shanks. And so I turn away from you, and turn my back to your magazine, to address Armenian readers:

My friends! Whether or not Turkey and Israel are allies, in the dirty and changing world of politics, and whether or not the present regimes of Iran and Syria are Armenia's partners now, sooner or later Turks, Armenians, Kurds, Persians — will have to live together. But real peace is based on justice, and on truth. Until then, it will be an uphill struggle against lies and distortions and calumny. But we will win it. I will defend you, your mystic script and sun-blessed land and truthful cause, to my last breath. The Jews are not your enemies; and this one will never abandon you.

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