



Turkey's Genocidal Crime and Silence

Mass-Murder of the Armenian People

Richard R. Korn, Ph.D.
Institute for the Study of Genocide

In 1915 the Turkish government, led by the Young Turk party which had seized power six years earlier proclaiming a commitment to "Freedom, Justice, Equality and Fraternity," launched a program aimed at the extermination of its Armenian population. Under the supervision of the central government, between 800,000 and 1,200,000 Armenians were murdered. There is evidence that these murderous operations were sometimes monitored with a fine attention to detail. Witness the following telegram sent by Talat Pasha, Minister of the Interior, to the governor of an outlying province:

We hear that certain orphanages which have been opened received also the children of the Armenians. Whether this is done through ignorance of our real purpose, or through contempt of it, the Government will regard the feeding of such children or any attempt to prolong their lives as an act entirely opposed to its purpose, since it considers the survival of these children as detrimental.

Genocidal operations were carried out under the eyes of many witnesses, including foreign observers and diplomats from many legations. Reports of the atrocities flooded the presses of the world. They produced a sense of horror and outrage among those who were already habituated to the atrocities of the European war - a war in which reports of executions of civilians were becoming commonplace. The leaders of the allied nations at war with Germany and Turkey issued grave warnings, promising redress to the survivors and justice for the leading murderers. In the sordid horse-trading which followed the allied victory, none of these promises were carried out.

Armenian Appeals Unheard

In the seventy-one years which have passed since their calamity, the survivors have fought to gain official recognition of the crime committed against them. These efforts have uniformly failed. Successive Turkish governments opposed them with a zeal which matches their original dedication in conducting the massacres. Each went to great lengths to bury their crime as efficiently as they buried their victims. The determination of the Turkish government to police world opinion continues to this day. Professor Leo Kuper reports:

In 1982 the Turkish government brought diplomatic pressures to bear on the Israeli Government and on Israeli diplomats in Europe and the USA to suppress any discussion of the Turkish genocide against Armenians in a conference to be held in Tel Aviv on the Holocaust and Genocide. The Israeli Government, "out of concern for the interests of Jews", did seek to ensure that the conference was canceled, or removed from Israel, and it also made representations to invited participants. The conference did, in fact, take place, and the Armenian case was fully discussed, but many of the scheduled speakers had withdrawn.

The Turkish campaign of denial has had graver repercussions. In 1971 the United Nations Commission on Human Rights appointed a Special Rapporteur to supervise the preparation of a report on the efficacy of the UN Convention on Genocide. His interim report included a historical survey in which the following paragraph appeared:

Passing to the more modern era, one may note the existence of relatively full documentation dealing with the massacres of the Armenians, which have been described as the first case of genocide of the twentieth century.

The Turkish representative demanded that this paragraph be deleted forthwith. His request was supported by the representatives of Pakistan, Italy, France, Tunisia and the United States. The offensive paragraph did not appear in the final report - but the omission stirred bitter debate. In justifying his deletion, the Special Rapporteur offered an explanation which was, in effect, the acknowledgment of an obligation to avoid ruffling the feelings of an offender by any reference to his offense:

A large volume of correspondence had been received concerning the Armenian question. When the work had begun on the historical part of the study, it had been suggested that as many cases as possible should be reviewed. Many members of the Sub-Commission had been opposed to that idea, however. Concern had been expressed that the study on genocide might be diverted from its intended course and lose its essential purpose. Consequently it had been decided to retain the massacre of the Jews under nazism; but other cases had been omitted, because it was impossible to compile an exhaustive list, because it was important to maintain unity within the international community as regards genocide, and because in many cases to delve into the past might re-open old wounds which are now healing.

Duplicating the First Holocaust

The successful carrying out of Turkey's mass killing of Armenians, and the equally significant success of the Turkish Government in evading official responsibility for it, have become a model for other governments which seek to resolve their problems by exterminating large numbers of their citizens. No less an authority than Hitler recognized the historical importance of this achievement of official amnesia. In a speech urging his general to massacre Polish civilians, Hitler is reported to have said:

Only thus can we gain the living space we need. Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?

The Armenian murders were soon to be emulated. By 1933 the Soviet Union had liquidated between 5 and 15 million people in the Ukraine. Following the Holocaust, genocides have been perpetrated against millions of people in a score of countries. Each new atrocity was greeted by outcries of shock and dismay, followed by inaction, apathy and disillusionment. Despite the adoption of the Genocide Convention by the United Nations in 1948, the international response has been uniform. Far from preventing and punishing genocide and other crimes against humanity, the world organization tacitly supports what Leo Kuper called the "right of the sovereign territorial state, as an integral part of its sovereignty, to commit genocide . . . against peoples under its rule." Kuper continues:

To be sure, no state explicitly claims the right to commit genocide - this would not be morally acceptable even in international circles - but the right is exercised under other more acceptable rubrics, notably the duty to maintain law and order, or the seemingly sacred mission to preserve the territorial integrity of the state.

The sovereign right to commit mass murder has now become a familiar feature of the international landscape. And its sheer familiarity has produced a desensitization and brutalization of human consciousness which has only abetted the destructive process. This corruption-by-familiarity was clarified by the English poet, Alexander Pope, in his matchless Essay on Man, written in the 18th century:

**Vice is a monster of so fierce a mien
As to be hated, needs but to be seen.
But seen to oft,
familiar with her face,
We first endure, then pity, then embrace.**

Up to the time of Turkey's genocidal crimes against Armenians, the lower limit of state-perpetrated atrocity was defined by occasional massacres and pogroms. After the setting of the new bottom line - genocide - it became possible to down-grade these atrocities as mere massacres, by definition, less intolerable than the deliberate extermination of whole populations. Next it was the Holocaust which defined the new bottom line of genocide - after which it became obligatory to concede that any new genocide which did not fall to the level of the Nazi crime was somehow less atrocious. The principle of relativity holds for households as well as communities, nations and states.

Lowering the Tolerance to Mass-Murder

In a family in which the ultimate sanction for misbehavior is a spanking, the introduction of beatings makes spanking less severe - and a slap in the face a virtual act of mercy. When maiming becomes the new bottom line, a mere beating is upgraded. What holds for families holds for the family of nations. When mass execution becomes the norm, mere torture and maiming may be redefined as acts of leniency. The principle is obvious: Each lowering of the bottom line of intolerability diminishes the perceived cruelty of any sanction which is relatively less severe, debasing the entire scale.

It was Turkey's acts of genocide which made the Holocaust thinkable and morally possible; it was the Holocaust which made the post-war genocides in Asia and the third world more tolerable by comparison.

The still unrequited genocide in Cambodia (Democratic Campuchea) duplicated the Armenian example in many ways, including the use of deportations resulting in massive death by exposure and starvation. To this date the Pol Pot regime has not been indicted, and its representative still occupies its seat in the United Nations.

Armenian Survivors Remember

On the 13th of April, 1984, thirteen scholars and jurists from eight international states constituted themselves as a tribunal to consider charges brought by Armenian survivors and other specialists against the government of Turkey. The Turkish Government was invited to send representatives to this inquest, but declined. For four days this prestigious but unofficial jury heard written and oral reports from a number of distinguished specialists, including Richard Hovannisian, Gerald Libaridian, Christopher Walker, Tessa Hoffman and several Armenian survivors.

In lieu of the Turkish presence, the tribunal received a recent report in which the Turkish Government presented, once again, its brief to the effect that the Armenian accusations were baseless provocations. In the introduction to its carefully considered verdict, the tribunal made plain the reasons for its creation:

The . . . Tribunal was brought into existence partly to overcome the moral and political failures of states as instruments of justice. The Tribunal has inquired into the Armenian grievances precisely because of the long silence of the organized international society, and especially, of the complicity of leading Western states (with the recent exception of France) who have various economic, political and military ties with the Turkish state.

The Tribunal also acts because it is deeply concerned with the prevalence of genocide and genocidal attitudes in our world. As members of the Tribunal we believe that the uncovering and objective documentation of allegations of genocide contributes to the process of acknowledgment. To uncover and expose the genocidal reality makes it somewhat harder for those with motives of cover up to maintain their position. By validating the grievances of the victims, the Tribunal contributes to the dignity of their suffering and lends support to their continuing struggle. Indeed, acknowledging genocide itself is a fundamental means of struggling against genocide. The acknowledgment is itself an affirmation of the right of a people under international law to a safeguarded existence.

The testimony adduced by the Tribunal, together with its verdict have recently been gathered in a book titled *A Crime of Silence* published by Zed Books, Ltd, in London, and distributed in the United States by the Biblio Distribution Center in Totowa, New Jersey.

Students of Turkish crimes against Armenians will find this work to be an indispensable resource. Its publication makes clear that the Armenian community is determined to dedicate its tragedy to humanity at large, and to the breaking of the conspiracy of silence which menaces future generations.

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