



# HOUSE COMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

BENJAMIN A. GILMAN, CHAIRMAN

2170 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING  
WASHINGTON, DC 20515

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## **FEDERAL NEWS SERVICE**

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PREPARED STATEMENT BY PROFESSOR ROBERT MELSON, PURDUE UNIVERSITY, MEMBER OF THE ASSOCIATION OF GENOCIDE SCHOLARS, BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL OPERATIONS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

SUBJECT - CONCERNING HOUSE RESOLUTION 398

Mr. Chairman Smith, and members of the committee.

When I was ten years old in 1947, my family and I immigrated from Poland to America where we found a home and a sanctuary from the Nazis' attempt to exterminate the Jews of Europe. In 1965 I did field work for my doctorate in Political Science in Nigeria a year before that great country disintegrated in civil war, massacre, and what the UN calls a "genocide-in-part."<sup>1</sup> Some of the people I had interviewed for my thesis were killed in what came to be known as the Biafran war. I mention these things not to call attention to myself but to tell you that I have had some personal experience with genocide.

Hence when I started to research the Armenian Genocide in the early 1970s, in order to compare the Holocaust to that earlier disaster, I recognized a familiar pattern. The two genocides were of course not equivalent, and they differed in 'significant ways that were also enlightening for our understanding of genocide. I shall return to this point presently.

Let me now turn to the business at hand. My reading of H.Res.398 is that it calls on the President

- 1) to provide Foreign Service Officers and others concerned with American foreign policy with training and materials concerning the Armenian Genocide; and
- 2) it urges the President in his annual message commemorating the Armenian Genocide to characterize that disaster frankly and openly as a "genocide," not as a "massacre" or as a "tragedy" or by another euphemism.

I firmly support both parts of the resolution on scholarly, moral, and strategic grounds.

In the time allotted me I wish to briefly comment on three points:

1. The **Armenian genocide** was the first genocide of the modern era and set a precedent not only for the Holocaust but for most contemporary genocides especially in the Third World and in the current post communist world. Hence it is essential that it be studied by American Foreign Service Officers as well as others involved in the shaping of foreign policy.
2. In order to understand the phenomenon of genocide members of the Foreign Service community need to study the **Armenian Genocide** and America's reaction to it. And one of the best places to start are the records of the State Department itself, especially Ambassador Morgenthau's Story.

Ambassador Henry Morgenthau was, of course, the American ambassador to the Ottoman Empire at the time of the genocide.

3. I have often heard it argued that despite the occurrence of the Armenian Genocide and the Turkish government's continued denial of it, the United States should keep a low profile on the subject for fear of hurting Turkish sensibilities and undermining American strategic and economic interests in the area. Hence neither the President nor any of his representatives should use the term "genocide" when referring to the mass-murder of the Armenians.

Let me start with the first point.

When confronted with mass death and forced deportations, the contemporary world community has often reached for the Holocaust as a paradigmatic case of genocide, in order both to make sense of and to condemn current events. In my longer deposition, I suggest that although the **Armenian Genocide** resembles the Holocaust in significant ways, it is a more accurate model for current ethnic disasters in the Third World and the post-communist world.

The **Armenian Genocide** and the Holocaust are the quintessential instances of total genocide in the 20th century. In both instances a deliberate attempt was made by the government of the day to destroy in part or in whole an ethno-religious community of ancient provenance that had existed as a segment of the government's own society.

In both instances genocide was perpetrated after the fall of an old regime and during the reign of a revolutionary movement that was motivated by an ideology of social, political, and cultural transformation. And in both cases genocides occurred in the midst of world wars.

These may be said to account for some of the basic similarities between the two genocides, but there were significant differences as well. The Armenian Genocide also differs from the Holocaust in that the Armenians, unlike the Jews, were living on their ancestral lands when they were deported to their deaths, and the ideology motivating the Young Turks, the perpetrators, was not a totalitarian racism but a version of integral or organic nationalism.

The mix of ethnic conflict over land driven by a murderous nationalism should be familiar to any student of the contemporary Third World or post-communist Yugoslavia.

Thus following the policy recommendations of H. Res. 398, State Department Officers and others involved with making foreign policy would do well to study the Armenian Genocide for lessons bearing both on the Holocaust and more current disasters.

Turning to the second point, when Turkey entered the First World War on the side of Germany against the Entente, the United States was still neutral and Henry Morgenthau was the American ambassador during some of the worst moments of the genocide. He received information from American consuls like Leslie A. Davis in Harput, as well as from missionaries and other American citizens. On the basis of this information he concluded that the Ottoman government of the day had decided to exterminate the Armenians, and he tried to intercede on their behalf but to not avail. (see his attempt to intercede with Enver, p. 351-352).

Having read Ambassador Morgenthau's diary, the foreign service officer might want to consult the work of Leslie A. Davis, the American consul in Harput, and a direct witness to the events. See his *The Slaughterhouse Province* (New Rochelle, NY: Aristide Caratzas, 1989). For further research and verification the Foreign Service Officer need not look further than the United States National Archives and Record Administration, where there is extensive documentation on the genocide especially under Record Group 59 of the United States Department of State, files 867.00 and 867.40.

Turning to the last point allow me to speak as a proud American citizen, not only as a scholar of genocide. I find it thoroughly dishonorable that knowing what we know about the Armenian Genocide, we persist in using euphemisms like "tragedy," "catastrophe," and "massacre" when referring to the mass-murder for fear of offending Turkish sensibilities. Would we abide such behavior from a Germany that denied the Holocaust?

Indeed, could Germany ever have evolved into the vibrant and powerful democracy she is today without confronting her past? The answers are apparent, and they should be apparent in our relationship to Turkey as well.

Last March I had the privilege of participating at a conference on the Armenian Genocide at the University of Chicago, which was attended by American, Armenian, and Turkish scholars.

We discussed the Armenian Genocide in open fora, with Turkish scholars not once questioning the facticity of the genocide. Indeed, some of their contributions concerning the ideology of the Young Turks was fresh and to the point.

While talking to my Turkish colleagues it dawned on me that one of the reasons they were openly and courageously researching and discussing the Armenian Genocide, despite their government's denial, was because they were Turkish patriots who wished to see Turkey move towards a more modern, more open, more just, and more democratic society.

In their view having Turkey bravely confront her past in the manner that Germany did with the Holocaust, South Africa did with apartheid, and the United States is attempting to do with the legacy of slavery would be a major step in the healing of the breach, the maturation of Turkey into a democratic civilization.

It is of no help to my Turkish colleagues and to other democratic forces in Turkey, nor indeed to the good name and honor of the United States, to have the President use half-truths and euphemisms when speaking about the Armenian Genocide.

Thank you for allowing me to testify Mr. Chairman and members of the committee.

**NOTE:**

1 On the basis of the United Nations definition, it is possible to distinguish between "genocide-in-whole," and "genocide-in-part." In this essay a "total domestic genocide" is a genocide-in-whole directed against a group of a state's own society, while a "partial"genocide is a "genocide-in-part." Total genocide implies extermination and/or massive death of such order that a group ceases to continue as a distinct culture.

Partial genocide stops at extermination and the annihilation of culture. For further discussion of these distinctions see Robert F. Melson, *Revolution and Genocide; On the Origins of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 22-30.

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