
AHR Forum

Truth in Telling: Reconciling Realities in the Genocide of the Ottoman Armenians

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In the summer of 2002, the reporter Ron Suskind was told by a White House aide about displeasure with a critical article he had written. "The aide said that guys like me," Suskind writes,

> were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."[1]

Sadly, not only self-styled current empires, but past empires, indeed most governments and their defenders, have been creating their own preferred realities and narratives of the past for much of recorded history. Nations and states have long been in the business of fabricating, more honestly at some times than others, myths and stories of their origins, golden ages, heroic deeds, victories, and triumphs, while eliminating the defeats and failures, even mass murders. What appears to be new in our own time is the brazenness of what is claimed, the un-self-reflexive cynicism of the perpetrators, and the potential reach through mass printed and broadcast media, the Internet, and film. Historians inevitably have been pulled into this war of words.

Positioned on both sides of the discussion, historians have been both the producers of sanctioned historical memories and among the principal destabilizers of official narratives. A few years ago, Condoleezza Rice, Colin Powell, and President George W. Bush talked about "revisionist history," referring to those with different memories of why the United States invaded Iraq—the second time.[2] Long before its latest political deployments, the term "revisionist history" had its own controversial

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[1] Ron Suskind, "Without a Doubt: Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush," *New York Times Magazine*, October 17, 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/17BUSH.html?ex=1255665600en=890a96189e162076ei=5090.

[2] White House Press Briefing with Ari Fleischer, June 17, 2003.

pedigree. Most infamously applied to those discredited cranks who deny the validity of the Holocaust, revisionism has been equated with the most egregious practices of historical falsifiers. Conservatives have criticized revisionists who questioned the sanitized narratives of American history that neglected the horrors of slavery and racism, the treatment of Indians, or the darker sides of the Vietnam War. Western historians of the Soviet Union who attempted to rethink the Bolshevik victory in the revolution of 1917 or the social history of the Stalin era in the Soviet Union have been labeled revisionists, a term which in the polemics of some means "apologists for communism." Israeli revisionist historians have been attacked for interrogating the foundational myths of how their state was established and how the indigenous Palestinians became refugees. And the Turkish state and Turkophilic historians have revised the mass deportation and killing of Armenians in 1915 from state-initiated ethnic cleansing and massacres into a civil war between Muslims and Christians.

Revisionism works both ways, as falsifying or whitewashing the past, or simply as what good historians regularly do: bringing new evidence to bear to reinterpret existing stories of whence we have come. Historical revisionists at their best are subversives, undermining unquestioned assumptions with documentation and argument. The result of the last forty years of rewriting American history has been a history that now includes women and minorities, slavery and ethnic cleansing, blemishes as well as beauty marks. The revisionist historians of the Cold War forced a fundamental rethinking of responsibility for the dismal end of the Grand Alliance. A shift in the angle of vision and the opening of Soviet archives have led historians of the USSR to a deeper appreciation of the depths of the brutality of Stalin's regime, of how ordinary Russians managed to live and love under Stalinism, but also how even radical authoritarian political projects can have massive social support.

Aware that someone had to educate the educator, most historians appreciate the provisional nature of their conclusions. Postmodernist doubts about the possibility of finding the "truth" disarm to a degree those who face the fierce certainty of faith-based ideologues. In the besieged public sphere of early-twenty-first-century America, rather than "the truth shall make us free," plausible explanations that people are willing to accept seem adequate. Credibility replaces fact and truth.

A contemplative lot, historians might prefer to shy away from confrontation with governmental opposition or public protest, but the cost of retreat is the replacement of critical assessments by the feel-good narratives of the organic intellectuals of the state. The commitment of professional historians to the mustering of evidence and careful argument and the submission of their findings to peer review at least provides some assurance that their conclusions are reliable, if never definitive. However doubtful its ontological status in the minds of some intellectuals—and, apparently, state officials—reality has a nasty habit of biting back. When usable pasts and preferred realities are being proliferated, historians can take some comfort in the thought that dangers lurk when intellectual constructs stray too far from careful and accurate readings of the world.

Revision of history is constant, even essential, and it is especially needed in the story of the Ottoman Armenians. The conventional histories have led to two separate, contradictory nationalist narratives that appear to defy reconciliation. Although the existing literature produced by Armenian and Turkish historians actually agrees on many of the basic facts, the various authors interpret them so differently that neither explanations of the causes of the events nor a synthetic narrative has been convincingly elaborated. Armenians passionately defend the case that massive deportations and massacres of a peaceful, unthreatening people were ordered by and carried out by the Young Turk authorities and that these events constitute a genocide. The Turkish state and those few historians who reject the notion of genocide argue that the tragedy was the result of a reasonable and understandable response by a government to a rebellious and seditious population in time of war and mortal danger to the state's survival. *Raison d'état* justified the suppression of rebellion, and mass killing is explained as the unfortunate residue ("collateral damage" in the now-fashionable vocabulary) of legitimate efforts at establishing order behind the lines. This position, which Armenians and those who recognize the events of 1915 as genocide call denialist, might be summarized as: There was no genocide, and the Armenians are to blame for it. They were disloyal subjects who presented a danger to the empire and got what they deserved.[3] Relative peace and harmony had existed in the Ottoman Empire between the state and its religious minorities until "outside agitators," usually from the Russian Empire, aroused the nationalist and separatist passions of the Armenians. But despite the existential threat posed by the Armenians and their Russian allies to the survival of the empire, the denialists claim, there was no intention or effort by the Young Turk regime to eliminate the Armenians as a people.

On the other side, many historians sympathetic to the Armenians have shied away from explanations that might place any blame at all on the victims of Turkish policies. Because a full account of the background and causes of the Genocide seems to concede ground to the deniers, Armenian scholars in particular have been reluctant to see any rationale in the acts of the Young Turks.[4] Explanation, it is claimed, is rationalization, and rationalization in turn leads to the denialist position of justification. When explanation is offered, it is either an essentialist argument—Turks are the kind of people who employ massacres and systematic killing to maintain their imperial dominance—or related arguments that religion and/or nationalism were the underlying causes of the killings.

THE ARGUMENT FROM RELIGION holds that the Genocide was the culmination of a deep-seated Turkish-Armenian conflict that existed for centuries and was rooted in the incompatibility of the theocratic Ottoman state, guided by the precepts of Islam, with rule over a heterogeneous population divided by religion, language, and culture. Islam could not tolerate the reforms that Turkish bureaucrats and European powers attempted to implement in the nineteenth century that would have created more egalitarian relations with the non-Turkish peoples of the empire. The theocratic dogmas of Islam denied that the *gâvur* (infidel) could be equal to the Muslim, and permanent disabilities and inequities were imposed on non-Muslims by the Ottoman state. When Armenians moved from centuries-long acquiescence in Ottoman rule to self-assertion and self-protection, they provided the excuse for (not the cause of) the massacres.[5]

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[3] This argument has been called "the provocation thesis" by political scientist Robert Melson. See Robert F. Melson, *Revolution and Genocide: On the Origins of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust* (Chicago, 1992); and Melson, "A Theoretical Enquiry into the Armenian Massacres of 1894–1896," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 24, no. 3 (1982): 481–509.

[4] Uppercase "Genocide" will be used in this article to refer to the Armenian Genocide of 1915, while lowercase "genocide" refers to the phenomenon more generally. This usage is consistent with the now-conventional employment of "Holocaust" with a capital "H" to refer to the genocide of the Jews by the Nazis.

The argument that a theocracy by definition and fact cannot be secularized is belied by the evidence that polities infused with and sanctioned by religion managed to become more secular in the long European transition from medieval to modern times, and to some degree in the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth and even more so in the twentieth century in Turkey. Religious orthodoxy was certainly a powerful inhibitor to effective reform in both Europe and the Ottoman Empire, but it was not an insurmountable barrier, as reforming Ottoman bureaucrats, Young Ottomans, Young Turks, and Kemalists would seek to demonstrate. The argument that theocracy cannot tolerate heterogeneity also fails before five centuries of imperial rule. Empire may be defined by its preservation, even enforcement, of heterogeneity. Distinction and discrimination, separation and inequality were hallmarks of Ottoman imperial rule (and, indeed, of all empires). That heterogeneity was marked in the *millet* system, an imperial structure through which the Islamic state managed other religious communities.[6] Moreover, one has to question seriously whether the Ottoman Empire was in any meaningful sense a theocracy ruled by a clerical elite rather than a dynastic empire held by the House of Osman. Finally, as Islamic as the empire conceived itself, religion was often used instrumentally—by Abdul Hamid in the formation of Kurdish units to police eastern Anatolia, and by the Young Turks in their policies toward the Arabs.[7] The revolutionaries who seized control of the empire in 1908 were not religious fanatics but secular modernizers devoted to bringing technology, science, and greater rationality and efficiency to their country.[8] Suspicious, even hostile, to conservative clerics who blocked reform, they were, however, willing to deploy Islamic, Turkish nationalist, or pan-Turkic rhetoric when it served their strategic ends.

THE ARGUMENT THAT TWO NATIONALISMS—even two competing nations—faced each other in a deadly struggle for the same land is most eloquently made by the eminent scholar of Islam Bernard Lewis. It can be read as an implied rationale for the Turkish massacres of Armenians:

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[5] Vahakn N. Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasus* (Providence, R.I., 1995); Dadrian, *Warrant for Genocide: Key Elements of Turko-Armenian Conflict* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1999); and Peter Balakian, *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response* (New York, 2003).

[6] Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis, eds., *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society*, 2 vols., vol. 1: *The Central Lands* (New York, 1982); Aron Rodrigue, "Difference and Tolerance in the Ottoman Empire: Interview by Nancy Reynolds," *Stanford Humanities Review* 5, no. 1 (1995): 85.

[7] Hasan Kayali, *Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908–1918* (Berkeley, Calif., 1997).

[8] M. Şükrü Hanioğlu, *The Young Turks in Opposition* (New York, 1995). Ambassador Henry Morgenthau, who knew the leaders of the Young Turks personally, believed that violence was inscribed in Islam, but he characterized Minister of the Interior Tâlât, one of the key architects of the Genocide, as uninspired by Islam or any religion. "I hate all priests, rabbis, and hodjas," Tâlât told Morgenthau. Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story* (1918; repr., Detroit, 2003), 14.

> For the Turks, the Armenian movement was the deadliest of all threats. From the conquered lands of the Serbs, Bulgars, Albanians, and Greeks, they could, however reluctantly, withdraw, abandoning distant provinces and bringing the Imperial frontier nearer home. But the Armenians, stretching across Turkey-in-Asia from the Caucasian frontier to the Mediterranean coast, lay in the very heart of the Turkish homeland—and to renounce these lands would have meant not the truncation, but the dissolution of the Turkish state. Turkish and Armenian villages, inextricably mixed, had for centuries lived in neighborly association. Now a desperate struggle between them began—a struggle between two nations for the possession of a single homeland, that ended with the terrible holocaust of 1915, when a million and a half Armenians perished.[9]

In what appears to be a cool and balanced understanding of why their Ottoman rulers would have used mass violence against a perceived Armenian danger, Lewis places the Armenians "nearer [the Turkish] home" and "in the very heart of the Turkish homeland," employing language that already assumes the legitimacy and actuality of a nation-state. In this transparent paragraph, he subtly rewrites the history of Anatolia from a land in which Armenians and Kurds were the earlier inhabitants into one in which they have become an obstacle to the national aspirations of the Turks, who now can claim Anatolia, rather than Central Asia, as their homeland. His language employs the logic of nationalism as if it has a kind of universal relevance even in political structures that evolved out of and still worked within the contradictory logic of empire. In 1915, the ethnically and religiously diverse Ottoman Empire was evolving into a more homogeneous Turkic-Muslim state, but until the triumph of the Kemalists in the early 1920s, it remained a multinational imperial state with large Arab, Kurdish, Jewish, and Christian minorities. Already long existing within an international system of powerful nation-states in which there was an increasingly hegemonic Western conviction that the nation, however defined, was the principal source of political legitimacy, the Ottomans were desperately seeking a road to survival. But Lewis's reading of a notion of ethnic homogeneity as the basis for a national republic of the Kemalist type, which lay in the future, into the moment of Armenian annihilation is ahistorical and anachronistic. Whatever else they were, the Young Turks were never purely Turkish ethnonationalists but remained Ottoman in fundamental conception. They were primarily state imperialists, empire preservers, rather than the founders of an ethnic nation-state. There was no thought of giving up the Arab lands that they still controlled, and when opportunity presented itself in 1918, the Young Turks were prepared to move north and east into Caucasia. On the other hand, the removal of the Armenians, and later the Greeks, laid the basis for the Kemalist state, nearly homogeneous except for those resistant Kurds who had lived in eastern Anatolia long before the first Turks arrived and who after 1915 spread onto lands formerly held by Armenians.

The dual narratives of the Turkish state and its supporters and the Armenians and theirs are equivalent neither in their number of adherents and general acceptance in academic historiography nor in the evidentiary base and argumentation of their positions. Besides Turkish official historians, there are only a small number of defenders of the provocation thesis or the notion of Armeno-Turkish civil war, among them Justin McCarthy of the University of Louisville; Heath W. Lowry, Ataturk Professor of Ottoman and Modern Turkish Studies at Princeton University (who has been notably silent on this issue for many years); the late Stanford J. Shaw, who had retired from UCLA; and a new entry, Guenter Lewy, an emeritus political scientist who taught at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.[10] Overwhelmingly, since 2000, publications by non-Armenian academic historians, political scientists, and sociologists—among them Donald Bloxham of the University of Edinburgh, David Gaunt of Södertörn University, Hans-Lukas Kieser of the University of Basel, Michael Mann of UCLA, Norman Naimark of Stanford University, and Benjamin Valentino of Dartmouth College—have seen 1915 as one of the classic cases of ethnic cleansing and genocide.[11] And, even more significantly, they have been joined by a number of scholars in Turkey or of Turkish ancestry—among them Fikret Adanir, Taner Akçam, Halil Berktay, Fuat Dündar, and Fatma Müge Göçek—who have moved far beyond any notion of civil war and demonstrated the initiation and organization of the massacres by the Young Turk political apparatus.[12] What has become known as genocide is seen by several of these historians as part of a general population policy that was specifically implemented during the war. Several have pointed to the importance of the Ottoman defeats in the Balkan wars as a turning point that intensified anxieties about the fragility of the empire and turned the Young Turks' attachment to the earlier Ottoman "heartland" in the Balkans toward a new interest in Anatolia. The older stories are being radically revised by professional historians and a new generation of graduate students engaged in diligent research in the available archives.

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[9] Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1968), 356.

Unprecedented initiatives in the academy and developments in the domestic and international politics of Turkey and Armenia have moved the discussion of 1915 into new channels. In the last twenty years, Armenia became an independent state, and Turkey became a vibrant modernizing state with an energetic, diverse civil society. Ten years ago, the idea of Armenian and Turkish historians sitting down together to discuss the traumatic last years of the Ottoman Empire would have been almost unthinkable, but with the Cold War in the past, the opening of negotiations on the possible entry of the Turkish republic into the European Union, and the courageous forays by individual Turkish scholars to investigate the fate of the Armenians, a fragile but sustained dialogue emerged that moved beyond accusation and denial. My own initial experience with such a dialogue occurred in early 1998 when I was invited to give a lecture and seminar at Koç University in Istanbul, and my host—a former graduate student at the University of Michigan and at the time a professor of political science at Koç—suggested that I speak about the Armenians.[13] Given the official position of the Turkish government that no genocide had taken place, and with laws in place prescribing that insults to the Turkish state were punishable by imprisonment, this seemed a bizarre and even dangerous suggestion. Yet it also was an opportunity that I could not turn down. I consulted with friends, some of whom suggested that I was taking an unnecessary risk. One Turkish colleague encouraged the trip: "Don't worry, if anything happens, we can get you out!" That was not the kind of assurance I wanted to hear, but as someone who has long advocated intellectual exchange between Turks, Armenians, and others on the issue of genocide, I decided to fly to Istanbul.

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[10] Justin McCarthy, *Muslims and Minorities: The Population of Ottoman Anatolia and the End of the Empire* (New York, 1983); McCarthy, *Turks and Armenians: A Manual on the Armenian Question* (Washington, D.C., 1989); Heath W. Lowry, *The Story behind Ambassador Morgenthau's Story* (Istanbul, 1990); Stanford J. Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey* (Cambridge, 1977); and Guenter Lewy, *The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey: A Disputed Genocide* (Salt Lake City, 2005).

[11] Donald Bloxham, *The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians* (Oxford, 2005); David Gaunt, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim-Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia during World War I* (Piscataway, N.J., 2006); Hans-Lukas Kieser and Dominik J. Schaller, eds., *Der Völkermord an den Armeniern und die Shoah / The Armenian Genocide and the Shoah* (Zurich, 2002); Hans-Lukas Kieser, ed., *Turkey beyond Nationalism: Towards Post-National Identities* (London, 2006); Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (Cambridge, 2005); Norman M. Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001); Benjamin A. Valentino, *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the Twentieth Century* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2004).

[12] Many of these works are still in preparation, but among the first to appear were Taner Akçam, *From Empire to Republic: Turkish Nationalism and the Armenian Genocide* (London, 2004); Akçam, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* (New York, 2006); Fuat Dündar, *İttihat ve Terakki'nin Müslümanları İskan Politikası* [*The Muslims' Resettlement Policy of the Committee of Union and Progress (1913–1918)*] (Istanbul, 2001); Dündar, "L'ingenierie ethnique du Comité Union et Progrès et la turcisation de l'Anatolie (1913–1918)" (Thèse de Doctorat en Histoire, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2006); Fatma Müge Göçek, "Reading Genocide: Turkish Historiography on the Armenian Deportations and Massacres of 1915," in Israel Gershoni, Amy Singer, and Y. Hakan Erdem, eds., *Middle East Historiographies: Narrating the Twentieth Century* (Seattle, 2006), 101–127.

Koç University, founded by the head of one of Turkey's richest families, was a newly established institution specializing in business and economics. The Spartan campus was filled with young people, fluent in English, who could easily have been mistaken for American college students, and the faculty was both Turkish and foreign. The university prides itself on being Western and lives with the contradiction between its loyalty to a Kemalist vision of secularism, statism, and modernization, on the one hand, and the critical attitudes of some of its foreign faculty and the reviving interest in Islam among Turkish youth, on the other. Still recovering from the long flight, I began by thanking my host and the university for the chance to discuss a great tragedy that divides Armenians and Turks. My opening lines seemed to paralyze the audience:

> Historians have analyzed the massive deportation and killing of hundreds of thousands of Armenians in eastern Anatolia in 1915 as the conflict of two exclusivist nationalisms, the conflict of two people over a single piece of territory. Carrying that view slightly further, those who would deny that a genocide took place have interpreted these events as a civil war between Turks and Armenians. What I will argue is quite different. Rather than a civil war, which indeed never took place and exists only in the imagination of professional falsifiers, the Genocide occurred when state authorities decided to remove the Armenians from what had been their historic homeland in order to realize a number of strategic goals—the elimination of a perceived Armenian threat to the war against Russia, to punish Armenians for activities which the Turkish authorities believed to be rebellious and subversive, and to realize their ambitions to create a pan-Turkic empire that would extend from Anatolia through the Caucasus to Central Asia.

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[13] Paul Kubichek is now a professor of political science at Oakland University.

I spoke for an hour. Several people walked out. A Turkish faculty member whom I had met just before the lecture looked particularly grim through the entire talk. But the audience was extraordinarily attentive, and when I finished, they applauded—and, I would say, enthusiastically. For the next hour I answered questions, none of which were hostile. The audience seemed to accept the argument that a genocide had occurred, that it had been initiated and carried out by the Young Turk government, and that rather than a clash of nationalisms, the massacres had resulted from the state's desire to reformulate and preserve a Turkic-Islamic empire by drawing together the Islamic peoples, expanding to the east to include other Turkic peoples, and physically removing those whom they considered to be the most alien, dangerous, and disloyal of the Ottoman peoples, namely the Armenians.

Asked about Armenian attitudes toward Turks, I told the students that most diaspora Armenians reviled Turks for what they had done and for the continued denial, that this denial had caused pathological responses by both Armenians and Turks (including Armenian terrorism in the past), and that the only way to move beyond the pain caused by repressed memories was to face what had happened. I said that many Armenians in the United States would be surprised that such a talk had been allowed in Turkey, and even more amazed by the reception that I had been given by the students. At some point during the question-and-answer session, I mentioned that my mother's father had come from the central Anatolian town of Yozgat and my mother's mother from Diarbekir, the town that the Armenians called "Dikranagert," now largely inhabited by Kurds. My grandparents had left Turkey after the massacres of 1894–1896 and 1909, but all of their relatives left behind were murdered during the Genocide. The stillness with which those personal remarks were received left me with the clear impression that what I had related about 1915 had struck a nerve.

Back home, a graduate student encouraged me to "do something" about the Armenian-Turkish question. I met with my colleagues Kevork Bardakjian, an Armenian language and literary scholar, and Fatma Müge Göçek, a sociologist specializing in Ottoman society and history, and we began planning a workshop to bring Armenian, Turkish, and other scholars together to present work on the non-Turkish peoples in the last years of Ottoman rule.[14] The reaction from both the Armenian and Turkish diaspora communities was generally hostile to the idea of such a meeting, and prominent scholars in genocide studies declined to attend. Articles appeared in English-language Armenian newspapers warning that "the Turks are coming" to Chicago and asserting that "Suny is worse than a Turk!" But enough scholars were willing to participate that we held our first workshop (what would later be called WATS, the Workshop on Armenian-Turkish Scholarship) at the University of Chicago over the weekend of March 17–19, 2000. All doubts and hesitations evaporated in the first minutes of the first day. Halil Berktay of Sabancı University, Istanbul, made it clear that he did not want to be known as a "Turkish historian," but simply as a historian. Jirair (Gerard) J. Libaridian, formerly the senior adviser to the president of the Armenian Republic, asked rhetorically, “Why do some people like the problem, rather than the solution?” A common past has been hijacked by those who accept a nationalist framework. “Some historians,” he said, “are like failed gods; they cannot make the future in their own image, so they remake the past in their own image.”

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[14] The graduate student who first suggested the project was Kenneth Church; the other faculty member involved in organizing the initial workshop was Stefanie Platz. They were subsequently joined in the organization of the workshops by Taner Akçam, Elazar Barkan, Paul Boghossian, Selim Deringil, Stephen Feinstein, Jirair Libaridian, and Eric Weitz.

Taner Akçam, the first Turkish historian to write about the Genocide, re-created in detail the timing of the decision for the deportations, locating it at the beginning of March 1915. Earlier, Enver Pasha, one of the top Young Turk leaders, had called other party members to Istanbul to make plans for eliminating non-Muslim elements from Anatolia. In May–June 1914, the government moved Greeks from the west Anatolian coast. On August 2, 1914, the Young Turk Central Committee reestablished the Teşkilatı Mahsusa, the special organization that would later carry out many of the deportations and massacres of Armenians. At this point its task was to work in the Caucasus to provoke Russia into a war with Turkey. After the defeat of the Ottoman army at Sarıkamış at the beginning of 1915, the fateful decisions to deport Armenians were made. A dual mechanism operated: an official one from the Ministry of Internal Affairs to the local gendarmeries, and an unofficial one made up of party officials and agents sent with secret orders to provincial governors.

While historians tried through efforts such as the Chicago workshop to open a dialogue between Armenian and Turkish scholars, the Turkish state maintained, even intensified, its campaign of denial of the Genocide. Threats were made against Turkish scholars, including Taner Akçam, who had appeared in a Dutch film with the sociologist Vahakn Dadrian as early as 1997 and had acknowledged the Genocide even earlier. Prompted by the Turkish ambassador to Washington, Baki İlkin, an editor of the Microsoft Encarta encyclopedia approached me and the genocide scholar Helen Fein and requested that we revise the articles we had written for Encarta, removing the word “genocide” in reference to the 1915 events. We both protested, and eventually Microsoft accepted our texts. When the House of Representatives’ International Relations Committee voted in October 2000 on a resolution recognizing the mass killings of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire as genocide, Turkish money financed powerful lobbyists in Washington to work against it, and it eventually was scuttled. Influential supporters of the Turkish position, among them former congressmen Bob Livingston, Stephen Solarz, and Gerald Solomon, opposed putting the United States on record as accepting this historic tragedy as the first genocide in the twentieth century. Reaction to the resolution in Turkey was furious. Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit warned that Turkish-American relations would suffer if the House accepted the characterization of the massacres as genocide. The press condemned the Armenian version of history as myth, and demonstrators in Adana burned an Armenian flag. Just as Congress was about to pass the bill, the administration of President Bill Clinton convinced enough House members to vote against it, and the resolution failed. A similar outcome occurred in October 2007 when the House Committee on Foreign Affairs resolved that the 1915 deportations and massacres amounted to genocide. Turkey recalled its ambassador and threatened American supply lines to Iraq, and within weeks the resolution was withdrawn. Although *Realpolitik* had once again trumped moral and historical imperatives, the debate this time focused almost entirely on policy considerations, not on whether or not there had been a genocide.

In both Turkey and the West, those who opposed political resolutions recognizing the Genocide frequently proposed that the matter be "left to the historians," as if the political implications of the issue could be avoided. Our workshop had been founded on the premise that as politicized as the matter had become, scholars could at least do what they do best professionally and establish the documentary evidence, review the various interpretations, and make judgments about the most convincing arguments. Workshop participants differed as to their willingness to engage in political efforts, but all were committed to keeping WATS dedicated to scholarship and as free of politics as possible. We continued our series of workshops at the University of Michigan (2002), at the University of Minnesota (2003), in Salzburg, Austria (2004), at New York University (2005), and at the University of Geneva (2008). Journalists from Turkey attended the meetings and reported back illuminating accounts of the discussions. Each time, new papers, some by younger scholars with remarkable archival access, explored what had been rendered as a controversial subject. Historians from Armenia met with historians from Turkey and their respective diasporas. Participants shared their findings in an atmosphere of frank, respectful exchange. Agreement far exceeded difference. There was no dispute that deportations and massacres had occurred, that the forced movement of the Armenians had been ordered by the Young Turk government, that the mass killing was the result of both government and party actions, and that while there were several moments of Armenian resistance (most notably at Van), there was no civil war. The two opposing nationalist narratives were replaced by a single shared account based on evidence. Yet many blank spots remained; archival access in Turkey remained restricted; and disagreements about the timing of events, the motivations of the Young Turk leaders, and, most important, the question of whether to call the mass killings genocide remained yet to be resolved.

In Article II of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (December 9, 1948), "genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, as such: a) Killing members of the group; b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group." A capacious definition, the UN's conception has become standard and widely accepted, even as it is contested. Most difficult of all for scholars has been the phrase "intent to destroy." On the motives and aims of the Young Turks, as well as the timing of their decision to deport the Armenians, major Armenian scholars claim that massacres of dissident minorities were a consistent Turkish practice. The Hamidian massacres of the 1890s and the killing of Armenians in Adana in 1909 were precursors of the Genocide, which in turn was a premeditated event planned before World War I. Others argue that the earlier massacres were discrete events different in kind from the Genocide of 1915 and that the Genocide was a largely contingent event that occurred in a moment of radicalization following the catastrophic defeat at Sarıkamış in the winter of 1914–1915.[15] The contention that the Genocide was planned long in advance and realized a consistent Turkish policy of extermination harked back to the essential notion of "the terrible Turk," an irredeemable enemy of Christians and European civilization, as well as to the debate in Holocaust scholarship between "intentionalists" and "structuralists."[16] But even those who want to disaggregate the episodes of Ottoman state violence against Armenians agreed that the earlier massacres reflected a propensity for violent repression. Repeated official justifications based on security requirements, as well as inconsistent and ineffective responses by the European powers, served only to open the way for future episodes. While it is undeniable that an anti-Armenian disposition existed among the Turkish elite long before the war, that some extremists contemplated radical solutions to the Armenian Question, particularly after the Balkan Wars, and that the world war presented an opportunity for carrying out the most revolutionary program against the Armenians, the particular conjuncture that brought the Young Turk triumvirate to ethnic cleansing and genocide came together only after the outbreak of war and the leaders' fear that their rule was in peril and that the Armenians were particularly dangerous as the wedge that the Russians and other powers could use to pry apart their empire.

MY OWN FORAY INTO THE DEBATE can be summarized in the claim that had there been no world war, there would have been no genocide, not only because there would have been no war to cover up the events, but also because the radical sense of endangerment among Turks would not have been as acute. Without the war, there would have been less motivation for a revolutionary solution and political opportunities for negotiation and compromise. On the eve of the Ottoman declaration of war on Russia, the government was engaged in negotiations with the leading Armenian political party, the Dashnaktsutiun (Armenian Revolutionary Federation), to secure its support in subverting the Russian Empire from within using Russian Armenians. The Dashnaks wisely refused, but it is evident that the Young Turks were considering a variety of political options short of genocide. When it came, the Armenian Genocide was the result of long-term, deep-seated elite and popular hatreds, resentments, and fears intensified by war and defeat—an affective disposition in which Armenians were perceived as irredeemable enemies of Muslims—that in turn shaped the stra-

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[15] Michael Mann, Norman Naimark, and I are among those who have argued for contingency and the distinctiveness of the Genocide. Ronald Grigor Suny, "Empire and Nation: Armenians, Turks, and the End of the Ottoman Empire," *Armenian Forum* 1, no. 2 (1998): 17–51; critical responses by Vahakn N. Dadrian, Engin Deniz Akarli, and Selim Deringil, with a reply by Suny, 131–136. A similar argument had been made earlier by Yves Ternon in a series of works: *Les Arméniens: Histoire d'un génocide* (Paris, 1977); *La Cause arménienne* (Paris, 1983); with Gérard Chalian, *The Armenians from Genocide to Resistance*, trans. Tony Berrett (London, 1983) and *Le génocide des Arméniens, 1915–1917* (Paris, 1984); and his own *Enquête sur la négation d'un génocide* (Marseilles, 1989).

[16] For a review of these debates, see Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation*, 3rd ed. (London, 1993), 80–107; and Geoff Eley's introductory essay to his edited volume *The "Goldhagen Effect": History, Memory, Nazism—Facing the German Past* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2000), 1–31.

tegic considerations of the Committee of Union and Progress as to the most effective ways to save the empire. In the absence of fully opened archives, the evidence at hand suggests that the decision to deport the Armenians was made sometime early in 1915 and was related to the military disasters of that winter. The circumstances were now propitious for such an effort, for the parliament had been shut down, the state appeared to be at risk from the British navy and Russian armies, and the Armenians could be linked to the Russian advance as collaborators. What appears in the sources to have been the Turks' panic and paranoia at an imagined danger from their Armenian subjects has metastasized in the hands of apologists into justification for state-ordered murder.

The workshop discussions managed to return agency to the Ottoman Armenians, transforming them from simple victims into historical actors in their own right, but without either rationalizing a policy of mass deportation and murder or trying to render equivalent the roles of Turks and Armenians. Both before and during the early months of World War I, leading Young Turks constructed the Armenians as the principal obstacle to their plans for modernizing the country and preserving, even expanding, their empire. This sense of threat—combined with resentment at what they took to be Armenians' privileged status, Armenian dominance over Muslims in some spheres of life, and the preference of many Armenians for Christian Russia—fed a fantasy that the Armenians presented an existential threat to Turks. Threat must be understood not only as an immediate menace but as a perception of potential danger, of future peril. Within such an imaginary, Armenians were helpless and soon became the victims of both their success within the *millet* system and their vulnerability as largely unarmed subjects.

Our workshops, which had begun in great controversy at the end of the last century, had by 2002 found acceptance, even legitimacy, in the academic community, and more broadly among the Armenian-American community and among Turkish university scholars in Europe and Turkey, as well as others in the public sphere who increasingly accepted the need for such discussions. The emphasis on scholarship rather than polemic, accusations, or political pleading allowed discussion to flow freely without rancor or defensiveness. WATS managed to hold together while more political efforts withered, including the Track Two diplomacy of the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission (TARC).[17] The monolithic view held by many Armenians of Turks as Armenocidal fanatics slowly dissipated—for some. Dialogue became acceptable. At the Michigan workshop, Richard Hovannisian, originally skeptical of the possibility of such discussions, presented a paper on Turks who had protected and saved Armenians during the Genocide. The acknowledged dean of modern Armenian scholars, Hovannisian had had little interaction with Turks, other than hostile exchanges. A few years later, he toured eastern Turkey (historic Armenia!) with Müge Göçek. Others, even among the founders of the dialogue, fell away for personal reasons, but none disavowed the effort. And the circle of those involved grew, as alongside active scholars preparing research papers, WATS also involved hundreds of people interested in Armenian-Turkish history and relations through its e-mail list, armworkshop.

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[17] On TARC, with which WATS has sometimes been confused or deliberately conflated, see David L. Phillips, *Unsilencing the Past: Track Two Diplomacy and Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation* (New York, 2005).

Among the most exposed and vulnerable scholars were those who lived and worked in Turkey. Halil Berktay gave an interview to the Turkish newspaper *Radikal* in which he affirmed that genocide had occurred but called on the Turkish state and other governments not to take official positions on such historical events. "Bringing up the issue renders the Turkish state and society more defensive on this topic and closed within themselves," he said, "and pushes them to become more rigid. Political polarization on this topic is so strong that even finding the courage to speak on this subject is a great problem."[18] The Turkish state not only did not heed Professor Berktay but instead intensified the campaign of denial of the Genocide. Some Turkish nationalists called upon Sabancı University to fire Berktay, but the university's benefactress refused to succumb to pressure.

The workshop process reached an unexpected climax when Turkish scholars in Turkey decided to hold their own conference on "The Ottoman Armenians during the Era of Ottoman Decline" in May 2005. Spearheaded by several veterans of WATS and sponsored by three leading Istanbul universities—Bosphorus, Sabancı, and Bilgi—the conference was abruptly postponed by its organizers the day before it was to open because of an aggressive campaign of "pressure, threats and slander." The minister of justice, Cemil Çiçek, had pronounced that holding the conference would be tantamount to stabbing Turkey in the back, adding, "I wish I had not renounced my authority to open criminal cases as justice minister." Despite intimidation by nationalist protesters, the conference opened at the end of September at Bilgi University. Unperturbed by about a hundred nationalist protesters outside who occasionally threw eggs or tomatoes, historians met for two marathon days, listening to and discussing dozens of papers. Despite a lone woman protester in the hall, the sessions heard accounts of Armenian life in Ottoman Anatolia, the evacuation of some three thousand Armenian communities, the international media coverage of the 1915 events, rival interpretations of the famous Ottoman Bank incident and the Adana massacres of 1909, and the "demographic engineering" of the Young Turks. Müge Göçek reported on the WATS process, linking what had begun so modestly five years earlier with the signal gathering in Istanbul. Many of those who gave papers either had attended the earlier workshops or were participants on the WATS e-mail list. Several "Turkish" speakers revealed how they had recently discovered their Armenian ancestry, and discussants reflected on "the terrible social death of the Armenian identity through forced conversion, adoption, and marriage."[19] Much discussion centered on the evolution of Turkish nationalist views generated in the Kemalist republic on the events of World War I and on the silence that had progressively enveloped the memory of what happened to the Armenians. In an eloquent address to the conference, the Turkish Armenian journalist Hrant Dink, a participant in several of the WATS meetings, told the largely Turkish audience, "We [Armenians] want this land; not to take it away but to lie under it!"

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[18] " 'A Special Organization Killed Armenians': An Interview with Halil Berktay," *Radikal* (Istanbul), June 30, 2000, interviewed by Nese Duzel, translated by Marc David Baer.

[19] The account of the Istanbul conference comes from a report authored by Fatma Müge Göçek and circulated through the WATS e-mail list.

As dialogue broadened, as Turkish civil society increasingly explored through universities, the press, television, and published works the dark pages of Ottoman history, the backlash from nationalists and the state turned against journalists and fiction writers as well as historians. The most famous Turkish novelist, Orhan Pamuk; the editor of the Turkish Armenian newspaper *Agos* (Furrow), Hrant Dink; the novelist Elif Şafak; and the publisher Ragıp Zarakolu were among those who were either brought to trial or threatened with prison for remarks "insulting" to Turkishness. Most of the cases were dismissed, but Dink was convicted and given a suspended sentence. Still, the waves generated by the initial pebbles thrown into the historians' pond were splashing up against the dikes. When Pamuk was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in October 2006, nearly every account mentioned his statement to a Swiss journal that "thirty thousand Kurds and a million Armenians were killed in these lands." Just hours before the announcement that Pamuk had received the prize, the French National Assembly passed a bill criminalizing denial of the Armenian Genocide. The past could no longer be contained; awareness of a genocide could no longer be obliterated.

WHILE BOTH THE TURKISH AND ARMENIAN GOVERNMENTS have asserted that the question should be left to historians, official Turkish denial, along with well-meaning governmental interventions to recognize 1915 as a genocide and to make denial a crime, have taken the issue out of the hands of the historians and made the free and full discussion of the Turkish and Armenian experience more difficult. Just as the dialogue among scholars was reaching the point of rough consensus, activists and politicians hardened the positions of defenders and deniers. The Turkish parliament responded with a joint declaration signed by all parties denouncing the French bill as motivated by domestic political concerns and predicting that it would harm Turkish-French relations as well as prospects for normalization of relations between Ankara and Erevan. Opposition deputy Şükrü Elekdağ, a former ambassador to the United States, called for sanctions against Armenia and the deportation of some seventy thousand Armenian illegal workers living in Turkey. From the opposite side, Pamuk condemned the French move as a betrayal of France's own liberal traditions. Many who have been tending the delicate dialogue in which history is written, rewritten, revised, and presumably improved were dismayed by the preemptive strike by legislators. Dink boldly stated that if the bill passed, he would provoke arrest by publicly denying the Genocide in France.

He never got that chance. On January 19, 2007, a seventeen-year-old nationalist assassin from Trebizond gunned Dink down outside his office in Istanbul. The irony of his death is that he was killed in the name of a particularly narrow notion of patriotism while he was himself a fervent Turkish patriot. His vision of his native country, however, was of a modern democratic, tolerant state, the eastern edge of Europe, in which his own people, the Armenians, could live together with Turks, Kurds, Jews, Greeks, and the other peoples who had coexisted, however uneasily, in the cosmopolitan empire out of which the Turkish republic had emerged. What he could not tolerate was the denial of the shared history of those peoples, a history that involved not only the mass killing of Armenians but the ongoing repression of

Kurds. Dink was an active participant in the vital civil society emerging in Turkey, and people who had felt alone suddenly, briefly, felt empowered in the outpouring of grief witnessed at his funeral. Tens of thousands marched for hours through the streets of Istanbul with signs proclaiming "We are all Hrant; we are all Armenians." January 19 seemed to shift the landscape for Armenians and Turks. More starkly than before, Armenians were revealed as symbols in present-day Turkey, having taken on a variety of meanings—enemy, outsider, foreigner, victimizer. After January 19, they further became symbolic of an alternative to the current impasse, a way out, perhaps into the European Community, to greater tolerance, to democracy. But as cracks in the edifice of denial widened, a backlash from nationalists took on new force. Dink's assassin was cheered in public as a national hero. Turkey's mildly Islamist government faced the "deep state" of the military and Kemalist elite and was forced at times to take a hard line on the Armenian issue. The question of the Genocide became even more difficult either to suppress or to resolve. Where scholars had tentatively trod had turned into a perilous minefield, but now it was just as dangerous to turn back as to push forward.

No matter how hard historians tried to keep the question of genocide confined to scholarship, it could not be kept from the public sphere. While WATS scholars are as yet unable to express clear unanimity on whether 1915 constitutes a genocide, they have come together around a shared sense of what happened and why. The problem of the "G" word is both definitional and political. Some of the participants hold that public acceptance of the term "genocide" would render them ineffective with the Turkish public. Others disagree with the standard United Nations definition of genocide. The resident philosopher in our workshops, New York University professor Paul Boghossian, explored the imprecision of this official internationally accepted definition and the confusion surrounding it, but in a summation of where we were, he noted that we all agreed that deportations and massacres had occurred; that they had been ordered, organized, and carried out by the Young Turks and their agents; and that the target of these brutal policies had been defined ethnoreligious groups (the Assyrians and some other minorities, as well as the Armenians). If, he suggested rhetorically, you accept that all this happened, and you still do not want to call it genocide, then you give us the word.

Acceptance of 1915 as an instance of ethnic cleansing, *avant la lettre*, is much less problematic. And we appear to have achieved a closer consensus that ethnic cleansing, like genocide, is almost always an activity organized by state authorities. The line between the two is a thin one, but ethnic cleansing—the coercive removal of an ethnically defined group of people from a given territory—need not involve mass killing, although death from deportation, forced marches, and deprivation usually accompanies it. Genocide, on the other hand, is the deliberate, sustained mass killing of a designated ethnic or national community with the aim of reducing or eliminating its political, social, or cultural potential.[20] Unlike a pogrom or urban riot instigated and carried out by one ethnicity against another, genocide does not simply flare up and die down in a relatively short time; it is sustained over both time and territory. It requires some premeditation and planning, however chaotic and messy its actual execution and consequences. What remains open and in dispute for some, albeit a minority among scholars, is whether the murder of a nation in the case of the Armenians and the Assyrians was intentional or an unfortunate consequence of a brutal program of deportations.

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[20] A useful discussion of the distinction between ethnic cleansing and genocide can be found in Naimark, *Fires of Hatred*, 2–5.

Early in December 2007, eighteen of the participants in the WATS process gathered at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University for a writers' conference, preliminary to publishing the first collection of articles emerging from the series of workshops. The stunning impression of the two and a half days of discussion was how far we had come—how questions that had troubled the earlier meetings had been resolved, and how subtle and nuanced our understanding of the Young Turks' motives, Armenian activities, and the role of the Great Powers had become. A newly minted doctor of history, Fuat Dündar, showed with his careful reading of Ottoman archival documents how the deportations had been organized and carried out by the Turkish authorities, and—most shocking of all—that Minister of the Interior Tâlât, the chief initiator, had been aware that sending people to the Syrian desert outpost of Der Zor meant certain death. A more senior scholar of twentieth-century Turkey, Erik Zürcher of the University of Leiden, confessed that his earlier work on the Young Turks had not given their role in the Armenian massacres—and the lasting effects of those massacres in the Turkish republic—the attention that it deserved. David Gaunt delivered a meticulous account of Ottoman atrocities in the invasion of Persia and the mass killing of Nestorian Assyrians, a genocide in its own right. A general, if not complete, consensus was reached that the Young Turks had had no "blueprint" for genocide—that is, no carefully drawn out, long-established plans for exterminating the Armenians—but that sometime in March 1915, a decision was made to deport them systematically and, by issuing oral orders and sending out secret emissaries, to massacre them in the process. The working title for the volume (forthcoming from Oxford University Press), "A Question of Genocide: Armenians and Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire," reflects both the certainty of some and the ambiguity of others about the nature of the killings.

There may be no escape from the political aspects of setting the record straight on any genocide, and the Armenian Genocide has been the exemplary victim of deliberate, sustained falsification. Historians are implicated in these politics no matter how faithfully they attend to the obligations of their craft. As Turkey and Armenia both construct and reconstruct their historic and present-day identities, they have to deal with the traumas of their twentieth-century emergence. These two countries and their peoples, both at home and in the diaspora, are condemned to live in the present and the future, as they have for half a millennium in the past, side by side, their destinies intertwined, their senses of self intimately wrapped up in each other. For historians, who have done so much to construct the past with which each nation now lives, the task of reconstruction has become imperative. Essentializing the other as irremediably evil leads to endless repetition of the debilitating conflicts and deceptions of the last century. At present, the histories preferred by most Armenians and Turks remain embedded in their respective nationalist master narratives, which portray the other people as perpetrator and their own as victim. Yet the simplicities of national myths, themselves the handiwork of historians as well as politicians, must continually be challenged by more critical historical work, so that "realities" created instrumentally to defend particular power and knowledge structures can be replaced by shared, subversive narratives that move us beyond nationalism toward truer understanding.

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