

The Armenian Holocaust and Israeli Denial

Twenty-two years before the Jewish Holocaust, one million Armenians living in Turkey were exterminated by the Turkish government. Almost 1 1/2 million more were condemned to a slow death march to the Syrian desert. Thousands of Armenian churches and monasteries in Turkey were destroyed. In his new book, *The Banality of Indifference* researcher and lecturer Dr. Yair Auron examines the Armenian genocide and the subsequent reaction of the Zionist movement and Jewish community in Palestine. He also looks at connections between modern Israel's treatment of this issue and the Israeli interpretation of the Jewish Holocaust. Before 1915, there were two and a half million Armenians living in Turkey. By the early nineties, 50,000 were counted. "More important than citing the exact number of victims of this tragedy," writes Auron, "is to grasp the fact that half of the Armenian population was massacred and the rest were forced to leave their historic homeland of 3,000 years. This was done by the lawful government of the Ottoman empire." (Auron. p. 48), To this day, the Turkish government denies that the massacre ever happened.

In Israel today there are 4,000 Armenians living in Jerusalem, Jaffa, Haifa and the Arab village of Rammallah. According to Dr. Auron, some of these Armenian families have lived in Palestine since the 16th century, while others descend from the few hundred that took refuge in Palestine during the 1915 massacre.

At the beginning of the century both the Armenians in Turkey and the Jews in Palestine lived as ethnic minorities under the rule of the Ottoman empire. According to Auron, the Jews were not harassed by the ruling power, as they were not considered a threat. The Jews, in return, supported the empire; Auron points out the little-publicized fact that at the beginning of World War I, both the Zionist movement and the Jewish community in Palestine were very pro-Turkish - and consequently, pro-German (p. 18).

In 1915-16, while American Jews donated money to the Armenian victims of the massacre, the Zionist establishment in Palestine kept silent. The Jewish community in Palestine was led at the time by David Ben Gurion (later to become Israel's First Prime Minister) and Yitzhak Ben Tzvi (later to become President of Israel). Auron claims that the silence of most Zionists over this issue was determined by political interests; they regarded the Ottoman empire as their natural ally against the Arab national movement. To illustrate his claim, Auron mentions "NILI," the only pro-British Zionist group in Palestine, who openly condemned both the massacre and the Turks at the time (p. 155). Since NILI regarded the Ottomans as their political foe, he explains, the group had no trouble speaking up against their crimes.

"All Armenian researchers try to find the similarity between the Armenian massacre and the Jewish Holocaust; all Zionist researchers try to find the difference. Only a few researchers, such as Professor Yehuda Bower, claim that the massacre of the Armenians most closely resembles that of the Jews." (Auron, page 21)

Although Auron does not actually compare the two tragedies, his research alone on holocausts other than the Jewish one brought upon him the wrath of the Israeli establishment. In 1995 he presented the Ministry of Education (then headed by Amnon Rubinstein of Meretz) with a pilot History program entitled "Sensitivity to Human Suffering - Genocide in the 20th Century." The program, which dealt with the genocides of the Armenians, the Gypsies and the Jews, was declared "unbalanced" and banned.

"This was one of the uglier stories with the Ministry of Education," says Auron to Challenge. "Many figures and organisations - headed by Yad Vashem (the Israeli Holocaust Museum) - objected to the program on the grounds that it would undermine the uniqueness of the (Jewish) Holocaust!"

After banning Auron, the Ministry of Education subsequently presented its own program on the topic, in which "genocide" is referred to as the "Armenian version" of the story. Also presented is the Turkish claim that such a massacre never happened. The program itself does not State a position.

In his new book, Auron documents other Israeli interventions in attempts to officially mark the Armenian massacre: 1) In 1978, a film about the Armenian quarter in Jerusalem was banned from public viewing in Israel because it mentioned the massacre several times; 2) In 1982, the Israeli government prevented the participation of Armenian researchers in an international conference entitled "Holocaust and Genocide," 3) In 1989, the Israeli government used diplomatic pressure to prevent the Armenian genocide from being marked in the American calendar, 4) In 1990, an American movie for television entitled "Journey to Armenia": was banned from Israeli television, after, being broadcast in over 38 countries. 5) No Israeli officials ever participate in the yearly ceremonies commemorating the massacre.' (Auron p.328)

Very few books on the subject of the Armenians have been translated into Hebrew, the most recent of which was Franz Werfel's *The Forty Days of Mussa Dagh* (translated in 1934). Auron is concerned about the ignorance of the Israeli public - particularly of the youth - with regard to the Armenian tragedy.

"I am currently conducting a survey among students of Humanities at Israeli universities - I know that the Ministry of Education would not allow me into the high schools," says Auron. "The results are not complete but my general impression so far is shocking: in a class of fifty students, only two (4 percent) said that they knew quite a lot about the Armenian tragedy. The rest said that they know nothing or very little. I am also planning to check the level of knowledge in teacher colleges."

Despite its banishment from the official curriculum, Auron's program on genocide is being taught in some private schools and colleges where the headmasters are more open minded. Auron recalls a letter sent by a group of pupils from Kibbutz Ma'abarot to the Ministry of Education, asking: "Why ignore history? We believe that ... this program can open students' eyes to the fact that racism is not exclusive to one group of people, or one event."

In addition, a protest was staged by the Armenian community in Israel, in front of the Ministry of Education on April 24, 1996 (the memorial day of the Armenian massacre). Demonstrators condemned the Ministry's new, "balanced" program on the genocide which "presents the butcher and the victim as equals."

Auron believes that the national denial of the Armenian genocide has a detrimental effect on the Israeli approach to Jewish history, and resultingly on Israeli-Jewish behaviour towards the Arab minority in Israel. In his banned program "Genocide in the 20th Century," Auron quotes the Czech writer Milan Kundera: "The struggle of the peoples against abusive power is the Struggle of the memory against forgetfulness."

"From this point of view," Auron continues, "all the reasons for remembering the (Jewish) Holocaust apply to the Armenian genocide. Furthermore, for the Turks who committed the crime to deny it ...is as if Germany were to deny its crimes from World War II..."