

ON THE DENIAL OF THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

HOVHANNISYAN M.

hovhannisyanmari@gmail.com

While contriving a state policy with the intention of building up a developed country with democratic values and civil society, there is always a moot point concerning its own history, politics of past and national identity. The concern is strengthened if the past is difficult since the question of what to do with that past is raised. Should it be remembered or forgotten? What would be the influence of that past on the state and the society that strive for a stable development? Should it be ignored or does it need a reinterpretation? The question becomes much more sensitive when the difficult past is linked to the history of another nation or a neighboring country, when the relations with the neighbor to some extent or in large are conditioned by its present position towards that past. In this respect, the knowledge of the Armenian Genocide is of paramount importance both for the Armenians and the Turks.

The denial of well-documented mass atrocities carried out against the Armenians in the 1890s and at the beginning of the 20th century in the Ottoman Empire has become a subject of conflict between Armenia and Turkey for more than a century. In the current dynamics of globalization, the lack of healthy relationships between the neighboring countries brings about political, economic, social issues and a number of other consequences, which in their turn have a negative influence on the development of the region – the Middle East and the South Caucasus, as well as incites continuous welter in the world politics, i.e., modern great powers use this fact to lead their national interests and realize their long-standing strategic plans in their relationship with other players. Therefore, the comprehensive analyses of the past, the disclosure of unknown facts and the demonstration of constructive approaches to the resolution of difficult issues are of crucial significance.

It should be noted that besides its socio-economic, political, and military consequences that impede the improvement of the relationship between the two states and nations, the proper addressing of the past bears morally vital consequences for the mankind in general. The appropriate evaluation of the past events creates new opportunities to avoid the recurrence of similar events in

future. The proper addressing and evaluation of the human rights violations may establish a base for avoiding the recurrence of similar events; in particular the Holocaust, the Rwandan and Cambodian genocides and other massacres of the century might not have happened if the Armenian Genocide had been addressed properly. This is greatly emphasized by Adolf Hitler's widely quoted remark: "Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians¹." However, there has been a lot of debate among scholars about the connection between the recognition and punishment of the committed atrocities and the prevention of similar crimes in future. Some scholars assert that the recognition and punishment of the committed crimes against humanity cannot prevent the recurrence of genocidal acts in future. As a matter of fact they provide the example of the Holocaust condemnation followed by the Cambodian, Rwandan genocides and other crimes against humanity². Those believing in the necessity of proper acknowledgment of genocides and genocidal acts provide their arguments³. Whether the adequate disposition towards crimes against humanity have the capacity to prevent the possible recurrence of similar acts or not is a question of a separate and comprehensive research. This paper aims at addressing the Turkish denial of the Armenian Genocide in the academic world, which in its form is as unique and complex as the Genocide itself.

Very often the Armenians have been accused of living in the past and seeing the future through the horrors of the past. It is frequently said that the past is unchangeable, thus there is no need to remember what happened long ago. On the contrary, it is essential to erase the difficult past from the memory and set up friendly relations with neighbors. Nenad Dimitrijevic, a professor at Central European University and an expert in transitional justice, states, "To silence the past means to identify, isolate and make publicly irrelevant that particular moment of our past which is not up to the best self-interpretation of our intergenerational

¹ **Kevork B. Bardakjian**, *Hitler and the Armenian Genocide*, Canada, The Zoryan Institute, 1985, p. 14.

² See **Maureen S. Heibert**, "Do Criminal Trials Prevent Genocide? A Critical Analysis", *Impediments to the Prevention and Intervention of Genocide: A Critical Bibliographic Review* Vol. 9, Samuel Totten (ed.), Transaction Publishers, 2013, p. 223–245.

³ **Հովհաննիսյան Մ.**, Որացման քաղաքականության արմատները, նորոգյա դրսևորումները եւ դրանց հետեւանքները, Ե., 2017, էջ 35:

shared identity⁴.” I believe that looking back is essential for both the Armenians and the Turks since it is a part of our common history. In the words of a renowned scholar, emeritus professor of philosophy Avishai Margalit “making the traumatic, repressed communal memories open, explicit, and conscious is said to have healing power...this is the only way to overcome the irrationality that springs from the past trauma and the only way to gain peace of mind⁵.” And rightfully states Marta Minow, failing to respond to the trauma can bring about “intergenerational transmission of trauma⁶.” Thus, there is no doubt about the importance of remembering the past, and the denial is unacceptable. But what is denial and why is it dangerous?

Denial means closing eyes and ears and evading responsibility since the acknowledgement of the past wrongdoings requires a proper response and consequently restoration of the injustice done. In the words of the historian Vahagn Hakobyan “denial is a set of measures taken for political reasons to deny and/or distort the events and historical facts of both the past and the present⁷.”

The denial of the Armenian Genocide has long been on the agenda of the Turkish both scientific and political circles. The Turkish government spares no effort to deny the Armenian Genocide both in Turkey and outside its borders.

The Turkish official historiography has created and developed its own version of the events of 1915 of which the Turkish society has been convinced for decades. Any deviation from the state policy on that issue is perceived as a betrayal of the Turkish nation and the state which leads to persecutions and expulsion from that society. As Stanley Cohen asserts in his book “States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Sufferings”, “the most consistent and elaborate state-organized attempt to conceal a record of past atrocities” is the Turkish government’s efforts.⁸

⁴ **Dimitrijevic N.**, *Duty to Respond: Mass Crime, Denial, and Collective Responsibility*, CEU Press, 2011), p. 57.

⁵ **Avishai Margalit**, *The Ethics of Memory*, Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 5.

⁶ **Minow M.**, *Breaking the Cycles of Hatred: Memory, Law and Repair*, ed. Nancy L. Rosenblum, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2002, p. 16.

⁷ **Hovhannisyan M.**, *Collision of Past and Present: The Collective Memory of the Armenian Genocide and the Turkish Denial*, Germany, Lambert Academic Publishing, 2012, p. 29.

⁸ **Stanley Cohen**, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Sufferings*, Great Britain, Polity, 2001, p. 134.

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It should be noted that the methods and mechanisms used in the Turkish denial policy have been elaborated and refined in the course of time in response to the actions taken to unveil the truth and restore the justice.

The Turkish denial of the Armenian Genocide was initially a political issue. It penetrated into the academic world mainly in the 1980s when genocide studies as a separate field in academia was formed, academic and research centers were established at different universities and institutes all over the world. For the most part this was conditioned by Germany's official acknowledgment and condemnation of the Holocaust, which was followed by the profound interest among scholars in the phenomenon of the crime against humanity.

In 1982 for the first time in the world history an academic conference dedicated to the Holocaust and other genocides was organized. The preparatory works began in 1979. In the words of Israel W. Charny, initiator and organizer of the conference, this was the first academic conference, which focused on the future with the aim to prevent similar events in future⁹. The information about the conference spread in 1980 and a year later, in 1981, 10 thousand booklets were sent to academic and research institutions with the call of papers. For the organization of such an unprecedented conference there was a need of a serious financial means. In the introduction of the book, Israel Charny details about the difficulties and obstacles created by the Turkish government. He states that many Jewish organizations decreased their financial support as the Turkish government threatened them with the safety of the Jews living in Turkey¹⁰. Moreover, there was also pressure on the scholars who dared participate in the conference. The Turkish government spared no efforts to prevent any reference to the Armenian Genocide in the worldly recognized academic conference. However, thanks to the efforts and perseverance of the organizers the conference took place as it had been planned and the panel dedicated to the analyses of the Armenian Genocide was kept in the program in its full form. This was the first explicit intervention of the Turkish government in the academic world to prevent the analyses of the Armenian Genocide. Later on the techniques were modified but the main goal –

⁹ **Israel W. Charny**, Shama Davidson, *The Book of the International Conference of the Holocaust and Genocide: Book One. The Conference Program and Crisis*, Tel Aviv, Israel, 1983, p. 11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

prevention of the analyses and research of the Armenian Genocide – remained the same.

Many publications followed the conference illustrating the Turkish official version of the events of the 20th century. In 1982 Foreign Policy Institute established in Ankara published a brochure with the title “The Armenian Issue in Nine Questions and Answers” illustrating the Turkish main denial theses¹¹. In the same year another booklet entitled “Setting the Records Straight on Armenian Propaganda Against Turkey” again with the initiation and sponsorship of the Turkish authorities was published, this time in the capital of the U.S.A. by the Assembly of Turkish American Associations based in Washington D.C.. The main message of this publication was that there was no genocide in the Ottoman Empire either during World War I or before that¹².

In the course of time the Turkish state could engage not only Turkish scholars but some foreigners in their efforts to deny the fact of the Armenian Genocide. The Turkish state initiated and financed publications of foreign scholars working at various institutions and universities around the world with the aim to create credibility around the theses and allegations made up by the Turkish official historiography. In 1983 New York University Press published a book by American historian Justin McCarthy entitled “Muslims and Minorities: The Population of Ottoman Anatolia and the End of the Empire”, in which the facts were again distorted and presented according to the scenario elaborated by the Turkish state. Another book by the same author was published in 1984 entitled “Armenian Terrorism: History as Poison and Antidote”. It is worth mentioning that American historian Justin McCarthy holds an honorary doctorate from Boğazici University, Turkey, and is a board member of the Institute of Turkish Studies. In his book entitled “Armenian Terrorism: History as Poison and Antidote” McCarthy states:

By the end of the Eastern Anatolian wars, 1.2 million Muslims from Eastern Anatolia and the Caucasus had become refugees. More than one million of the Muslims of Eastern Anatolia had died, as had at least 130.000

¹¹ Foreign Policy Institute, The Armenian Issue in Nine Questions and Answers, Ankara, Foreign Policy Institute, 1982.

¹² Assembly of Turkish American Associations, Setting the Records Straight on Armenian Propaganda Against Turkey, Washington D.C., Assembly of Turkish American Associations, 1982.

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Caucasian refugee Muslims. 870.000 of the Armenians of the six Vilayets had become refugees or had died. In Anatolia as a whole, 600.000 Armenians and 2.5 million Muslims had died. If this was genocide, it was a strange genocide indeed, one in which many more killers than victims perished¹³.

This was a well elaborated method of denial, which can be called a “game with the numbers of victims” used by both the Turkish scholars and the foreigners. Very often it is stated that the numbers presented by the Armenians are forgeries of one’s imagination. This was illustrated in the publication by the Foreign Policy Institute:

Armenian propagandists claim that as many as 1.5 to 2 million Armenians died as a result of “massacre”. Like the rest of their claims, this is also highly exaggerated, with the number claimed being increased over time¹⁴.

In 1985 another book entitled “The Armenian File: The Myth of Innocence Exposed” by Kamuran Gürün appeared. In his book the author blames the victims for treason and states that the adverse circumstances during the inevitable relocation cause deaths:

The Armenians were forced to emigrate because they had joined the ranks of the enemy. The fact that they were civilians does not change the situation. Those who were killed in Hiroshima and Nagasaki during the World War were also civilians. Those who were killed during WWI in France, Belgium, and Holland were also civilians. Those who died in London during the Battle of Britain were also civilians. We gave above some examples as to how the civilians were killed. Turkey did not kill them, but relocated them. As it was impossible to adopt a better solution under the circumstances, it cannot be accepted that those who died because they were unable to resist the hardship of the journey were killed by the Turks¹⁵.

As stated above both foreign and Turkish scholars were engaged in the denial policy of the Armenian Genocide. In 1988 Esat Uras published his book “The

¹³ **Justin Mc Carthy**, *Armenian Terrorism: History as Poison and Antidote*, Ankara University Press, 1984, p. 90.

¹⁴ Foreign Policy Institute, *The Armenian Issue in Nine Questions and Answers*, Ankara, Foreign Policy Institute, 1985, p. 29.

¹⁵ **Kamuran Gürün**, *The Armenian File: The Myth of Innocence Exposed*, Palgrave Macmillan, 1986, p. 217.

Armenians in History and the Armenian Question” (1033 pages), in which he claimed that the whole Armenian history presented by the Armenians is fake and has no academic bases. In his denial he goes so far that claims even Armenian prominent historian Movses Khorenatsi or his work never existed and whatever is stated by the Armenians based on Khorenatsi's work has no credibility¹⁶.

The list of the publications denying the Armenian Genocide was growing year by year as the academic world working in the field of genocide studies got engaged in the research of the Armenian Genocide. On the other hand, the Armenians all over the world started intensively working on the international recognition of the Genocide.

In recent years there is a growing interest among Turkish students to conduct their research on the Armenian “issue”, Armenian Diaspora, events of 1915, etc. This can be viewed as a Plan B: i.e. to prepare as many scholars as possible who would later work in the field, hold responsible positions at institutions and universities not only in Turkey but mostly abroad. This statement is greatly proved by the fact that the Institute of Turkish Studies based in Washington D.C. has widely sponsored scholars both by financing publications and by providing academic scholarship to conduct research at different universities abroad.

According to the report issued in September 2017, the Institute of Turkish Studies from 1983 to 2017 has sponsored 137 individuals to write doctoral dissertations on the topics of their interest, i.e. Turkish history, Armenian issue, history of the Ottoman Empire, etc. The well documented information completely discloses the main directions of the new strategy adopted by the Turkish state in their denial policy. Approximately 90 beneficiaries of the Institute of Turkish Studies continued their professional activities at the institutes and universities, nearly 70 of them at 60 universities in the U.S., 5 of them in Turkey, 15 of the beneficiaries in different universities around the globe. As stated in the report, besides the above mentioned individuals who received scholarships, 12 beneficiaries, who received financial support from the Institute of Turkish Studies, continued research or administrative work at research centers, museums and libraries acting in the United States of America. In the report a special emphasis is

¹⁶ **Esat Uras**, *The Armenians in History and the Armenian Question*, Ankara, Istanbul: Documentary Publications, 1988.

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placed on the fact that by the support of the Institute of Turkish Studies education along the lines of the Turkish state and Turkish history has greatly enlarged at the American academia¹⁷.

Another hazardous mechanism used by the Turkish state has been the politics and its international relations. For many years the Turkish government has warned and threatened other states that made attempts to recognize or have already recognized the reality of the Armenian Genocide or adopting bills which would ban the denial of the Armenian Genocide. A notable example of such is the statement made in 2012 by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, former Prime Minister and currently president of Turkey, to break the ties with France when the bill to criminalize the Genocide denial in France was on the agenda of the French Senate.

It has to be noted that in the course of time the Turkish government has changed its denial policy and nowadays they share the “pain” and equalize the sufferings of the Armenians and the Turks during WWI. In his statement on April 23, 2014 Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said, “The incidents of WWI are our shared pain”. Yet, we should hasten to add that this is a different topic and should be addressed in a separate research.

It is obvious that the Turkish denial is on a grand scale. And it would continue and escalate if there are no counteractions. The consequences of the denial of the past atrocities and, in particular, the Turkish denial of the Armenian Genocide and the methods of atrocities committed against the Christian population of the Ottoman Empire have become obvious in the recent developments in the Middle East Region. To be more specific I would like to give just two examples of the recent massacres that have many similarities with that of the Ottomans. One of them is the massacres committed by the ISIS against the Yezidis in Northern Iraq when thousands of innocent people fell victim to the ISIS religious ideology, and the other vivid example is the Azeribaijani soldiers’ brutalities against the civilians in Nagorno Kharabakh in April 2016.

Besides its moral and psychological effects, new approaches to the past may serve as an aid to the beginning of the process of possible dialogue leading to

¹⁷ Beneficiaries of Institute of Turkish Studies Awards 1983–2017, Washington D.C., Georgetown University, 2017, p. 13.

reconciliation and eventually to peace in the Caucasus-Middle East Region¹⁸. In this sense, the establishment of democratic values, peaceful coexistence and stability, as well as the development of economy in the region largely depend on the states' policies.

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ՀՈՎՀԱՆՆԻՍՅԱՆ Մ.

Ամփոփում

Հայոց ցեղասպանության ժխտման թուրքական քաղաքականությունը լիովին արտացոլվել է թուրք և օտարազգի մի շարք պատմաբանների աշխատություններում, որտեղ այդ ոճրագործությունը ժխտվում է ոգի ի բռին: Բայց այդ իրողության ժխտումն իսկ բացասաբար է անդրադառնում ինչպես տարածաշրջանում խաղաղության, այնպես էլ արդի աշխարհաքաղաքական զարգացումների վրա:

ОБ ОТРИЦАНИИ ГЕНОЦИДА АРМЯН

ОГАНЕСЯН М.

Резюме

Проводимая Турцией политика отрицания геноцида нашла отражение и в научных работах. Об этом свидетельствуют исследования ряда турецких и иностранных историков, всячески отрицающих факт геноцида. Политика отрицания геноцида имеет негативный резонанс как в вопросе сохранения мира в регионе, так и современных геополитических реалий.

¹⁸ **Taner Akçam**, Dialogue across an International Divide: Essays towards a Turkish-Armenian Dialogue, Canada, The Zoryan Institute, 2001.