

Review Feature - The Armenian Genocide

Written by Levon Chorbajian

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LEVON CHORBAJIAN, JUL 11 2016

Open Wounds: Armenians, Turks, and a Century of Genocide

By Vicken Cheterian

London: Hurst Publishers, 2015

Justifying Genocide: Germany and the Armenians from Bismarck to Hitler

By Stefan Ihrig

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016

The legacy of major historical events is memory. How should an event be remembered? What is its meaning in a contemporary world? What are the new avenues to be explored, and the new interpretations to be considered? These very issues were examined recently in an interpretative essay on one hundred books dealing with the memory of the Vietnam War. Some of these were written by professional historians but many by anti-war veterans, American POWs, their spouses, and the Vietnamese themselves, all of them offering new understandings and meanings.

The Armenian Genocide was launched by the Ottoman Turkish state in April of 1915 under the cover of World War I. A million to a million and half Armenians perished. The exact numbers can never be known. Some victims were brutally murdered, especially young and middle aged men. Most however, women, children, and older men, perished in forced marches into what are now the deserts of northern Syria. In these slowly moving death camps^[1] the deportees were denied food and water, and subjected to sexual predation and the theft of everything they had.

Like the Vietnam War, the memory of the Armenian Genocide travels its own journey. At the time this mass destruction of a people (the word genocide had not yet been invented) received wide publicity all over the world and produced two primary documents still useful today. The first was by the U.S. Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire Henry Morgenthau who published *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story* and the other was a vast collection of eyewitness accounts compiled by a young Arnold Toynbee. However with the birth of the Turkish Republic in 1923 and the normalization of relations between Turkey and the Allies in the Treaty of Lausanne, the Armenian Genocide slowly passed into oblivion and for decades was known, if at all, as "The Forgotten Genocide".

For a complex set of reasons this changed, and the changes ran in two very different directions. For a decade starting in the mid-1970s militant Armenian youths began a series of assassinations of several dozen Turkish diplomats around the world. Vicken Cheterian is critical of these acts but concedes that the killings placed the Armenian Genocide once again on the international agenda and led some Turkish intellectuals to question and then reject the official history of the Republic of Turkey which is that there had never been a genocide. The other development was the production of high quality research and the publication of history and memoirs combined with non-violent political activism. Much of the action took place in Turkey under uncertain and dangerous conditions, and Cheterian focuses much of his attention there. However, when Cheterian's publisher asked him to write his own history of the Armenian Genocide, he demurred saying that he did not wish to write yet another history. Instead he wrote *Open Wounds*, a fascinating yet difficult to classify book; part history, part memoir, part interpretation. Cheterian describes it as a post-1915 political history of the Armenian Genocide and the consequences of a century long Turkish campaign of genocide denial.

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If we think of Cheterian's book in literary/cinematic terms, there is a hero and an important cast of supporting characters who are profiled in short biographies throughout the volume. The star is Hrant Dink, the Turkish-Armenian activist and founder of the Turkish-Armenian weekly *Agos*. Dink fought the relentless media stereotyping of Turkey's small and dwindling Armenian community and the everyday discrimination directed at its members. Dink also prodded Turkey's national conscience to provide a full and honest accounting of the fate of the Armenians. He deeply believed along with others that this was the only way for Turkey to shed its repressive, authoritarian political structure and move ahead to democracy. Dink had received thousands of death threats for his activities over the years and was assassinated with three bullets to the back of the head outside the *Agos* office in 2007. He died for championing free speech in Turkey for Armenians, Kurds and other minorities and fighting for the rights of trade unionists and others working for social justice. His greatest success was to create a new public space where the Armenian Genocide could be openly discussed as a Turkish national issue that all Turkish people and the state would have to address in order to move forward as a nation. In recognition of his work, his catholic vision, and his sacrifice, Dink's funeral procession drew tens of thousands of people from every ethnicity and social class in Turkey.

The cast of characters are all major intellectual figures in their own right. Turkish-Armenian Vahakn Dadrian, living in the U.S. for decades, published numerous high quality histories of the Armenian Genocide including *History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasus*. Taner Akçam published three major studies of the genocide, the latest being *The Young Turks' Crime against Humanity: The Armenian Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire*. Fatma Müge Göçek, like Akçam another U.S. based Turkish intellectual, published *Denial of Violence: Ottoman Past, Turkish Present, and Collective Violence against the Armenians, 1789-2009*. Like Akçam, she sees the Armenian Genocide as the foundational event of the modern Turkish state because it established extreme violence and repression as a legitimate mode of governance in Turkey, a culture of violence she insists prevails down to the present. An entirely different vista was opened by Fethiye Cetin to the lives of the tens of thousands of abductees and forced converts of the genocide. In *My Grandmother: A Memoir*, Cetin tells the story of her Armenian grandmother who had been abducted during the genocide at the age of 10 and raised as a Muslim. At the end of her life the old woman tells her life story to Cetin who publishes it in English and Turkish.^[2] A key contribution came from Turkish human rights activist and co-founder of Belge Publishing, Ragıp Zarakolu. He published Turkish translations of Dadrian's *History of the Armenian Genocide* and collections of Dadrian's essays. For this and his publications on other taboo topics such as the Kurdish Question Zarakolu has been arrested numerous times as well as imprisoned and tortured.

Cheterian makes it clear that these works and the struggles accompanying them matter because the Armenian Genocide was the start of a continuous, on-going and failed attempt to manufacture an exclusively mono-Turkish state out of the multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, and multi-religious Ottoman Empire. The Armenian Genocide is now rarely front page news, but it roils in the background as Turkey continues to struggle with its current ethnic make-up and very large non-Turkish Muslim population, most of it Kurdish. On the Armenian front, Turkey is increasingly isolated in its campaign of genocide denial, and 2015 and 2016 were not good years. Aside from commemorative centenary events all over the world, Pope Francis led an Armenian Genocide mass in St. Peter's Basilica on April 12, 2015. Shortly thereafter Ottoman Turkey's two major allies during World War I acknowledged the genocide, the Austrian parliament on April 22, 2015 and the German Bundestag on June 2, 2016. Of greater significance are events in Turkey where the ghost of Hrant Dink and his allies call for an honest confrontation with Turkey's past as the elusive foundation for a truly democratic Turkey. The forces of denial have been challenged and weakened perhaps but remain sufficiently strong and entrenched in Cheterian's view to block Turkey from acknowledging the Armenian Genocide at this time. However, Cheterian's closing is optimistic. He writes, "I know that in the future Turkey will acknowledge the genocide, and it will be a beautiful country" (p. 313). We shall see.

If Cheterian starts his book off with Hrant Dink, Stefan Ihrig starts his with German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck and the Ottoman defeat in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878. In the midst of Russia, Britain, and France seeking to weaken the Ottoman Empire and claim spheres of influence and territories for themselves, a desperate Sultan Abdul Hamid turned to Germany for support. From that starting point, at first slowly and then more aggressively, Bismarck saw opportunity in supporting the Ottoman Empire and came to the defense of the Empire against criticism and reprisals from its many enemies. We see this clearly when Germany defended Ottoman pogroms, most notably during the Hamidian massacres which claimed 200,000 Armenian lives from 1894 to 1896.

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To demonstrate the strength of German ties to the Ottoman Empire and its successor state, Turkey, Ihrig relies heavily on articles and editorials from the German press and statements by leading German statesmen and military leaders. As early as the 1890s these materials reveal a pattern of stereotypical anti-Armenianism in Germany which Ihrig compares in style and content to German anti-Semitism. During World War I Germany defended its Ottoman Turkish ally and Turkey's genocide of the Armenians. Ihrig provides many examples of German leaders re-stating Turkish denials of systematic mass killings, and when the evidence was so overwhelming that it could not be plausibly denied, providing rationales and justifications. These statements were dutifully reported in the German press.^[3] The average German was told that the demonized Armenians operated as a subversive fifth column in Asia Minor and posed a serious national security threat to the Ottoman Empire. Therefore Armenians had to be re-located away from border areas on the Russian front. These mass deportations were reported as temporary and conducted with respect for life and property. In reality, German leaders and the German media promoted little other than what the Turks were saying about themselves.

After the war and into the 1920s the Armenian Genocide was widely debated in Germany and often justified. The top Nazis, including Hitler, were well aware of the Armenian Genocide, and Hitler cited Atatürk along with Mussolini as the major role models in shaping his own conception of the Fuhrer figure. Furthermore, the Nazis held up Atatürk and the Turkish Republic as a model of national resurgence in the wake of wartime defeat and the extermination of pariah peoples.^[4] Ihrig stops short of claiming the Armenian Genocide directly inspired the Holocaust. He does argue though that it suggested to the Nazis that genocide could restore defeated and humiliated powers to past glories.

Notes

^[1] Recent histories and archival collections include Rouben Adalian, *Guide to the Armenian Genocide in the U.S. Archives, 1915-1918*. Alexandria, VA.: Chadwick-Healey, 1991-1993; Taner Akçam, *From Empire to Republic: Turkish Nationalism & the Armenian Genocide*. London: Zed Books, 2004; Taner Akçam, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility*. New York: Picador, 2007; Donald Bloxham, *The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005; Vahakn Dadrian and Taner Akçam, *Judgment at Istanbul: The Armenian Genocide Trials*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2011; Vahakn Dadrian, *Warrant for Genocide: Key Elements of Turco-Armenian Conflict*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1999; Richard Hovannisian, *The Armenian Genocide: Cultural and Ethical Legacies*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 2007; Richard Hovannisian, *Looking Backward, Moving Forward: Confronting the Armenian Genocide*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 2003; Raymond Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2011; Donald Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller, *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999; Ara Sarafian, *United States Official Documents on the Armenian Genocide*. Volumes 1-4. Watertown, MA.: *The Armenian Review*, 1994-2002. Ronald Suny, *They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. Uğur Ümit Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913-1950*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012; Jay Winter, *America and the Armenian Genocide of 1915*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. For additional references see footnotes 3-7 and 9.

^[2] Unlike the Nazis whose objection to Jews was their very physicality, the Turkish objection was cultural. Thus some Armenians could be allowed to survive but not as Armenians. We should also consider as a measure of the silencing of history that Akçam, Cetin, and Göçek—all of them Turkish, all of them born and raised in Turkey, and all of them educated—knew nothing about the Armenian Genocide until they had reached adulthood. The Genocide had been all but blanked out and erased in Turkish political and popular culture.

^[3] The only counter-current was found in the much smaller German missionary press that most Germans never saw and the activism of prominent Protestant missionary Dr. Johannes Lepsius. See Lepsius, *Deutschland und Armenien*. Potsdam: Der Tempelverlag, 1919.

^[4] The Atatürk connection is explored in Ihrig's earlier book *Atatürk in the Nazi Imagination*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014.

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