

What's the Turkish for genocide?

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Opinion

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If Turkey wants to join the EU it must confront its bloody past and admit to the massacre of the Armenians.

Historians have become the moral accountants of our time, poring over the archives to establish, as nearly as possible, the unpaid debts still owed by the present to the past. In China there have been violent demonstrations demanding Japan's penitence for its wartime aggression. In Mississippi, an elderly white man and reputed Klansman has gone on trial accused of murdering civil rights workers more than four decades ago. The Argentine Supreme Court this week opened the way for a full inquiry into the crimes of the "dirty war" between 1976 and 1983. Even France, for so long in denial, has begun to address the unquiet ghosts of Vichy and Algeria.

The process of historical self-examination is neither simple nor easy. In the wrong hands, history becomes a weapon of recrimination and revenge, intercepted by bigots who would use old battles to stoke new ones. Yet historical introspection is crucial to democracy. The fledgeling South African democracy bravely sought to cauterise a traumatic past through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The Bloody Sunday inquiry may have been expensive and lengthy (seven years, £155 million and 1,700 witness statements) but it was a necessary step towards freeing Northern Ireland from the locked grip of competing histories. Postwar Germany has confronted its demons in a conscious and continuing act of national catharsis. The alternative is self-delusion. Treat the past as self-serving myth and it forms a canker of moral equivocation.

Amid the debate over Turkish membership of the EU, there is one matter that has hardly been raised, and that is Turkey's bitter and blinkered refusal to make peace with its past. In Turkish history, no event is more divisive and explosive than the "Armenian question", the long-disputed massacre of hundreds of thousands of Armenians during the First World War.

Armenia claims that, as the Ottoman Empire crumbled in 1915, Turkish soldiers and Kurdish tribesmen were unleashed in a deliberate act of genocide that killed 1.5 million Armenians. Turkey has refused steadfastly to accept that version of events, declaring that the Armenian death toll was far lower, and that the dead perished mainly through civil war, hunger and disease. This, the Turks insist, was not a systematic slaughter, but a bitter partisan and ethnic conflict in which Armenians sided with the invading Russians against Ottoman rule, leading to the deaths of at least 350,000 Turkish Muslims.

This month, historians at Bosphorus University scheduled a conference to debate the tragic events of 1915-1916. Turkish nationalists reacted with fury. Cemil Çiçek, the Justice Minister, described the planned conference as "treacherous" and accused the historians of "preparing to stab Turkey in the back." With government pressure mounting, and nationalist students threatening to converge on the university campus, the conference organisers buckled. The event was cancelled.

The argument, which continues to poison relations between Turkey and Armenia and destabilise the region, boils down to a single, intensely emotive word. As Caroline Finkel writes in her excellent forthcoming book, *Osman's Dream: The Story of the Ottoman Empire 1300-1923*: "The Armenian question today has come to focus exclusively on whether the massacres constituted genocide . . . and all other aspects of this acutely sensitive matter tend to be scrutinised for their value in clarifying this central point."

But clarity is impossible in a debate that evokes such violent emotions. The Turkish Foreign Minister has dismissed the term genocide as "pure slander", and when the celebrated Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk dared to declare this year that a million Armenians had been murdered in Turkey, he received three lawsuits for "damaging the State" and a volley of death threats.

To complicate matters further, much of the killing in 1915 appears to have been carried out by Turkish secret societies, whose records have disappeared and whose relationship to the Ottoman authorities is unclear. Turks point out that there is no official document ordering the killing of Armenians. Armenians allege that the archives have been purged.

The parliaments of 17 countries, including France and Russia, have already passed resolutions recognising the Armenian genocide. Britain and America have held back, wary of angering a powerful and important ally. But staying silent is not the act of a friend, and it is hard to see how Turkey can join the EU, "an organisation founded on a determination to avoid repeating the mistakes of history" without first acknowledging its own bloody past.

The precise numbers of dead, and the meaning of the term genocide, can be debated forever, but of this there is no doubt: hundreds of thousands of innocent Armenians perished as a consequence of Turkish actions. Most historians outside Turkey now agree that what happened after 1915 constituted "ethnic cleansing", for which the Ottoman Government was ultimately responsible.

Acknowledging this, while genuinely encouraging the widest and most dispassionate debate on the subject, would establish Turkey's commitment to freedom of speech and democratic ideals in the run-up to accession talks in October. So far, British officials have side-stepped the issue, insisting that the Armenian question is a matter for historians. As a country with its own ghosts, Britain has a responsibility to encourage Turkey to see its own history beyond confining notions of treachery or loyalty.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Turkish Prime Minister, while reiterating his belief that the genocide never happened, has called for a joint commission to look into the Turkish archives. But a far more emphatic demonstration of openness would be to revive the conference at Bosphorus University and open it to the widest possible range of scholarly opinion. "Who today, after all, remembers the annihilation of the Armenians?" Thus spake Adolf Hitler, reassuring his generals that the Jewish Holocaust would be forgotten in the glow of Nazi victory. Ninety years after the killing, the Armenians remember one way, and the Turks another. The passage of time has calcified these rival histories, but Turkey's desire to enter the EU represents an opportunity for genuine historical reconciliation. The Armenian question may yet be answered, if Turkey can be persuaded to ask it.

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