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Armenia Genocide in Brave Detail

A Turkish historian has mined and synthesized the Ottoman Empire's internal documents and memoirs for moral clarity.

By Paul Bessemer

Pope Benedict XVI's just-ended magical military tour of Turkey—with helicopters overhead and riot police bristling on every flank lest he be plugged on his first visit to a Muslim land—revealed a profound truth: Those who forget the past sometimes simply want to forget it.

The pope didn't utter a peep about arriving in a country whose predecessor state, the Ottoman Empire, committed the largest genocide in history against Christians. Of course, it may be that the always-diplomatic Vatican Curia took possession of Benedict's mind and body, having exorcised the former Cardinal Ratzinger's well-known views about Turkey and Islam.

It may also be that the murder of more than one million non-Catholic Christians in the Armenian genocide is a non-homefield matter in the Vatican's current damage-control foreign policy toward Turkey and Islam.

But the upshot—a spectacle of supposed reconciliation between the Papacy and Islam last week that operated without moral memory or judgment—proved embarrassing to anyone who thinks there is no God but truth. Thankfully, we have Taner Akcam's magnificently researched study, *A Shameful Act*, as rebuke and counter lesson.

Why, as the world press endlessly repeated this last week, is Turkey "99 percent Muslim"? One reason is that Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II, who regarded Armenians as a "degenerate community," ordered the massacre of 200,000 Turkish Armenian Christians in 1894-96.

Another is that a nucleus of future nationalist leaders of the Turkish Republic—known as the "Young Turk" government—embarked in the dying days of the Ottoman Empire (1915-16) on horrific acts of genocide and "ethnic cleansing" to rid Turkey of Christians.

To put it bluntly: In those dying days, Ottoman leaders killed most of Turkey's Christians, just as Nazi Germany would kill most of its Jews.

Hundreds of thousands of Turkey's Greek Christians had already been expelled or killed in 1914. But in 1915, as World War I raged and provided a smokescreen, the Young Turk leaders implemented a "final solution," murdering an estimated one million to 1.3 million Turkish Armenian Christians—two-thirds of the remaining Armenian population of Turkey—through starvation, death marches and execution.

That the Armenian genocide remains little-known in the United States amounts to amnesia about our own history. As powerfully recounted in Peter Balakian's *The Burning Tigris* (2003), the campaign by prominent Americans from 1892 to 1920 to prevent genocide in Armenia formed the first international human-rights movement in our history, the template for today's struggle over Darfur.

Feminist leader Julia Ward Howe railed against the sultan's massacres. Clara Barton led an 1896 American Red Cross mission to save Armenians. Congress passed a resolution condemning the sultan. Americans donated more than \$100 million to Armenian relief aid.

In light of how things ended, the force of American outrage astonishes. Theodore Roosevelt called the Armenian massacres "the greatest crime" of World War I. The American ambassador to Istanbul labeled Turkey "a place of horror."

Despite that, by the early 1920s, the United States abandoned its intent to establish an Armenian homeland and convict Turkish leaders. The military success of Mustafa Kemal (later Atatürk) in establishing the Turkish Republic in 1922 against the wishes of the Great Powers, along with the U.S. decision to let oil politics trump human rights, pushed the Armenian holocaust off center stage.

Ever since, the Turkish Republic has rejected charges of genocide. It describes the Armenian deaths as collateral damage, World War I-style. That's despite postwar Ottoman courts-martial in which officials confessed to a genocidal policy. Turkey still mandates criminal penalties for those who accuse the state of slaughter.

One wishes that all involved in this last week's stagecraft between the Vatican and Turkey had been forced to read Akcam's *A Shameful Act* and to comment on it. Turkish Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk calls Akcam's work "the definitive account of the organized destruction of the Ottoman Armenians" by "a brave Turkish scholar."

Some fine earlier books in English have delivered the grim tale. But no scholar has mined and synthesized the Ottoman Empire's internal documents and memoirs with Akcam's assiduous skill. Like Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews*, *A Shameful Act* is destined to become a touchstone for other studies.

Akcam, 56, a Turkish sociologist and historian, obtained political asylum in Germany after receiving a 10-year prison sentence at home for working on a student journal. He now teaches at the University of Minnesota. Hardly anti-Turkish, he dedicates his book to Haji Halil, a righteous Turk who, at the risk of being hanged, protected eight members of an Armenian family in his home during the genocide.

As you might expect from an author of such courage, Akcam pulls no punches. Ottoman Turkish leaders "did deliberately attempt to destroy the Armenian population." Turkey continues to deny the genocide because many of the leaders involved in it "later became central figures in the Turkish government" and "admitted openly that the republic could

only have been established by eliminating the Armenians and removing their demand for self-determination in Anatolia."

The most striking achievement of *A Shameful Act* is its depth of detail. Akcam documents every twist of the story—from the political and racist origins of Turkish nationalism to the insistence of Muslims that they had to rule over inferior "infidel" Christians—with multiple sources and shocking quotations.

How, though, to explain the disappearance of such crucial history during the pope's visit? This honesty gap left his visit a moral mess, a pageant of hypocrisies. Turkish newspapers, for instance, kept asking whether the pope would offer yet another, fuller "apology" for remarks on Islam during a recent lecture that had provoked Muslim outrage.

Moral clarity, on the contrary, would suggest that it is Turkey that still owes the pope, Armenians, Christians, and the rest of the world an apology for acts far more heinous than provocative citation. Turkish nationalism, as Akcam shows, took its racist spine partly from Germany and partly from Islamic jihadism. Turkey could do worse than look to 21st-century Germany for instruction on decency, honesty and redemption.

At the same time, the pope won himself no credit by honoring the Vatican tradition of Pius XII—resisted by both John XXIII and John Paul II—of failing to speak truth to power when in the latter's presence. One couldn't help thinking of Hitler's famous question to his generals eight days before invading Poland in 1939. "Who today," he asked, "speaks of the annihilation of the Armenians?"

Not Pope Benedict XVI. Be grateful instead for Taner Akcam. He doesn't wear pretty white vestments, but he speaks the holy truth.

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