

The Politics of Genocide and the Turkey-Armenia Protocols

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We must approach all cases of genocide as part of world history. If we believe in “Never again” and want to prevent future genocides, we must treat such epochal events as part of the universal experience and of concern to all.

James Traub writes the following in an October 18 *New York Times* review of Daniel Goldhagen’s new book, *Worse than War: Genocide, Eliminationism, and the Ongoing Assault on Humanity*:

But to exclude mass murder from the realm of conscious action offers an exculpation of its own, both to the killers and to ourselves — for how could we, ordinary folk who cherish life, descend to such madness? In this magisterial and profoundly disturbing “natural history” of mass murder, Daniel Jonah Goldhagen calls for an end to such willful blindness.... Goldhagen insists that even the worst atrocities originate with, and are then propelled by, a series of quite conscious calculations by followers as much as by leaders. “We must stop detaching mass elimination and its mass-murder variant from our understanding of politics,” Goldhagen writes.... Atrocities resemble one another; their differences are shaped by the perpetrators’ ideology, their specific fantasy of a purified world, their view of the victims they seek to eradicate....

But if the ultimate goal is to ensure that we never again stand by in the face of a Rwanda-style genocide, public opinion will not be rallied through an earnest accounting of national interest, but through an appeal to conscience.... He heaps scorn on the United Nations, whose founding principles of respect for sovereignty and of noninterference in internal affairs have served, as he rightly observes, as a shield for leaders in Sudan and elsewhere who are bent on slaughtering their own people.

This is interesting in light of the press coverage both before and after the signing of the Turkish-Armenian protocols. A recurrent theme emerges, particularly in countries which have yet to recognize officially the mass murder of the Armenians in 1915 as genocide: the dispute between Turkey and Armenia over the Genocide is exclusively their problem. For example, the BBC, in reporting on the Protocols on October 10, 2009, stated, in effect, the Armenians say it was genocide, Turkey says it wasn’t, so the reader does not know what to believe:

Armenians have campaigned for the killings to be recognized internationally as genocide - and more than 20 countries have done so. Turkey admits that many Armenians were killed but says the deaths were part of the widespread fighting that took place in World War I.

As far back as 2005, the distinguished human rights activist and Nobel Laureate, Elie Wiesel, described the difficulty of Armenian-Turkish relations because “ancestral hate is not easily erased.” This gives the impression that the problem between the two countries is intractable ancient history, rather than a political problem arising out of a specific historical event: the Armenian Genocide of 1915 committed by Ottoman Turkey.

On April 9, 2009, when President Barack Obama was in Turkey, he distanced himself from getting directly involved in the Armenian-Turkish issue, stating:

I want to be as encouraging as possible around those negotiations, which are moving forward and could bear fruit very quickly, very soon. And as a consequence, what I want to do is not focus on my views, but focus on the views of the Turkish and the Armenian people, if they can move forward and deal with a difficult and tragic history, then I think the entire world should encourage them. So what I

told the president was I want to be as constructive as possible in moving these issues forward quickly. And my sense is that they are moving quickly. I don't want to, as the president of the United States, to preempt any possible arrangements or announcements that might be made in the near future. I just want to say that we are going to be a partner in working through these issues in such a way that the most important parties, the Turks and the Armenians, are finally coming to terms in the most constructive way.

It seems that there is a certain point of view prevailing that only Turkey and Armenia have a vested interest in the Armenian Genocide, and that it is no one else's problem.

One wonders, would the Rwandan Genocide be characterized as a problem of concern only to Hutus and Tutsis? The complexities of the situation in Rwanda, for example, involved Belgium, France, Burundi, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, US, and the UN. The United States' contortions to avoid using the word "genocide" in 1994, and the UN refusal to accept General Dallaire's warning of imminent genocide there, in order to avoid getting involved, are well documented. Such obvious political manipulation caused outrage in most people, and the suffering caused by the slaughter of some 800,000 victims made us all empathize with the plight of our fellow human beings. The horror of that genocide, where the men, women, children and elderly of one group were targeted with the intent to annihilate them, was an outright violation of international law, and was watched on our television screens, bringing the injustice home to everyone. It may have been easier for some to be bystanders in the face of that genocide, but no one today would say this tragedy is of concern only to Hutus and Tutsis.

The same is true for the Holocaust and the Armenian Genocide. In fact, the Armenian Genocide is recognized by scholars as the archetype of modern genocide, and its lessons have universal application. One of the lessons most particularly associated with the Armenian Genocide is how denial of the crime can embolden future perpetrators, as we learned from Adolf Hitler and Albert Speer. In order to be able to prevent genocide in the future, we must raise awareness of it as a scourge on humanity and educate our societies about it. We must resist all attempts to disparage or dismiss any case of genocide. Once you compromise the universality of any genocide, the entire worldwide effort for genocide prevention is undermined.

The prevention of genocide and upholding freedom of expression and thought are mandated by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. It is against this background that the Zoryan Institute is committed to raising awareness of genocide and the necessity of its prevention and to promoting universal human rights. These are the principles reflected in our commentary on the Turkish Armenian Reconciliation Commission in 2001, in our open letter to Prime Minister Erdogan on his call for a joint historians' commission in 2005, in our commentary against the proposed law to criminalize denial of the Armenian Genocide in France in 2006, in our co-organizing a Symposium on the Albright-Cohen Genocide Prevention Task Force Report in March 2009 (which, among other issues, was based on faulty assumptions and the ignoring of past history), and in our open letter to President Sargsyan regarding the Protocols, last month.

Our position on the Protocols is to make sure that the incontestability of the Armenian Genocide is neither ignored nor called into question. It is from this perspective that we wrote to President Sargsyan:

... numerous distinguished historians, political scientists, sociologists, legal scholars, and authoritative institutions around the world have investigated the Genocide many times over, issued academic publications, and even made public declarations. These scholars have devoted their professional lives to conducting scientific research with the highest levels of academic integrity. As a result of their work, scholars have identified the Armenian Genocide as the archetypal case of modern genocide, whose pattern has many similarities with subsequent cases.

What the Armenian and Turkish governments do or agree upon, as two sovereign nations, is their prerogative. However, our objective is to raise the awareness of all those involved in these Protocols (the two signing countries, the three OSCE monitoring countries—the US, Russia and France—and the EU representative) that the Armenian Genocide is a historical fact, part of the universal human experience, and can not be compromised.

Furthermore, any attempt to deny it was genocide, to trivialize this enormous crime, or to relativize it as an issue only between Armenians and Turks will be firmly opposed by scholars, legal specialists and human rights activists in this field. The recent open letter from Prof. William A. Schabas below is vivid testimony of this resolve.

Dear Prime Minister Erdogan and President Sarkisian,

The proposed protocols between Armenia and Turkey call for an “impartial historical commission” to investigate what the world knows as the Armenian Genocide of 1915.

As the leading scholarly organization engaged in the study of genocide, we welcome continued investigation that will enhance our understanding of the 1915 massacres. However, we are extremely wary of any call for allegedly impartial research into what are clearly established historical facts.

Acknowledgement of the Armenian Genocide must be the starting point of any “impartial historical commission,” not one of its possible conclusions. The world would not accept an inquiry into the truth of the Nazi Holocaust, or the extermination of the Tutsi in Rwanda, and nor can it do so with the genocide of the Armenians.

William Schabas, President, International Association of Genocide Scholars

In 1915, against the background of great power politics intervening in the Ottoman Empire and of World War I, some 1.5 million Armenians were slaughtered. While on May 24, 1915, the Allied Powers (France, Great Britain and Russia) warned the Ottoman leaders that they would be called to account for their “crimes against humanity,” US Ambassador Henry Morgenthau described on July 16, 1915 what was happening as “race extermination.” Raphael Lemkin, the legal scholar who coined the term “genocide” in 1944, describing in his personal memoir how he became involved in its study, wrote:

I identified myself more and more with the sufferings of the victims, whose numbers grew, and I continued my study of history. I understood that the function of memory is not only to register past events, but to stimulate human conscience. Soon contemporary examples of Genocide followed, such as the slaughter of the Armenians.

We note that monitors at the Protocols signing ceremony, Russia, France, the European Union, and Switzerland (the mediator in the negotiations) all have already acknowledged the Armenian Genocide through their respective parliaments. The US, whose official diplomatic archive is one of the richest historical sources on the Armenian Genocide, will itself eventually have to stop compromising the truth for political expediency. President Ronald Reagan called it genocide in 1981. President George W. Bush described it as “the annihilation of as many as 1.5 million Armenians through forced exile and murder at the end of the Ottoman Empire” in 2004. President Obama, in January 2008, stated:

I also share with Armenian Americans—so many of whom are descended from genocide survivors—a principled commitment to commemorating and ending genocide. That starts with acknowledging the tragic instances of genocide in world history. As a U.S. Senator, I have stood with the Armenian American community in calling for Turkey’s acknowledgement of the Armenian Genocide. Two years ago, I criticized the Secretary of State for the firing of U.S. Ambassador to Armenia, John Evans, after

he properly used the term "genocide" to describe Turkey's slaughter of thousands of Armenians starting in 1915. I shared with Secretary Rice my firmly held conviction that the Armenian Genocide is not an allegation, a personal opinion, or a point of view, but rather a widely documented fact supported by an overwhelming body of historical evidence. The facts are undeniable. An official policy that calls on diplomats to distort the historical facts is an untenable policy. As a senator, I strongly support passage of the Armenian Genocide Resolution (H.Res.106 and S.Res.106), and as President I will recognize the Armenian Genocide.

Notwithstanding the above, we are of the opinion that while Turks today are not guilty of committing the Genocide, they are responsible for accepting and allowing Turkey's official state denial. Denial is considered the final stage of genocide, which continues to victimize the survivors and their descendants, aggravating an open wound that can not heal. The tremendous pain that an Armenian feels is no different from that a Jew, Pole, or Roma feels because of people, such as President Ahmedinejad of Iran, who deny the Holocaust of WWII, or a Tutsi feels when the Rwandan genocide is denied.

In conclusion, the Armenian Genocide is part of world history. If we want to prevent future genocides, we must treat all cases of genocide as part of the universal experience, and of concern to all.