

# TEN YEARS SHY OF A CENTURY!

## *The Armenian Genocide 1915*

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*Nations have no permanent friends or allies. They only have permanent interests.*

**Lord Palmerston, British Foreign Minister, 1846-1851**

*For me, the Armenian genocide is something we remember and commemorate every year on April 24<sup>th</sup> in our different countries. I went recently to Dzizernagapert [Genocide Memorial Complex in Armenia] and what I could feel was how extremely proud I was of my nation for surviving this gruesome ordeal. But I'm more concerned about the Armenia of today. Talking about the genocide has been getting Armenians some sympathy but actual financial compensation could also be quite useful, don't you think? People are starving there, or so they say, and they seriously need help. Constantly reminding them about their misfortunes and bad luck isn't going to do much for their morale now, is it? So why dwell on this one horrific historical chapter to the exclusion of other equally pressing and contemporary issues?*

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*Individuals, nations, and cultures are the sum total of their past experiences. However glorious or painful, it is the experiences of our forebears that are the forming forces that weave the very fabric of our identities. No individual / generation has the right to wipe the slate clean and start all over again for the sake of expediency in the short term. By the same token we all have the obligation to help each other out, celebrate our values, and pass on our cultural identities - having made our contribution - to future generations. At best we are stewards of our heritage. We can address questions of the Armenian character, purpose in, and contribution to life by examining ideas that have shaped western thought through the lens of our heritage. We should seek to reinvigorate our society and culture through the transformation and renewal of its leaders. We could do well to remember what Goethe said, 'He who cannot draw on 3,000 years is living hand-to-mouth.'*

These two expurgated quotations come from separate conversations I had with a couple of Armenians well over two years ago. I remember them quite clearly since I have used them on different occasions to define Armenian perceptions of the Armenian Genocide. The first response is congruent with the views of someone like the syndicated

columnist, broadcaster and award-winning author Eric S Margolis. The second one comes closer to those views propounded by the likes of the distinguished journalist Robert Fisk from the *Independent* daily newspaper who has often addressed the Armenian Genocide that remains hitherto officially unrecognised in the UK. Just like my two acquaintances making their attentive comments, both Fisk and Margolis acknowledge the veracity of the genocide but then diverge somewhat when history cedes to future orientations. There is a diversity of views that forms the sum-total of those realities surrounding us, developing, instructing and infusing us in the process with a set of core values and beliefs.

In one sense, those twin perceptions are not only staking a claim to the pages of Armenian history. With their own overarching themes, they are equally lending themselves to definitions of national existentialism that are much closer to psychological modes of knowing than to metaphysical ones. Like the Cartesian theories of Jean-Paul Sartre or Albert Camus, their perceptions - dissimilar in their similarity - strive for self-discovery and place the absolute in human freedom somewhere between the levels of existence and essence.

It is my belief that the horrendous events of 9/11 introduced a sea change in our global perception of world events. Until that fateful and horrific date, most countries had attempted to treat the symptoms of conflicts by applying plasters to their more visible manifestations. Ever since, many world democracies have begun addressing the root causes of some of those festering conflicts. As Professor Simon Roberts taught me at University College London some moons ago, plasters cannot be effective tools of conflict resolution. Indeed, the world has come to acknowledge a new paradigm whereby injustices cannot simply be swept under the proverbial carpet in the sanguine hope that they will fade away! Unless they are dealt with conscientiously, those conflicts have a way of re-emerging time and again until their underlying causes let alone inherent traumas are dealt with methodically and equitably. It is true that major miscalculations have tarnished global strategic thinking in the past few years, most recently in Iraq, but the neo-con theosophy today enjoys some acute relevance to our world as terrorism and genocide from Indonesia to Darfur are occurring with impunity almost daily.

In a sense, it is this global shift that encouraged me to address yet again the open chapter in the narrative of my own Armenian people. Why should the British Government, for instance, attempt to exclude the Armenian Genocide year-in-year out from the commemorative service of Holocaust Memorial Day? Why should those people who are loyal to the ethos of the Jewish Holocaust remain disloyal in equal but opposite measure to the ethos of the Armenian Genocide? Should Churches world-wide not be more prophetic and true to their faithful ministries, and should they not strive to encourage reconciliation that is anchored in justice - just like the Vatican and the Geneva-based World Council of Churches have done already? Has it not been proven that the collective experience of the Armenian massacres fulfils all five criteria of genocide under article 2 of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide that was adopted by Resolution 260 (III) A of the UN General Assembly on 9 December 1948? How could I therefore idly sit back and accept that so many men and women are unable - or reluctant - to move beyond their own set of truths, prejudices, memories, fears, interests and dissimulation? The challenge is no longer solely to argue about the historical verisimilitude of the Armenian Genocide since many

historians have already corroborated it. The challenge today is also to lobby recalcitrant countries - namely Turkey, the UK, Germany and Israel - to remove their own politico-economic blinkers and assume the moral mantle of recognition at long last. As Dr Donald Bloxham, historian, lecturer and author of *The Great Game of Genocide - Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians*, has often averred, it is high time to 'shame' governments into recognition.

As a public international lawyer, I have been following with professional interest the lengthy trial of former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic at The Hague War Crimes Tribunal as he faces a total of sixty six counts on three indictments for genocide and crimes against humanity in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo. I still recall with poignancy the opening statement from Carla Del Ponte, ICT prosecution team, who said that in Milosevic the world 'saw an almost mediaeval savagery and calculated cruelty that went far beyond the boundaries of legitimate warfare, scenes that the international community was shocked to witness. These were crimes against humanity.' It is my contention that the legal jurisprudence by which Slobodan Milosevic is being tried for genocide in the unforgivable and wanton deaths of 130,000 men, women and children should apply in equal measure to those victims who were killed - again unforgivably and wantonly - during the Armenian massacres of the late 1890's and early 1900's that culminated in the genocide of 1915.

But I also recall today my own history classes and the 1932-33 genocide in which Stalin's regime murdered seven million Ukrainians and sent a further two million to concentration camps. I further recall the [almost] unknown genocide of two million Muslims during the USSR era - Chechen, Ingush, Crimean Tatars, Tajiks, Bashkir or Kazaks. After all, the Chechen fighters who are branded as terrorists today are the grandchildren of survivors of the Soviet concentration camps. Add to this list of forgotten atrocities in Eastern Europe from 1945-47 against two million ethnic Germans, mostly women and children, and the violent expulsion of fifteen million more Germans - during which two million German girls and women were raped. The US, British and other governments were well aware of those genocides at the time but they chose to close their eyes, so much so that Roosevelt and Churchill allied themselves to Stalin whilst being aware that his regime had murdered at least thirty million people long before Hitler's extermination of Jews and gypsies began. Yet in the strange moral calculus of mass murder, only Germans were deemed guilty. Upsetting as it may well be for a European Christian to acknowledge it, I believe Lord Palmerston was correct in stating that global strategies are not built on moral friendships but simply on vested interests, whereby human beings remain the most expendable commodity of all. Did Joseph Vissarinovich Stalin not say ominously, *Death solves all problems: no man, no problem!*

The recent attempts by Turkish official mouthpieces, the likes of Sedat Laciner, to turn the whole issue of the genocide on its head by projecting Turkey as the victim rather than victimiser constitute a brazen attempt to tinker with facts. Turkish semi-official suggestions for 'open enquiries' to examine this genocide, and the mooted of far less than impartial historians such as Justin McCarthy to profile them, are vacuous manoeuvres at pandering for EU goodwill. As Stanley Cohen, Martin White Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics and Board Member of the International Council on Human Rights, described in his 2001 book *States of Denial: knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*, 'bare-faced denial gets distorted in an

alternative view to the fully documented and witnessed facts.’ Citing the Armenian case as an example of this deviation he added that, ‘an indisputable genocidal massacre of more than a million people [is being turned] into an issue in which ‘the other side’, the Turks, must be given their rightful hearing’. But then, guess what? Gunduz Aktan, Head of an Ankara think-tank and a former Ambassador to Greece, labelled Armenian assertions of the genocide as ‘Holocaust envy’ - no doubt impugning the collective memories of two peoples with one misshapen stroke! But the Armenian Genocide is also personal for me. After all, I am writing my reflections today as someone whose own grandparents fled the genocide from different parts of Ottoman Turkey. My maternal grandfather was one such young lad who witnessed five of his relatives being slain before his very own eyes. He himself had a lucky escape (with the help of a kind Kurdish man) and lived in an orphanage in Beirut before re-establishing himself as a thriving carpet merchant in Jerusalem. My maternal grandmother witnessed her young relative try to jump into a well during the forced desert march to Der El-Zor in order to escape further suffering and humiliation. In fact, I am sure many people who have visited my hometown of Jerusalem will have also seen the card at the Museum of the Armenian Patriarchate reminding all and sundry in a most macabre manner that on 24 April 1915, prominent Armenian intellectuals of Constantinople were rounded up and massacred. To those doubting Thomases of our post-biblical world, one glaring statistical fact that cannot easily be dismissed stands out in this discourse: there were over 2 million Armenians in Ottoman Turkey prior to 1915, but only 20% were left thereafter. Facile explanations such as Armenians fleeing en masse, ludicrous ones such as massive emigration, untenable ones such as switching sides in bulk with Russia during the war or even painful ones such as forcible conversions do not in themselves lend credible answers to this all-too-dramatic drop in numbers. So if they were not deliberately cleansed out of Ottoman Turkey, where did they disappear to almost overnight?

An interested outsider would now perhaps begin to understand why I decided to challenge the mindset of the co-perpetrators of this genocide who are guilty of wilful omission, as much as the nationalist emotions that fired up such venom, violence, carnage and death. A whole people were made to disappear as Ottoman Turkey was sanitised from Armenians. Surely their collective story of suffering, sacrifice and pain warrants recognition? At no time can this attempt be more appropriate than today when the free post 9/11 world is being urged to expunge itself of terror. After all, the claims that history is for historians alone reeks of negligent hypocrisy. Those *ad hominem* claims by some people that the Armenian chapter of death and forced deportation was not a genocide reminds me also of the ongoing suffering of the Sudanese Muslims in the western provinces of Darfur who are being persecuted whilst the world wrings its hands with verbal compassion and economic interest in the face of a deliberate assault against an ethnic race.

However, let me also add a word of caution. Those human tragedies that befell well over one million Armenians and impacted inevitably their thinking should nonetheless not be allowed to hold the future forever captive or to re-define its orientation in perpetuity. Personal, painful and brutal though those tragedies were, they should be dealt with dispassionately and politically, in a sober setting that is devoid of emotive histrionics, excessive navel-gazing or rash arguments. It is through strategic thinking that Armenians the world over could address their unfulfilled mission of foreclosing this

chapter in their history in order to re-establish sound, healthy and forward-looking relations with Turks.

This year, 24 April 2005, Armenians and their friends are commemorating the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this genocide. Ninety years during which countless historians and think tanks, as well as eminent personalities from Jewish Holocaust and Genocide scholars to institutes, from clerics and journalists to lawyers and politicians, have recognised the Armenian chapter as an attempt to rid Ottoman Turkey of the most basic human right of a minority people - that of life. Whether Jewish, Christian or Muslim, surely we do not possess the right to snuff out any God-given life on this earth?

As Turkey negotiates to join the European Union, and as it embarks upon a set of necessary and verifiable reforms in order to accede to the EU Club, I hope it would realise that it is as much in its own interest as it is in that of Armenians to recognise at long last the Armenian Genocide. In that way, it would help liberate the primal scream of long years of hostility and thereby exorcise *mutatis mutandis* the ghosts of the past for Armenians *and* Turks alike. Mediocrity is not a hard exercise, nor is vision an easy feat: perhaps the world can do well with more of the latter and less of the former.

On the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, the Armenian Church, along with its organisations and communities, pause for a moment of temporal remembrance and spiritual resurrection. The memories are still vivid and livid despite many peoples' wishes that this titanic crime vanish into history's forgetful black hole. Yet, Armenians remember St Paul's sobering reminder to the Corinthians, *O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?* (1 Cor 15:55).

It is my contention today that no genocide can be unique since all genocides are reprehensible. This is why I believe it is in the Turkish national interest to come clean and recognise this genocide. Indeed, regardless of whether one speaks in Freudian orthodox terms of compulsion to relive things, or in an archaic way of the curse of evil deeds, I believe Turkey cannot find inner peace so long as it denies the genocide. Nor can Armenians for that matter, which is why the souls of Armenian victims still cry out for justice today.

***To forgive? Maybe. To forget? Never.***

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**REFERENCE WEB-LINKS:**

Campaign for Recognition of the Armenian Genocide (CRAG) at [www.crag.org.uk](http://www.crag.org.uk) [with 36 web-links to other sites]

Armenian Community & Church Council (ACCC) at [www.accc.org.uk](http://www.accc.org.uk)

European Armenian Federation for Justice & Democracy (EAFJD) at [www.eafjd.org](http://www.eafjd.org)