

Meds Yeghern

by [Nikos Akritas](#) (April 2022)



Scene de massacre, Jansem Hovhannes Semerdjian

“This year we mark the centennial of the Meds Yeghern, the first mass atrocity of the 20th Century. Beginning in 1915, the Armenian people of the Ottoman Empire were deported, massacred, and marched to their deaths. Their culture and heritage in their ancient homeland were erased. Amid horrific violence that saw suffering on all sides, one and a half million Armenians perished.” –Barak Obama, 2015

April 24th is Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day. Barak Obama’s speech to commemorate the centenary of the genocide caused much controversy, not only receiving criticism from Turkey but also from the Armenian diaspora. Why? Turkey refuses to recognize the events of the period as *genocide* and although

the speech was made in support of Armenians, who have desperately attempted to get the world to recognize what Armenians suffered a century ago, it did not use that crucial word. In the past, Obama had used the 'g' word but in the above centennial remembrance speech used the Armenian term: *Meds Yeghern* (the Great Calamity). The full text of the speech makes it clear Obama was referring to a genocide but avoided using the term in order not to invite incredulity from Turkey, a key ally in the Middle East.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Turkish nationalists transformed what was left of the Ottoman Empire into modern Turkey but at the cost of denying Armenians, Assyrians and Kurds a homeland and expelling most of Anatolia's Greek population – resulting in the genocide and ethnic cleansing of its Christian communities, some 20% of its population. According to a January 1915 article in the New York Times, the Minister of the Interior for the Ottoman government, Mehmet Talaat, had told the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, "There was no room for Christians in Turkey." [\[i\]](#)

The ethnic cleansing and genocides which followed are extremely sensitive topics on how modern Turkey came into being ('liberation' of the 'motherland' came at the cost of 'removing' non-Muslims). Any suggestion that modern Turks are descendants of Armenians or Greeks who had converted to Islam in the face of such oppression is met with incredulity and offence. As recently as 2004, the suggestion that Sabiha Gokcen (Ataturk's adopted daughter and after whom an Istanbul airport is named) was of Armenian descent caused national controversy with many, including government officials, claiming this mocked national values. In effect, the outcry was an accusation of *the crime of insulting Turkishness*, as per Article 301 of Turkey's penal code.

Aside from the dubiousness of such legislation, the incident serves to illustrate that being labelled a particular

ethnicity is regarded as an insult. The journalist making the claim, Hrant Dink, was assassinated three years later. The lawyer representing his family, Fethiye Çetin, revealed in her book *My Grandmother: An Armenian-Turkish Memoir* how, growing up, she had never suspected her grandmother of being anything other than of Turkish Muslim background. Cetin's grandmother only revealed her true identity when Cetin was an adult. Her real name was Heranush, not Seher as she had come to be known. She had survived the genocide of the early 20th century by being taken from her Armenian Christian family and brought up Muslim in a Turkish household.

The Turkish government still denies there was a genocide, despite a mountain of evidence to the contrary, and dictates an alternative view of what happened in its schools. It has also gone to great effort and expense to promote this view abroad, as became clear during the *Lewis affair*.[\[ii\]](#) According to this view, *only* up to 600,000 Armenians were killed and they were casualties of war. But there is ample evidence in the diplomatic archives of many countries from the period, including Turkish-allied and neutral countries, that a systematic extermination was taking place. Anybody questioning the government sanctioned view, or merely using the 'g' word, is accused of treason—as was Hrant Dink and is the noted Turkish historian Taner Akcam, as well as novelists Orhan Pamuk and Elif Shafak.

The importance of recognizing such atrocities is that, by doing so, dehumanizing efforts are recognized early and challenged, hopefully preventing a repeat of the horrors they lead to. Unfortunately, in 2015 Cetin lamented, "...new generations are being taught to see Armenians not as human, but an entity to be despised and destroyed, the worst enemy. And the school curriculum adds fuel to the existing fires."[\[iii\]](#) This followed an outcry from a number of Turkish intellectuals in 2014 that Armenians were being openly depicted as abominable in school history textbooks.

It seems not much has changed over the last century, even now Armenians constitute less than one tenth of one per cent of the population. Lending credence to Cetin's assertion, in 2014 Prime Minister Erdogan stated in an interview on a major Turkish television news channel that being called Armenian is worse than being called Georgian.[\[iv\]](#) When 'slurs' of being partly Armenian were made against President Gul, instead of drawing attention to the bigotry entailed in such accusations, he quickly attempted to prove otherwise. Such tactical calumnies would be the equivalent of Western politicians today accusing each other of having Jewish or black ancestry as legitimate points of concern.

The Turkish government disputes any evidence and claims coming from the West: diplomatic archives; eyewitness accounts; the sheer logic of what would result from marching people, mainly women, children and the aged, without any preparation through deserts and hostile territory; the final destination being inhospitable desert; and the state claiming their 'abandoned' properties and businesses, hence clearly not expecting them to return to name just some. More worrying is the assertion each country has their own version of history and facts are determined by the strongest – the only reason anyone believes the 'Western version' of events is because the West is currently dominant. However, documentation available includes damning evidence from Turkey's allies at the time, which had no reason to support any claims made by the Entente Powers.

According to Ottoman statistical records of 1914, non-Muslims accounted for almost 20% of the Empire's population. Of these, the official Ottoman figures give the number of Armenians of the Apostolic (Gregorian) Church as just under 1.2 million. However, aside from some genuine problems over calculating and grouping (for example, Protestant and Muslim Armenians, such as the Hemshin, were not included in the Armenian count) these figures were widely believed to be deliberately underrepresented by the Ottoman government.

A generation earlier, sultan Abdul Hamid II, fearing further loss of imperial territory through increased demands for independence by non-Muslims, had entered into a period of Turkification of the Armenian heartlands. This included changing geographic place names, redrawing boundaries to skew population figures in areas where Armenians were the largest group and encouraging anti-Armenian sentiment, resulting in the massacres of the 1890s, killing between 200,000 – 300,000 Armenians. The climate of fear caused by the latter led to mass conversions to Islam, further affecting the population make-up of the area.[\[v\]](#)

At the time, contemporary Western sources figured around two million Armenians, which would be in line with the actual figure suggested by Ottoman government officials to Abdul Hamid, which he refused to accept. This figure is further reflected in the Armenian Church Patriarchate figures of the period (1913-14) of just over 1,900,000 Armenians in the Empire. According to Ara Sarafian, even Mehmet Talaat (Ottoman Minister of the Interior and one of the triumvirs accused of being behind the genocide) considered the official figure of just over 1.25 million Armenians, which included Gregorian and Catholic Armenians but not Protestant, as an undercount which should have been revised up by 30% to over 1.6 million.[\[vi\]](#)

According to Turkish nationalist historians, the Armenians traitorously colluded with the enemy, Russia. In the opinion of one of these, Ziya Gökalp, "There was no Armenian massacre, there was a Turkish-Armenian arrangement. They stabbed us in the back, we stabbed them back".[\[vii\]](#) This view was widely held among the Young Turks and is supported by the government of Turkey today.

In the same way Hitler scapegoated the Jews and held them collectively responsible for the defeat of Germany in World War I, so too Ismail Enver, Ottoman Minister of War and another of the triumvirs effectively ruling the Empire, during that same war scapegoated the Armenians for a catastrophic

defeat which he was personally responsible for. In 1914, contrary to all advice from senior members of military staff, Enver massed 90,000 Turkish troops in the middle of winter for an invasion of Russian territory in the Caucasus. Ill-equipped, ill-prepared and suffering freezing conditions the Turkish troops were soundly defeated and barely 10,000 returned. In his desperation for a scapegoat, Enver blamed Armenians within his own army, claiming they had deserted or colluded with the enemy. In the wake of this, the already virulent anti-Christian and anti-Armenian sentiment within the Empire allowed Enver, under cover of World War One, to solve the Armenian Question once and for all.

At the outbreak of the First World War, Armenian males aged between twenty and forty-five were conscripted into the Ottoman army. Following Enver's disastrous Caucasus campaign, this was extended to those aged eighteen to sixty but, since Armenians were no longer trusted to bear arms, they were all placed in labour battalions – even those that had fought loyally for the Ottoman Empire. Poorly clothed and more often starved, these battalions were worked to death in similar fashion to prisoners in Nazi and Soviet labour camps.

Once the men were out of the way the rest of the civilian population was rounded up by soldiers and a largely elite band of convicts and cut-throats (15,000 were released from prison for the purpose) known as the *Teşkilât-ı Mahsusa* (Special Organization), referred to by General Mehmed Vehip, commander of the Ottoman Third Army, as, "Butchers of the human species." The rounding up was done with no warning and no preparation. Women, children, and the aged were expected to gather what little they could, given hardly, if any, notice and force-marched hundreds of miles through inhospitable terrain, where they were subjected to massacre, rape and abduction. The final destination, it was claimed, were 'camps' in the heart of the Syrian desert.

Out of a population of between one and two million, the

overwhelming majority never made it. Of the few that did, many were suffering from disease. All were starving and malnourished. There was no shelter, food or assistance of any kind. The camps were essentially open air concentration camps in the desert, where many more died of hunger, ill health and further massacres. If the journey couldn't claim them the final destination was to finish the job.

To those that claim the death marches were *merely* ethnic cleansing, rather than intended genocide, Hans-Lukas Kieser has highlighted the deliberations of the Ottoman parliament on 6th July 1914. At this sitting, Talaat explained his reasons for not sending Muslim refugees from the Balkans to the deserts of Syria and Iraq. Here, he said, they would have all died. These were the very destinations he ordered the Armenians to be *relocated* to a year later.[\[viii\]](#)

Deir ez-Zor, where the main camps were located, writes Peter Balakian, is a place that, "For Armenians... has come to have a meaning approximate to Auschwitz."[\[ix\]](#) A memorial built on the site was blown up by ISIS in 2014. Those who still doubt this was a genocide should ponder the intended fate of the vestiges that survived this harrowing experience. Along with the atrocities committed went forced assimilation of the surviving women and children. Orphans were to be Turkified[\[x\]](#) and settled in areas where Armenians were forbidden to constitute more than 10% of the local population. The destruction of churches, buildings, historical monuments and other evidence attesting to an Armenian presence—effectively cultural genocide—continues.

In his diary, the American ambassador, Hans Morgenthau, (the USA was neutral at this point in the war) wrote of his conversation with Mehmet Talaat. When the ambassador protested at the treatment of the Armenians,

“Talaat answered ‘It is no use for you to argue. We have already disposed of three quarters of the Armenians; there

are none at all left in Bitlis, Van, and Erzeroum... we have got to finish with them. If we don't they will plan their revenge... our Armenian policy is absolutely fixed... nothing can change it. We will not have the Armenians anywhere in Anatolia. They can live in the desert but nowhere else.'

[\[xi\]](#)

As to semantic arguments over the meaning of words such as 'disposed of' Talaat later asked Morgenthau's assistance in getting American life insurance companies to provide, "...a complete list of their Armenian policy holders. They are practically all dead now and have left no heirs to collect the money. It of course all escheats to the State. The government is the beneficiary now."[\[xii\]](#) In addition, the documentary evidence from a number of sources, including communications known as the *Talat Pasha telegrams* (for which, see Aram Andonian's 1919 *The Memoirs of Naim Bey*[\[xiii\]](#)), provide a very clear picture of intent. The question of intent within the context of the legal definition of genocide is dealt with in Geoffrey Robertson QC's *An Inconvenient Genocide: Who Now Remembers the Armenians?* The outbreak of the First World War and Enver's defeat aside, Matthias Bjørnlund has drawn attention to Talaat's desire to exterminate the Armenians of the empire as early as 1910.[\[xiv\]](#)

Many histories have been written which detail the gruesomeness of what happened, in what is commonly referred to as the twentieth century's first genocide. Objections to the term *genocide* are indicative of refusals to see the Armenians as victims. One argument is the term didn't exist until decades later. However, the word *genocide* was coined by Raphael Lemkin in 1943 specifically to describe what happened to the Armenians. In any case, Enver, Talaat, Ahmet Cemal (the triumvirate known as the *Three Pashas*) and others were charged and convicted of crimes against humanity after the war but are still considered national heroes in Turkey today, with many streets, schools and buildings named after Talaat. Talaat's

ashes were flown from Nazi Germany back to Turkey in 1943, Enver's from Tajikistan in 1996. Both were accorded full military honours.

All three pashas were tried in absentia, having fled before the trials commenced. In the end Talaat, Cemal and a number of others regarded as key figures responsible for the genocide were hunted down by Armenian avengers in much the same way Jewish groups later hunted down Nazi war criminals after World War Two (Enver died fighting in Tajikistan attempting to create a pan-Turkic empire). The general similarities between the fates of Jews and Armenians at the hands of their persecutors are poignantly striking. The overwhelming majority of both communities lived in and served their respective 'countries' loyally. Both were successful minorities valuing education, business enterprise and the arts. Both were previously valued as playing important roles in the economy (notably in banking and finance) but at the same time vehemently despised for their religion and success (popularly attributed to vile conspiracies involving racial caricatures and canards). Both were discriminated against, with inflammatory language used to dehumanize them (often described as parasites and tumours that needed to be removed from society). Both had served in the armed forces and were subsequently scapegoated for defeat in a major war. Both were rounded up *en masse* and removed from their homes. Both had their wealth and property appropriated by the state in order to advance the economic status of 'its own'. Both were victims of mass slaughter with some being used for lethal experiments. In the overall scheme of things, very few survived the atrocities. What happened to both these populations was vehemently denied by the perpetrators. In each case, the ruling party at the time subscribed to an ideology of Social Darwinism.

There are arguments over just how far Germany was implicated in the Armenian genocide. Putting that particular argument to

one side, however, debates around it do highlight Germany's heavy involvement in Ottoman Turkey during the period in question, with some German officers of the period eventually serving in the Nazi regime. Both Talaat and, especially, Enver were admired in Germany.[\[xv\]](#)

Chillingly, Stefan Ihrig has drawn attention to Franz Werfel's *Forty Days at Musa Dagh*, a novel based on a real episode of Armenian resistance during the genocide, being banned by the Nazis. Werfel had written the book at the time of Hitler's rise to power and intended it to serve as a warning to Germany's Jewish community about the possible dangers. It proved disturbingly prophetic, as Werfel had recognized the similarities between the two regimes' extreme nationalism. The Nazis recognized the connection he was making and "denounced Werfel as well as the 'American Armenian Jews' promoting the book in the United States... [which] betrays the racial view the Nazis held of the Armenians. For the Nazis, the Armenians were quasi-Jews, or indeed uber-Jews..."[\[xvi\]](#)

The last Ottoman caliph, Abdulmejid II, referred to the Armenian massacres as, "The greatest stain that has ever disgraced our nation and race," specifically blaming Talaat and Enver. Ataturk referred to them as a *shameful act* (referenced in the title of Taner Akcam's book) but did not take action against those responsible when he eventually came to power. After successfully defending what was left of the Ottoman state, Ataturk faced the task of building a nation and pursued a policy of ethnic homogeneity to that end. National unity was of paramount importance and many who had served in the administration responsible for the atrocities against Armenians and other minorities were incorporated into his new government.

Turkey, as successor to the Ottoman Empire, has never acknowledged the enormity of what happened; there has been no official apology. On the contrary, substantial financial and political resources are used by the Turkish government to

virulently oppose and silence criticism. In 1995 Professor Stanley Cohen wrote:

“The nearest successful example [of collective denial] in the modern era is the 80 years of official denial by successive Turkish governments of the 1915-17 genocide against the Armenians in which 1.5 million people lost their lives. This denial has been sustained by deliberate propaganda, lying and cover-ups, forging documents, suppression of archives, and bribing scholars.”[\[xvii\]](#)

This remains the *modus operandi* today. Turkey refuses to acknowledge the heinous crimes of a minority of Turks in the early 20th century, whose nationalist fervour did not regard the lives of all Ottoman subjects as equal and led to over 90% of an indigenous population's destruction. To make matters worse, the main perpetrators of the genocide are celebrated as national heroes. Reasons for Ataturk's avoidance of addressing the issue have already been alluded to but the Turkish state's obsession with security since then has resulted in ruthless crackdowns on opposition to government sanctioned views.

In the same way the atrocities of the Nazi regime are not associated with the German people *per se*, a way forward might be to disassociate the Committee of Union and Progress, especially the triumvirate of Enver, Talat and Cemal from the Turkish people today. The Three Pashas were 'Turks', as most Nazis were Germans, but the populations they identified with cannot be blamed *en masse* for the crimes of these individuals and their henchmen. Even within the CUP there were those that were horrified with what they recognized as the purposeful annihilation of an entire nation, as evidenced by the diaries of Mehmed Cavid[\[xviii\]](#) and the actions of other officials who refused to cooperate in executing such a policy. Ayhan Aktar highlights how too little attention has been paid to such courageous individuals;[\[xix\]](#) probably because neither side of the genocide argument can use them to their own advantage. On the one hand, they don't aid in attempted depictions of the

Terrible Turk and, on the other, for those advocating the Turkish government's official version of events, they inconveniently draw attention to government dictated atrocities.

[\[i\] Says Turks Advise Christians To Flee: Fear of General Massacre in Constantinople if Allied Fleet Passes Dardanelles](#)
New York Times, January 11, 1915

[\[ii\]](#) As an example of these efforts see Smith, Roger Professional Ethics and the Denial of Armenian Genocide *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, Volume 9, Issue 1, Spring 1995, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hgs/9.1.1>

[\[iii\]](#) Tremblay, Pinar Grew up Kurdish, forced to be Turkish, now called Armenian
<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/10/turkey-armenian-kurds-minorities-forced-to-be-turkish.html#ixzz5zgEjCtYp>

[\[iv\]](#) Taylor, Adam Is 'Armenian' an insult? Turkey's prime minister seems to think so
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/08/06/is-armenian-an-insult-turkeys-prime-minister-seems-to-think-so/?arc404=true>

[\[v\]](#) See Deringil, Selim "The Armenian Question Is Finally Closed": Mass conversions of Armenians in Anatolia during the Hamidian Massacres of 1895–1897, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* Vol. 51, No. 2, April 2009

[\[vi\]](#) Sarafian, Ara Talaat Pasha's Black Book documents his campaign of race extermination, 1915–17 *The Armenian Reporter*, 13 March 2009

[\[vii\]](#) Suny, Ronald Grigor: Armenian Genocide, in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2015-05-6. DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.10646](https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/armenian_genocide).
https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/armenian_genocide

[\[viii\]](#) Kieser, [Hans-Lukas](#) Germany and the Armenian Genocide of

1915–17 in [Friedman](#), Jonathan C. (Ed) *The Routledge History of the Holocaust* 2010

[\[ix\]](#) Balakian, Peter, Bones *New York Times Magazine*, December 5th, 2008

[\[x\]](#) Deringil, Selim Your Religion is Worn and Outdated *Études arméniennes contemporaines* 12, 2019, pp33-65 <https://journals.openedition.org/eac/2090>

[\[xi\]](#) Morgenthau, Henry *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story*, Doubleday, Page & Company, 1918

[\[xii\]](#) *ibid*

[\[xiii\]](#) Taner Akcam has, in recent years, provided evidence that claims made in a Turkish Historical Society publication (Orel S, Yuca S *Ermenilerce Talat Pasa'ya Atfedilen Telgraflarin Gercek Yüzü*, Turkish Historical Association, Ankara 1983) that these documents are fake are unfounded – Akcam, Taner *Killing Orders: Talat Pasha's Telegrams and the Armenian Genocide* Palgrave Macmillan 2018

[\[xiv\]](#) Bjørnlund, Matthias “When the Cannons Talk, the Diplomats Must Be Silent”: A Danish Diplomat in Constantinople during the Armenian Genocide *Genocide Studies and Prevention* Volume 1, issue 2, 2006

[\[xv\]](#) Ihrig, Stefan *Ataturk in the Nazi Imagination* Harvard University Press 2014

[\[xvi\]](#) Ihrig, Stefan *Justifying Genocide: Germany and the Armenians from Bismarck to Hitler* Harvard University Press 2016

[\[xvii\]](#) Cohen, Stanley *State Crimes of Previous Regimes: Knowledge, Accountability, and the Policing of the Past* *Law & Social Inquiry*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Winter, 1995)

[\[xviii\]](#) Ozavci, Ozan Honour and Shame: The Diaries of a Unionist and the ‘Armenian Question, in Kieser, Hans-Lukas et al, *End of the Ottomans: The Genocide of 1915 and the Politics of Turkish Nationalism*, London, N.Y.: I.B. Tauris 2019

[\[xix\]](#) Aktar, Ayhan Debating the Armenian Massacres in the Last Ottoman Parliament, November – December 1918, *History Workshop Journal*, Volume 64, Issue 1, Autumn 2007, Pages 240-270, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbm046>

[Table of Contents](#)

Nikos Akritas has worked as a teacher in countries across the Middle East and Central Asia as well as in Britain. He has had articles published in *BBC History*, *History Today* and other small circulation magazines and newspapers. Born to Greek Cypriot immigrants to the UK, having Armenian relatives, appearing South Asian, having a Turkish partner and growing up in a very ethnically diverse area of London have conspired to provide him with experiences not only encountering prejudice but also of being able to recognize it in various claims, regardless of the colour, ethnicity, creed or gender of those espousing them.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)