

## **DENIAL OF GENOCIDE: HISTORY OR POLITICS**

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"Who after all, speaks of the annihilation of the Armenians?" Hitler posed this rhetorical question in a speech in 1939, before embarking on the extermination of the Jews. Hitler's apparent conclusion, that no one remembered what befell the Armenians in 1915, emboldened him to perpetrate the Holocaust.

The strategy of the perpetrators and their successor government, that of the Republic of Turkey, was to avoid public discussion of the Armenian genocide, believing that in the course of time the survivors would pass from the scene, their children would become acculturated and assimilated in the diaspora, and the issue would be forgotten. In fact by the outbreak of World War II, the Armenian Genocide had virtually become the "forgotten genocide". In some ways, it became even more remote as new millions of victims were claimed in the conflagration of warfare and the Holocaust.

However, when Raphael Lemkin coined the word "genocide" in 1944 he cited the 1915 annihilation of the Armenians as a seminal example of genocide. After much toil, the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, defining genocide as a crime under international law, was the first-ever United Nations human rights treaty. The Convention defined genocide thus: "Genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such:

1. killing members of the group;
2. causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
3. deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
4. imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; and
5. forcible transferring children of the group."

What is compelling in the Armenian case is that the victims were subjected to each and every one of the five categories. Such drastic and absolute methods not only underscore the premeditated nature of the violence but the single-minded determination of the perpetrator regime to expunge the Armenians from the new society it was determined to create.

This year marks the 95<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Genocide. Still, the abuse of Armenians' memory by the continuing denial of Turkish governments is probably the most agonizing of the Armenians' tribulations, a fact confirmed by the statement issued by 150 scholars and writers on April 24, 1998:

Denial of genocide strives to reshape history in order to demonize the victims and rehabilitate the perpetrators. Denial of genocide is the final

stage of genocide. It is what Elie Weisel has called "double killing". Denial murders the dignity of the survivors and seeks to destroy remembrance of the crime. In a century plagued by genocide, we affirm the moral necessity of remembering.

Recognizing the enormity of the crime and its consequences on some of its citizens, the House of the Representatives of the Republic of Cyprus unanimously adopted the following resolution on April 29, 1982:

The House of Representatives, on the occasion of the anniversary of the genocide of the Armenian people which was started in 1915 in an organized manner by the then Turkish regime,

1. Notes with abhorrence and condemns unreservedly the crime against the Armenian people which had the dimensions of genocide and which uprooted the Armenians from ancestral lands.
2. Supports the full restoration of the inalienable rights of the Armenian people.
3. Underlines the harmonious and long-standing co-existence and brotherly cooperation with the Armenians of Cyprus and their contribution to the political, economic and cultural life of our country.
4. Considers the coexistence as evidence of the real possibility for harmonious coexistence of all the people of Cyprus regardless of language, religion or national origin.
5. In parallel considers it necessary to condemn the crime committed against the people of Cyprus by the Turkish invasion of 1974.

Nearly two dozen countries, including France, Canada, Russia, Switzerland and Chile, have formally recognized the Armenian Genocide. So has the European Parliament. Most recently, the Swedish parliament approved on March 11, 2010, a resolution that brands the killing of 1.5 million Armenians by Ottoman forces during World War I as genocide. Armenia's leaders thanked Sweden's parliament for adopting the resolution, which was passed by a 131-130 vote, while Turkey quickly denounced the vote, cancelled a visit to Stockholm by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan scheduled in March, and recalled its ambassador in protest.

Armenian President Serge Sarkisian said, "Recognition of and condemnation of crimes against humanity is the best way to avert such crimes." Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan warned, meanwhile, that the Swedish vote "can hurt relations between Turkey and Armenia," referring to the agreements signed by the two nations last October.

The Turks were already fuming over a similar resolution that was passed by 23 to 22 on March 4 by the Foreign Affairs Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives. In his speech, Howard Berman, chairman, quoted what the International Association of Genocide Scholars had stated in a letter to members of congress two years ago:

The historical record on the Armenian Genocide is unambiguous and documented by overwhelming evidence. It is proven by foreign office records of the United States, France, Great Britain, Russia, and perhaps most importantly, of Turkey's World War I allies, Germany and Austria-Hungary, as well as by the records of the Ottoman Courts-Martial of 1918-1920, and by decades of scholarship... As crimes of genocide continue to plague the world, Turkey's policy of denying the Armenian Genocide gives license to those who perpetrate genocide everywhere.

Then, it was reported that Turkish parliamentary speaker Mehmet Ali Sahin had said that Western countries whose assemblies have passed such resolutions should "look in the mirror, if they want to find criminals."

"Our 'friend' Sweden has stabbed us in the back with one vote!" read a front-page headline in *Sabah*, a leading Turkish daily. Fatih Altayli, editor-in-chief of *Haberturk* daily, was more sardonic: "Soon, there will be no Turkish ambassadors left abroad and no foreign country our officials can visit."

Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt immediately announced that the position of his government, which supports Turkey's entry into the European Union, "remains unchanged". "We think it is a mistake to politicize history," Bildt wrote on his blog.

"It is thus no coincidence that genocide rages on." From *A problem from hell: America and the age of genocide, 2002, Samantha Power*.