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THE PERNICIOUS PRACTICE OF HISTORICAL DENIAL

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History has long been an embattled social science. From its ancient origins in the work of Herodotus and Thucydides it has always been more than just a recording of the past, elusive as facts, witnesses, and memory are. Morality, judgment, advice to rulers, myth-making, and the preference for congenial versions of *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, Leopold von Ranke's famous phrase for getting the facts without interpretation, have been constant presences in historical writing. Despite the best efforts of the eminent German professor, acknowledged as the founder of modern "scientific" historical studies, both professional academic and popular historical writers have never been free from the education and environment in which they were brought up even as they strove for the unattainable goal of complete objectivity. As his contemporary Karl Marx warned us to ask, who educated the educator?

Von Ranke and generations of scholars have long been engaged in the making of myths – in the sense of coherent understandings of a preferred past – to bolster the nation and the state, the distribution of wealth and power as it existed in their own time, and the actions of their governments in the international arena. History has been implicated in nation-making as much as the nation from the early nineteenth century became the frame and form of the way the stories of the past were related. As critical as some historians might be of state policies or the crimes of empires and nation-states, the activity of the few who see history as a subversive activity undermining comfortable conventional narratives supporting the status quo has usually been condemned as unpatriotic, biased, left leaning, and – in the now fashionable deployment of a seemingly neutral term – revisionist.

Long before political deployment by the Bush administration, the term "revisionist history" had its own controversial pedigree. Most infamously, it was applied to those discredited

cranks who denied the validity of the Holocaust. Revisionism has been equated with the most egregious practices of historical falsifiers. The Japanese erasure of Korean comfort women or the Nanking massacres are flagrant examples of politically motivated revisionism. Yet revising histories can be positive as well as negative. In the struggles over school textbooks conservatives have labeled revisionists those who question the sanitized narratives of American history that neglect the horrors of slavery and racism, the treatment of Indians, or the darker sides of the Vietnam War. Writers on Russian and Soviet history have been labeled revisionists, or more flagrantly “apologists for Communism,” for attempting to rethink the Bolshevik victory in the revolution of 1917 or the social history of the Stalin era. And Israeli historians who have interrogated the foundational myths of how their state was established or how the indigenous Palestinians became refugees have been linked to the enemies of the state by the seemingly anodyne word “revisionist.”

While negative revisionism aims at glossing over and covering up the darkest practices of states, positive “revisionism” works toward disrupting the feel-good narratives that readers might prefer to read or the convenient official constructions of what supposedly happened in the past and legitimized the present distributions of power and property. The problem begins with the nature of history itself. It is not simply facts without interpretation but always selections from the infinite numbers of facts to tell particular stories. There is no history without interpretation and judgment. Most historians believe that rather than a final, fixed, definitive record of the past, histories are at best only provisional approximations inevitably influenced by the views of the writer and the context in which he or she writes. At the same time, however, history is neither simply unsubstantiated opinion nor fatally flawed by the limits of objectivity. Historians work within professional standards and conventions. While complete objectivity may be elusive, the historian’s task is to establish (and revise) an historical record as accurately and neutrally as possible, which means including the anomalous or inconvenient facts that belie any preconceived hypothesis. Evidence must be produced, verified, and subjected to criticism. Their accounts must be logically consistent and persuasive to their professional peers. Honest scholars often live with post-modernist doubts about the possibility of finding the “truth,” but their commitment to the mustering of evidence and careful argumentation gives us some assurance that what they find can be considered reliable. Governments or ideologues may not like the critical accounts that in the short run thwart their ambitions, but in the long run states, nations, and ordinary people benefit from knowing as accurately as possible how the present was produced. As late Soviet leaders to their chagrin discovered – and those who rushed the United States into the Iraq

maelstrum are still reluctant to admit – living in a mythological universe can lead to disaster. Reality has a nasty habit of biting back. Credibility or “truthiness” is not enough. The old adage retains its salience: “the truth shall make us free.”

Try as they may to maintain a degree of distance, even aloofness, from politics in their pursuit of historical truths, serious professional historians have been dragged into an alien arena, one populated by politicians and propagandists, the defenders of state interests. Revising older narratives is what historians are obliged to do, but the very difficulties of getting the story as right as possible offers opportunities for others to take shortcuts and create their own self-serving narratives. Revisionism as practiced by less scrupulous writers veers into denial of evidence and argument that historians have painstakingly collected and persuasively formulated. In this essay I explore one case of egregious revisionism – the denial of the Armenian Genocide of 1915 by the Turkish government and its revisionist supporters; the creation of controversy over whether the deportations and massacres carried out by the Young Turk regime constituted state-organized genocide; and the refusal by governments of the Republic of Turkey to recognize the dark episodes that accompanied the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the founding of its successor state.

For much of the last century denial of genocide was official state policy of the Turkish Republic, and the voices raised against that narrative were largely those of Armenian writers and scholars. But in the last quarter century, particularly since the turn of the 21st century, a recognition both of the tragedy that befell Ottoman Armenians and Assyrians and of the consensus that these events constituted state-initiated mass killing of designated ethnoreligious communities have become the dominant view of the scholarly community. Nineteen-fifteen was the first major genocide of the twentieth century in or near Europe, preceded only by the genocidal killings in European colonies such as those of the Herrerra and Nama in German South-West Africa. The numbers of Armenians who lost their lives run anywhere from 600,000 to 1.5 million, with 800,000 as the most likely number of those who perished directly as a result of the death marches and massacres. Europeans had not witnessed such atrocities so close to home, not even during the Great War. They had no word yet to describe the deliberate killing of a people, and they reached into the Bible and called it “holocaust.” Only with the mass Judeocide of the Second World War would the Polish-Jewish lawyer Raphael Lemkin devise the word “genocide” to apply to these two episodes of state-directed mass killing.¹

¹ Representative scholarly works on the Armenian Genocide include Vahakn Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasus* (Providence, RI, and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1995); and his *Warrant for Genocide: Key Elements of Turko-Armenian Conflict* (New Brunswick and

In centennial year of the Armenian Genocide, the battle over what happened and why in the Ottoman Empire in 1915 pitted historians against the Turkish government and divided Turks, Kurds, and Armenians. Officially Ankara denies that there was a genocide of Armenians and Assyrians during World War I. While there was evidently violence committed against civilians, and hundreds of thousands of Christian subjects of the empire were massacred, the Turkish government and “denialist” writers have contended that Armenians were a treacherous element in time of war, allied with the Russians and engaged actively in insurrection against the Ottoman Empire.² Therefore the deportations ordered by Istanbul were justified as a national security measure, but – the denialists argue – the subsequent killing (what today would be conveniently dismissed as “collateral damage”) was the result of deep-seated resentments and hatred felt by ordinary Muslims who had suffered outrages at the hands of Armenians. There was no genocide, they say, because one cannot prove that the Ottoman government of Talat and Enver Paşa specifically ordered the mass killings with the intention of eradicating the Armenians and their co-religionists, the Assyrians.

London: Transaction Publishers, 1999); Peter Balakian, *Black Dog of Fate, A Memoir* (New York: Basic Books, 1997; 2009); and his *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003); Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); Ronald Grigor Suny, Fatma Müge Göçek, and Norman M. Naimark (eds.), *A Question of Genocide: Armenians and Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Richard G. Hovannisian (ed.), *Remembrance and Denial: The Case of the Armenian Genocide* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999); Ara Sarafian (comp.), *United States Official Documents on the Armenian Genocide, Vol. I-III* (Watertown, MA: Armenian Review, 1993-1996); Raymond Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011); Wolfgang Gust (ed.), *The Armenian Genocide: Evidence from the German Foreign Office Archives, 1915-1916* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2014); Donald Bloxham, *The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); David Gaunt, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim-Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia During World War I* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006); Hans-Lukas Kieser and Dominik J. Schaller (eds), *Der Völkermord an den Armeniern und die Shoah. The Armenian Genocide and the Shoah* (Zurich: Chronos, 2002); Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Norman M. Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Benjamin Valentino, *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the Twentieth Century* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004); Taner Akçam, *From Empire to Republic: Turkish Nationalism and the Armenian Genocide* (London: Zed Books, 2004); his *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006); and his *The Young Turks' Crime Against Humanity: The Armenian Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); and Ronald Grigor Suny, “*They Can Live in the Desert But Nowhere Else*”: *A History of the Armenian Genocide* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

² See the works of Esat Uras, *Tarihte Ermeniler ve Ermeni Meselesi* (Ankara: Yeni Matbaa, 1950; later translated as *The Armenians in History and the Armenian Question* (Istanbul: Documentary Publications, 1988); Gunther Lewy, *The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey: A Disputed Genocide* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005); Sean McMeekin, *The Berlin-Baghdad Express: The Ottoman Empire and Germany's Bid for World Power* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010); Edward J. Erickson, *Ottomans and Armenians: A Study in Counterinsurgency* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Justin McCarthy, Esat Arslan, Cemalettin Taşkıran, and Ömer Turan, *The Armenian Rebellion at Van* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2006); and M. Hakan Yavuz, “Orientalism, the ‘Terrible Turk’ and Genocide,” *Middle East Critique*, XXIII, 2 (2014), pp. 111-126.

Turkish denialism at first glance might seem inexplicable. Why is revising history in the face of evidence and logic so difficult? What are the deep politics of denial? The answer lies in the political and emotional costs of a frank and courageous acceptance of a dark past. In the volatile ninety years of its existence the Republic of Turkey has been engaged in a radical program of ethnic homogenization, the elevation of Turkish identity as a point of pride and unity among the diverse peoples of Anatolia. After centuries of Ottoman imperial acceptance and recognition of difference and distinctions among the inhabitants of the empire, the removal, first, of most Armenians and Assyrians and, later, of Greeks, transformed a multicultural empire into a more homogeneous population largely made up of Muslim Turks and Kurds. In the post-genocidal decades the government of Kemal Atatürk turned on the Kurds, either forcibly assimilating them, dispersing them from their mountain highlands into cities, or brutally crushing their efforts to assert their claims to autonomy. Kurds were said to be “Mountain Turks”, and their rebel leaders were accused of being crypto-Armenians. In time the Kurds, who suffered violent repression of their resistance movement in the 1990s, came to recognize what had happened to the Armenians and their own participation in the murders in 1915-1916. “The Turks had you for breakfast,” they say, “and they will have us for lunch.”

In the years since the Islamist party AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, Justice and Development Party) came to power in 2002, the public sphere in Turkey has become more open. Discussion of past tragedies is allowed within limits, and left-leaning Turkish and Kurdish intellectuals have insisted that 1915 was a genocide. Speaking openly about the Armenian Genocide is intimately connected both to the democratizing efforts to reduce the power of the Kemalist military regime and to the vexing problem of the place of the Kurds in modern Turkey. The Armenian Genocide is deployed by the progressive intelligentsia in Turkey as the thin edge of a wedge to undermine the hegemonic Kemalist narratives that efface the deportations and massacres and instead proclaim the years of genocide and population exchanges as the War of Liberation against foreign enemies, among them Armenians and Greeks.

As the AKP, led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, moved away from a democratizing agenda (most rapidly after 2011) toward consolidating its party’s near-monopoly on power, Kurds and Armenians allied as partners in the struggle to prevent a re-emergence of the *derin devlet* (deep state) that had dominated Kemalist Turkey for half a century. Clinging to a barely sustainable view of their own past, government and allied “historians” refused to recognize the sanguinary origins of their state, the massive crimes on which the republic had been founded. Was it possible that Turks had been *genocidaires* rather than national liberators? Was the image of the

“Terrible Turk,” the scourge of civilization, the bearer of Asiatic barbarity, never to be overcome? Was this image the reason that the European Union has repeatedly delayed inviting Turkey to join? Nineteen fifteen might have been marginalized as a minor issue with recognition and reconciliation. Instead, by denying what happened, the Turkish state turned 1915 into a potent challenge to the current government’s political program and a threat to the self-conception of many Turks. The attempt to bury the past failed, and history took its revenge.

Turkey’s revision of its founding narrative and subsequent ethnic policies is hardly singular in its design or its effects on internal and external politics. Many nation-states, including the United States, Australia, and Israel, emerged after the displacement of peoples who had lived there before the state-founding people arrived. Contests over who should own the land have led to unending disputes, conflicts, and violence. In many cases the assertion of one people’s claims to territory and an organic and continuous past ran up against its neighbors’ analogous claims. Victims can become perpetrators; those who had been repressed can turn into repressors. In the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Mountainous Karabakh, Armenians claim that they are in fact an ancient people and are able to refer to a literary tradition running back to the fifth century CE, while the upstart Azerbaijanis did not exist as a nation until the Soviets designated them so in the 1920s. Azerbaijanis retaliate with their own stories of how Armenians never existed as a state or nation in the Caucasus but were interlopers without a legitimate homeland. The current Armenian state, moreover, is actually Western Azerbaijan! While Armenians are pained by the denial of their genocide, Azerbaijanis claim that the Soviet invasion of January 1990 or the Armenian killings in Khojaly in February 1992 were genocides. The fighting continues at the borders between the two countries. History costs lives. People die or are killed because of the way they understand their own origins, friends, and enemies.

Genocide is neither simply a legal, analytical, nor an unambiguously empirical concept. Freighted with raw emotions, it is considered the crime of crimes. Used promiscuously and polemically, the word genocide is deployed as a weapon in discursive wars against one’s enemies. The word itself has the power to delegitimize the transformative projects that the perpetrators carried out and justified as essential to their survival. Such political-motivated and denialist claims that genocide has not occurred are offensive, even obscene, both to victims of genocide and to those who care about historical veracity. Even more than ethnic cleansing or massacre, genocide elevates the killings to an offense that triggers the outrage of the international community and calls for recognition, reparation, and resolution.

Revising history in the service of nation, state, empire, and the status quo – to the point of denying the evils that the state or nation has done -- is alive and well in much of the world. Governments are right to fear historical study, for it always has the potential to destabilize those comfortably seated in power and privilege. Recognizing the Armenian Genocide disturbs and disrupts the preferred versions of the past of the powerful. The truth not only makes us free but is often revolutionary. It promises a different world, one that rejects the hidden injuries of cryptic colonialism that sanctions the superiority of some over others. An anodyne statement of remorse about the unfortunate past in which everyone suffered but no one is guilty does not go far enough to alleviate the pain of past and present generations who identify as victims of unrecognized crimes. If any advance is to be made, better understanding of what happened and why must be the first step. After that, the chips will fall where they may.

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