

Genocide by the Turks

by Michael Curtis



In a speech on August 22, 1939, a week before his invasion of Poland and the start of World War II, Adolf Hitler declared he would deal mercilessly and without compassion with the Poles. He boldly declared, "We have nothing to lose, we have everything to gain. Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?"

In an interview in February 2005 and in following statements Orhan Pamuk, the Turkish novelist, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2006, stated, "Thirty thousand Kurds have been killed here, and one million Armenians. And nobody dares to mention that. We have to talk about the past." Pamuk was tried for insulting the Republic of Turkey, but the prosecution was withdrawn. It was sad that on this Armenian tragedy, when about 1.5 million Armenians were killed in 1915, starting on April 24, 1915, with the arrest, deportation, and

murder of Armenian intellectuals and community leaders and following years by the Ottoman Empire and its successor Turkey, both Pamuk and Hitler were correct. The great international powers looked the other way.

However, the truth will out. Pope Francis in Yerevan, Armenia in June 2016 spoke of the genocide of Armenians, the first of the deplorable series of catastrophes of the past century, made possible by "twisted racial, ideological, or religious aims...even to the point of planning the annihilation of entire peoples.". By now 39 countries, including France, Germany, Russia, and Israel, have also condemned the Armenian Geocide. The UK is not fully convinced. It condemns the massacres, but holds that the evidence is not sufficiently unequivocal to call the events a genocide. France is more certain. In National Assembly in May 1998 recognized the behavior as genocide: in 2016 it made denial of the genocide a crime.

Now the United States, with almost all politicians unhappy and frustrated by Turkey's attack on the Kurds in Syria, has acted. A non-binding motion, in the U.S. House, Res 296, was passed by a bipartisan vote of 405-11 on October 29, 2019, stated that the Ottoman and Turkish actions constituted genocide. Curiously, 39 U.S. states have taken this position; only Mississippi has not officially recognized genocide. However, for too long, the U.S. Congress has been silent, never passed any resolution, or stated that the massacres were genocide. Speaker Nancy Pelosi said the truth of the staggering crime has been denied too often. In fact, the House did pass resolutions on the issue in 1975 and 1984, but none went to the Senate. The Senate has not yet taken up the new House resolution though Sen. Robert Menendez, D-NJ and Ted Cruz, R-Tx have been interested in it.

Three things are interesting about the present Armenian issue: one is the persons who were the main movers of the U.S. motion; another is the terminological dispute about what to the action; a third is the response of the Turkish President.

Adam Schiff (D-Cal) has become prominent and highly controversial in recent months for his activity in and chairmanship of the House Intelligence Committee, especially for his inquiry into the actions of President Donald Trump, and desire to seek impeachment. However, it is commendable that he was an insistent and main mover of the bipartisan Resolution on the Armenian genocide. No doubt his strong views on this issue are sincere, but they may also reflect the fact that South California is said to have the largest Armenian community outside the country of Armenia. Schiff has a considerable number of Armenian-Americans in his California constituency, and is vice-chair of the Armenian-American Caucus in Congress.

Schiff has long urged a resolution on the Armenian genocide issue, and it is laudable that his efforts have finally succeeded in getting official U.S recognition that genocide was involved. The resolution not only affirmed Congressional accord on the issue, but also requires a U.S. president to use the term "genocide" during the annual Armenian genocide convention address on April 24. It was characteristic of her general political outlook that Rep Ilhan Omar (D-Minn) was one of three who did not vote for the Resolution but cynically voted "present". She later explained, if irrelevantly, that accountability for human rights violations, especially ethnic cleaning and genocide is paramount. She, a native of Somalia, wanted true acknowledgment of historical crimes that include heinous genocides of the 20th century along with "earlier slaughter" like the transatlantic slave trade and Native American genocide.

The facts about Armenians are clear even if interpretation varies. The killings of Armenians took place by the Ottoman Empire and its successor state, but Turkey still denies they were genocide, arguing that both Armenians and Turks died as a result of World War 1. The Ottoman government decided the Armenian population in the Empire, a group with a distinct

language and religious institution, was subversive. It therefore decided to deport the whole Armenian population, about 2 million, to Syria and Mesopotamia, and about 1.5 million died or were killed. Present Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan maintains a similar hostility to Kurds. In 2013 he refused to recognize Kurdish identity and language, and favors suppression of Kurdish identity, cultural and political rights. Thus, he ruthlessly attacks the Kurdish fighters, formerly allies of the U.S., in northern Syria. This attitude to the Kurds helps explain why Erdogan refuses to consider the Armenian killings as genocide.

Yet, why the controversy? It is ironic that the two concepts pertinent to killings, genocide and crimes against humanity, were devised by two Jewish scholars, Raphael Lemkin and Hersch Lauterpacht, who both studied at the University of Lemberg (Lviv) and were both affected by the Nazi Holocaust. The London Agreement and Charter of the International Military Tribunal, IMT, of war time allies, of August 8, 1945 identified crimes against peace, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, as offences within the jurisdiction of the IMT. It set down the rules by which the Nuremberg trials on Nazi criminals were to be conducted. A simple, if incomplete, clarification is that the concept of crimes against humanity focuses on killing large numbers of people, while that of genocide focuses on the destruction of the whole group. The crimes against humanity were not codified in any international convention, but the Rome Statute adopted in July 1998 set up the International Criminal Court and established four core international crimes, genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and crimes of aggression.

Genocide, first mentioned as a crime by the UN General Assembly in 1946 and codified by UN Convention of December 9, 1948, is a crime under international law whether committed in time of peace or war. Its objective is to destroy in whole or in part a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group. The

French chief prosecutor at the Nuremberg trials argued that the scientific and systematic extermination of millions of certain national or religious groups whose existence were claimed to hamper the hegemony of the Germanic race was “a crime so monstrous, so unheard of in history up to the advent of Hitlerism, that the term ‘genocide’ had to be coined to define it.” A problem has always been that it is difficult to differentiate the two concepts, one focusing on attacks on individuals, the other on whole groups of people. For some, this was a problem of how to define the extermination of the Tutsi in Rwanda in 1994, or the massacre of 8,000 Bosniaks in Srebrenica in the Bosnia-Herzegovina war in July 1995.

The word “genocide” was coined by Raphael Lemkin to indicate the deliberate attempt to eliminate physically a national, racial, ethnic, or religious group. What is pertinent in the present context is that Lemkin formulated his ideas as result of studying the extermination of the Armenians. On December 9, 1948 the UN General Assembly unanimously adopted the Convention for the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide which it defined. So far, 150 states, including Turkey, have ratified or acceded to the Convention.

Turkey acceded to the Convention in July 1950 but at no point has it agreed that its treatment of the Armenians was genocide. Responding to the US House resolution, President Erdogan, on October 30, 2019 in Ankara, replied the U.S. legislature has no right to give lessons about genocide to Turkey. Referring to the Armenians, Erdogan at best regards actions against them as deportations, which he considered reasonable for the period, 1915-23, but never as genocide.

Of course, this difference over the Armenians is only a small part of the difficulties in Turkish-American relations. Issues recent and present have been obstacles; imprisonment of an American pastor in Turkey; Turkey buying Russian not U.S. missile system; U.S. refusal to deport Fethullah Gulen, Turkish Islamic scholar and leader of a faith based civil

society organization living since 1999 in Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania, who is accused by Erdogan of planning a coup in 2016.

Most all in importance is Turkish offensive in northeast Syria against Kurdish fighters that had allied with the U.S. against ISIS. Erdogan has ignored President Trump's warning that the U.S. would destroy the Turkish economy if it did not behave. The Turkish president is defiant, threatening an offensive against Syrian Kurds, dwelling on the glories of the Ottoman Empire, seeing himself as the power center in the Muslim world, challenging the primacy of Saudi Arabia, supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas against Israel, and declaring Jerusalem the primary city of Islam. But he refuses to admit genocide by Turks. He should be informed that genocide and Holocaust denial is the last act of genocide.