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**CHANHYEOK WANG
TELOPEA PARK SCHOOL**

**WHY IS IT CONTROVERSIAL TO CALL THE
'ARMENIAN GENOCIDE' A GENOCIDE?**

Why is it controversial to call the Armenian Genocide a ‘genocide’?

Chanhyeok Wang
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Despite the overwhelming evidence supporting the existence and execution of an Ottoman plan to exterminate the Armenians, the majority of the world has continued to ignore and even support Turkey’s denial of the Armenian genocide. This essay explores why calling the Armenian Genocide a ‘genocide’ remains a ‘contested’ issue.

Spanish-American philosopher George Santayana once said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" (SAAM, 2020). One of the most recent examples of history repeating itself occurred in October 2019 when Turkish forces invaded northeast Syria. The Kurds, an ethnic minority that had been controlling the area since driving out I.S. were forced to retreat. Russian intervention meant that the war was short, but Amnesty International stated, "Turkish military forces and a coalition of Turkey-backed Syrian armed groups have displayed a shameful disregard for civilian life, carrying out...war crimes, including summary killings...that have killed and injured civilians" (Amnesty International, 2019). Turkey was also accused of targeting civilians with white phosphorus, a chemical weapon (Haddad, 2019). These actions echoed events of 104 years ago, when the Ottoman Empire committed a series of gruesome massacres against another ethnic minority, the Armenians. However, the Turkish government steadfastly refuses to acknowledge these massacres as a 'genocide' (Arango, 2015). In this essay, I explore the reasons behind present day Turkey's continued denial of the genocide and the West's ignorance and/or trivialisation of it. I also argue that the events in Armenia in 1915-1923 were an organised group of actions by the Ottoman and Turkish government to exterminate the Armenian people due to a variety of socioeconomic and geopolitical issues. Therefore, it should be classified as a genocide and deserves similar recognition and research as the Holocaust.

Various socioeconomic and geopolitical reasons led to the events of 1915-1923, but none of them came close to justifying the Ottoman Empire's actions against the Armenians. After becoming a part of the Ottoman Empire, the Armenians were never truly accepted as part of the Empire due to their strong cultural identity and Christian religion (Suny, 2018). Also, while the Armenians received protection from the Ottoman government due to their dhimmis status, they were not regarded as equal to Muslim Ottomans and frequently suffered injustices from local judges. However, in the 19th century, "the spread of capitalism..., modernization and...the opening up of new avenues of participation... (meant Armenians) experienced rapid rates of social mobilization" (Melson, 1989). This created resentment amongst nationalist Ottomans, who believed that the Armenians would readily betray them for independence. This was compounded by significant Ottoman territorial losses in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, being forced to give up Romania, Serbia and Bulgaria among many other areas (Yapp & Shaw, 2019). In the Treaty of Berlin, which ended the Russo-Turkish War, the major European powers demanded that the Ottoman Empire protect the Armenians. This created fear that Armenia would follow the Balkan countries in emancipating with the help of their Christian brothers. Geographically, Armenian territory was viewed as the heartland of the empire by the Ottomans and unlosable (Melson, 1996). Therefore, when the Young Turks overthrew the Ottoman government and came to power, tensions were extremely high. Replacing the incompetent Abdul Hamid II, the Young Turks originally tried to work towards a liberal democracy, but when it failed, they turned to xenophobia and pan-Turkism. They "espoused a virulent economic nationalism demonizing the non-Muslims as usurpers who had exploited the labour of Turks" (Gürpınar, 2016). All of this culminated on the night of April 24, 1915, when 250 Armenian politicians and intellectuals were arrested in Istanbul. The

violence escalated, and all in all, it has been estimated that 600,000-1,500,000 Armenians were killed through methods such as “mass burnings and by drowning, torture, gas, poison, disease and starvation” (Melvin, 2015). The biggest killers were not the immediate slaughters, but death marches across Eastern Anatolia to concentration camps in Syria. On the way, countless Armenians died from dehydration, illness, hunger, or exposure. Rape and kidnappings were also common, while Turkish doctors used Armenians in their medical experiments (Kaplan, 2015).

The facts clearly show there was a premeditated plan by the Ottoman Empire to exterminate the Armenian people. However, while accepting that tragedies occurred during that period, Turkey and its close ally Azerbaijan actively deny there was a genocide (Arango, 2015). They reason that the defining of the events in 1915 Armenia should be decided by historians, but the West are using it as a political tool to ‘punish’ Turkey. When arguing against classifying the Armenian Genocide as a genocide, many Turks present three arguments. First, they argue that there was no intention to wipe out the Armenian people, but that the deaths were an unintended consequence of war (Oruc, 2019). Second, they argue that as 4.5 million Muslim Ottomans were killed from 1865-1922, the Armenians were not the only group that suffered during the period, and thus they did not go through a ‘genocide.’ Finally, they argue that the relocation of the Armenians was necessary during the war, as Armenian militias had allied with the Russians and the Ottomans were trying to prevent them from becoming dangerous. These excuses are objectively unfounded. Many documents and statements from neutral states and Ottoman allies clearly expose a plan to exterminate the Armenians. Captain Einar af Wirsén, the Swedish Military Attaché in Constantinople wrote, “Officially, these (deportations) had the goal of moving the entire Armenian population to the steppe regions of Northern Mesopotamia and Syria, but in reality, they aimed to exterminate [utrota] the Armenians” (Avedian, 2010). The level of planning by the Ottoman government is also evident, with German Colonel Stange, who led the 8th Infantry Regiment of the Ottoman Third Army, reporting that measures of annihilation [Vernichtung] were in line with ‘a plan conceived long ago’ by the Young Turks in Istanbul (Dadrian, 2002). Furthermore, there is a difference between suffering and genocide. The number of people who die does not determine if an event is a genocide. What is being argued is not who suffered the most, but whether there was a plan by the Ottomans to eradicate the Armenians. Also, the ‘provocation’ argument is implausible both practically and theoretically. While there were some small Armenian uprisings, German ambassador Paul Wolff-Metternich said, "There was neither a concerted general uprising, nor was there a fully valid proof that such a synchronized uprising was planned or organized" (Dadrian, 2002). Central Powers documents also confirm that the Ottomans attempted to provoke the Armenians into rebellion by stealing from, raping and assaulting them in order to create a pretext for the genocide. The provocation argument claims that the actions of a few can be used to justify the destruction of an entire population, and that the genocide is the victim’s fault. Applied to the Holocaust, this is like saying if the Jews were not so successful, the Holocaust would not have happened.

Clearly, Turkey's reasoning for denying the Armenian Genocide is not based on evidence, so why does most of the world, including the USA, UK, and Australia, still not recognise it? Both U.S. Presidents Obama and Trump have refused to call the genocide by its name, while Australia has made it government policy to 'not...become involved in this sensitive debate' (Tatz, 2015). The UK even reasoned that the word could not be applied to Armenia since it occurred before the word was ratified by the UN, which would mean that the Holocaust was not a genocide (Fraser, 2015). However, there may be another reason than pure academic reservations or pacificism. Turkey is a key military and strategic partner to the EU and NATO, and in the past, it has threatened to close its Incirlik Airbase to countries that recognise the Armenian Genocide (Özdemir, 2017). The airbase is crucial for NATO and the USA. It has acted as a pit stop for American soldiers returning from operations in the Middle East and played an important role in the fight against IS as a launch pad for allied operations. Also, the U.S. stores a minimum of 50 B61 nuclear bombs at Incirlik (Losey, 2019). For the EU, its migrant deal with Turkey has significant benefits. Both Turkey and Europe were overwhelmed by the significant influx of illegal refugees into Europe in 2015 due to the Syrian war (Help Refugees, 2018). This combined with the heartbreaking stories of refugees dying trying to cross the Aegean Sea led to an agreement between the two parties. Any illegal refugee arriving in Greece via Turkey would be returned, but EU states would take one refugee from Turkey legally for every illegal one sent back. The EU would also pay Turkey 6 billion euros to support the refugees (Özdemir, 2017). This meant that "the number of refugees who came to Greece via Turkey fell by 97 percent compared to the period before the agreement" (Crisis Group, 2020).

Israel has also reaped benefits from a positive relationship with Turkey and Azerbaijan. Since Turkey is one of their only allies in the Middle East, Israel is keen not to jeopardise their relationship. This meant that they consistently refused to recognise the Armenian Genocide (Melman, 2019). Despite the deterioration in the Israeli-Turkish relationship in the last decade, Azerbaijan remains a crucial customer for their weapons, and Israel continues its non-recognition policy. This could not be more hypocritical and morally reprehensible since the Jewish people have also gone through a genocide, and now they are prioritising arms sales over supporting fellow genocide survivors.

While the Holocaust is universally recognised as one of the most evil events in human history, the Armenian Genocide is known as a 'controversial' tragedy with many in the West not even aware of its occurrence (ANCA, 2015). The trivialisation of the Armenian Genocide is best illustrated by the fact that while the Israeli, Hungarian, and Romanian governments all criminalise Holocaust denial, they do not recognise the Armenian Genocide (Bazyler, 2020) (Armenian National Institute, 2020). Many comparisons can be drawn between the two genocides. Firstly, there was minimal provocation from either the Jews or the Armenians to incur the wrath of their slayers. Secondly, both groups coexisted with the other citizens of their countries for a very long time and had settled in their respective nations, albeit with unfair laws. Thirdly, both groups were portrayed by extremist parties as enemies of the people in their ideologies. The Armenian Genocide

was not carried out on the scale or with the horrifying efficiency of the Holocaust, but the intent and impact on the respective communities were similar. Adolf Hitler believed the Nazis would be able to get away with the Holocaust, stating, “who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?” (Armenian National Institute, 2019) By trivialising and forgetting the Armenian Genocide, a dangerous precedent is set for future homicidal maniacs: one can get away with genocide if the marketing is done well. Therefore, it is critical that the education system studies other genocides as well as the Holocaust, lest students think that such an indescribably evil event only occurred once.

In conclusion, despite clear evidence of a genocide against the Armenian people perpetrated by the Ottoman government due to a variety of factors, the Turkish government has persistently denied its occurrence. Many of the world’s most powerful nations including the UK, USA, and Australia have also refused to recognise the plight of the Armenian people due to Turkey’s geographic and strategic importance. There is a painful lack of knowledge in the West regarding the subject, and this leaves many vulnerable in the age of social media, where people are frequently exposed to politically motivated misinformation (Meserole, 2018). The education system must ensure that in the future, denying the Armenian Genocide will be regarded identical to denying the Holocaust. The President of Turkey, Recep Erdoğan argued that history should not be decided by politicians but by historians, and historians have clearly established that the events in 1915 Armenia were a genocide (Bohjalian, 2015). Almost every civilisation is keen to whitewash their past. However, it is critical that Turkey accept the facts, as only by recognising and studying the genocide can it be prevented in the future. As far as Australia is concerned, we must continue to not bow down to international pressure but have the courage to call out injustices in the world if we are to remain a great nation. The current leaders must decide what kind of Australia they leave us. A meek and sheep-like Australia or a proud and strong Australia? If it is the latter, then they must recognise the Armenian Genocide.

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This essay was very useful, as it provides a collection of primary sources regarding the actions of Ottomans in the Armenian genocide. I used these sources because they were written by the Ottoman Empire's allies during WW1 who had no reason to fabricate any information. This meant that their reliability was undeniable.

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Melson's article provided a detailed analysis of the causes behind the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust. It clearly explained the situation before the genocides occurred in both nations, and the fallacies in opposing arguments. This enabled me to gain a better understanding of why the genocides did occur. It also helped me recognise the similarities and differences between the two genocides.

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