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History 102

20 March 2012

Armenian Genocide

Genocide is one of history’s most saddening aspects, costing the world’s population millions of lives over the past several centuries. The staggering statistics that come along with these mass murders are the unfortunate reality in most cases, and their victims should be remembered with the upmost respect. In 1915, around one million Armenian people were killed in what most respected historians believe to be an intentional attempt at the extermination of an entire ethic group. While Turkey has denied these accusations for decades, the facts say otherwise. The Armenian Genocide was a huge tragedy that has been overlooked by society for many years due to lack of recognition around the world and the Turkish government’s active denial of its existence.

Although numerous countries around the world have recognized these acts as genocide, Turkey still continues to deny the charges. The Turkish government claims that Armenians are one of the many groups that lost their lives during World War I, and that no systematic murder occurred. While examining the facts, however, one can gather that the horrific acts directed at the Armenian people were indeed premeditated as well as genocidal. Recognizing the problem is the most effective way of preventing other acts of genocide from taking place, and it is also the best way to respect and honor the Armenian people, both living and deceased. There is a near-unanimous conclusion among scholars that the Armenian genocide was premeditated and did indeed occur, and the denial of these events by a governing body is unacceptable.

Knowledge of the events that occurred prior to and during the Armenian genocide are crucial in understanding why it should be condemned by all governments around the world. Problems between the Ottoman Empire (present-day Turkey) and the Armenian people became extreme long before the genocide in the 1890’s under Sultan Abdul Hamid II (Balakian 5). As a minority of Christian people in a Muslim-dominated area, the Armenian people struggled for basic civil rights on a regular basis. They were also discriminated against by the legal system, which was biased towards Muslims (Balakian 40). At this time, the Turkish population felt as though they were “entitled” to exercise special privileges over other non-Muslim groups. The Sultan, who has been described as “obsessed with the perception that Armenians were overstepping the boundaries of their position in society, being ungrateful and disloyal to the empire, and constituting a danger to its territorial integrity” only fueled these beliefs with his hatred of the Armenians (Astourian 27). Treaties and agreements had been put into place to help create justice for the Armenians, but none worked. As they continued to protest against the unfair laws, the Sultan eventually responded with drastic measures (Cohan 334).

After a small group of Armenians decided to revolt against the Ottoman Empire in 1894 in order to protest an unfair tax, thousands of innocent individuals were mercilessly slaughtered in what is known today as the “Hamidian Massacres,” named after Sultan Abdul Hamid (Cohan 335). For the next two years, the Armenian people were “targeted for elimination”, first by mobs and later by the army (Hovannisian “*The Armenian Genocide: Cultural and Ethical Legacies”* 4-5). In Hamid’s mind, the only way to fix the problem of the Armenian people’s demand for political reform was to purge the area of the Armenians themselves. An estimated 200,000 Armenian people were killed as a result of the Hamidian Massacres, 100,000 from the massacres and 100,000 from disease and starvation due to oppression by the Ottoman Empire (Balakian 5). These massacres are one of many examples that point to the intentional planning of genocide roughly twenty years later.

The Hamidian Massacres were an ominous foreshadowing of the Armenian Genocide of 1915. As Turkey entered World War I against Russia, a “hollow excuse for slaughter” was recognized when the Ottoman Army was crushed by Russian troops. The blame for this defeat was quickly shifted to Armenian volunteers who the secretary of war claimed were traitorous (Peterson 30). This incident led to all Armenian soldiers being forced to surrender their weapons, and later houses were entered and searched by officials who wanted to find weapons in innocent Armenian citizens’ homes. When no weapons were found, the Armenians were often unjustly arrested or executed for petty reasons (Balakian 178). On April 15th, 1916, the government demanded that over 4,000 men be sent to work in the army’s labor battalions. Certain that this would lead to their execution, the Armenian people quickly refused. Asserting that Armenians “were disloyal during wartime,” the CUP continued with their extermination (Balakian 179). Shortly after that instance, Armenian “civil leaders, intellectuals, doctors, businessmen and artists were all rounded up and killed” under orders of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), which was the head governing group at that time (Cohan 336).

Many Armenians, especially men, were then assembled and either murdered on the spot or deported. Those that were less mobile, such as women, children and the elderly, were exiled out of their homes and into the desert with little nourishment or water (Balakian 174). This soon escalated into an even more extreme situation when the head to the CUP’s Special Organization established “killing squads” in order to execute more Armenian people. Not only were these executions wrong; they were brutal and horrific as well. Frederik MacCallum, a missionary who eventually aided in the relief effort, wrote the following in a letter experience with helping to rehabilitate the survivors from the events that they witnessed and suffered through:

I heard a great many stories of individual sufferings—men flayed alive, hacked to pieces with axes, starved to death, buried alive, burned to death, starved to death in holes of indescribable filth, of women outraged in the most cruel and disgusting manner…of children also tortured and killed in the most brutal manner. But all I have seen myself are some of the effects of this treatment, scars, sickness, insanity, fright, desperation, hatred, desire for revenge on the Turks, etc. (qtd in Peterson 55).

As the year progressed, thousands more Armenians were forced into death marches, put into labor battalions and murdered. Although accounts of these atrocities have been taken from numerous other sources, the genocide still continues to be denied by many today.

Historians agree that these murders were committed in a “deliberate and systematic way and with frenzied competence” all over Turkey (Balakian 179). While most scholars differ on the exact number of Armenian victims, the estimated numbers consistently remain within the range of 800,000 and 1,500,000 (Gilbert 19). Although these statistics have been confirmed by scholars and historians as accurate, the Turkish government today still continues to actively deny that the government itself sanctioned the Armenian Genocide. In fact, they refuse to acknowledge that genocide even occurred there at all.

Turkey’s denial of the Armenian Genocide has continued from 1915 up until today (Lifton et al, 273). Repudiation of the genocide has often been consistently made up of the same ideas: failure to recognize that genocide occurred, stating that the intention was to “relocate” rather than “annihilate” the Armenians, saying that the statistics are exaggerated, and declaring that more Turks actually died than Armenians due to wartime circumstances (Hovannisian “Denial of the Armenian Genocide in Comparison with Holocaust Denial” 203). They have stated that they were not responsible for the deaths and that “genocide” is not an accurate term to describe what went on. While their claims have remained unchanged, the story has varied according to the time period and what is most convincing and convenient. Shortly after 1915 when the genocide began, it was blamed on corrupt officers as a “security measure that went awry” (Lifton , Smith, Markusen 273). Into the 1930’s, Turkey resorted to keeping the events as silent and secretive as possible, suppressing all attempts of discussing the issue. Turkey had also begun to encourage teachers, professors and other spokespersons to present the “other side of the story.” Turkey has also made an effort to keep the Armenian Genocide out of any textbooks or curriculums in schools (“Armenian Genocide”).

Perhaps the most disturbing tactic used thus far, historians were asked to “revise the record of genocide” with an explanation that pushed the blame onto the Armenians or the “wartime conditions that claimed the lives of more Turks than Armenians (Lifton, Smith, Markusen 273). In response to a report developed by the American Committee on Armenian Atrocities, the Turkish consul general in New York stated that “However much to be deplored may be these harrowing events, in the last analysis we can but say the Armenians have only themselves to blame” (Peterson 48). A Turkish governor even claimed that the Armenians were planning a revolution, and the Turks had to choice but to exterminate them or forfeit their ruling powers (Peterson 48). The Armenians were attempting to better their situation through revolutions and reform, but it was only to improve their dire situation, which offered them few rights in the legal system or elsewhere.

Today, the tactics of denial used by Turkey are different than those used during the past century. The Turkish government continues to claim that the deaths of Armenians were not carried out in a deliberate manner by a specific group, therefore they cannot be considered genocide. That being said, the term “genocide,” which came about in 1944, was actually created by scholar Raphael Lemkin after he studied both the Holocaust and Armenian Genocide in great detail (Cohan 337). Lemkin was most bothered by what happened in the aftermath of the Genocide. He observed that the Armenians did not receive any reparations for what they went through, whereas many those that orchestrated the genocide were not punished in any way. He made it his mission to set up guidelines to define what “genocide” was and make sure that those who committed the horrific crime were punished justly. Although the majority of countries around the world have since recognized the Armenian Genocide, Turkey still refuses to do so (Sassourian).

When the United States began a bill to formally recognize the genocide in 2007, Turkey’s extremely defensive reaction shocked many Americans. They first threatened to end their military relationship with the United States completely, cutting off all aid and assistance that was needed to continue the War on Terror in the Middle East (Khan). Later they attempted to intimidate the United States with threats of becoming more involved with Iraq in ways that would hurt them both politically and militarily (Khan). Although these reactions seem “disproportionally extreme” to the situation, Turkey has made it clear that using the word “genocide” is an insult that is taken personally by many Turks. That being said, ignoring the events that took place in 1915 would be an insult to both the victims and the living Armenian people today. When an event like genocide occurs, it should be recognized and looked upon with respect rather than defiance.

The government of Turkey does not just deny the Armenian Genocide; they have actually passed laws prohibiting its discussion. Articles 301 and 305 have made “denigrating Turkishness” a criminal offense that can result in a three year prison sentence if an individual speaks of the Armenian genocide or any other past event that Turkey wants to keep quiet (Von Brochowski). For example, Nobel Prize winning novelist Orhan Pamuk was prosecuted under Article 301 after condemning the acts against the Armenians as genocide, although his charges were later dropped. Hrant Dink a Turkish-Armenian journalist, was not as fortunate. He was found guilty for “denigrating Turkishness” after he spoke out against the acts committed against the Armenian people in 1915. After he was given a six-month prison sentence, a teenage nationalist shot and killed him for his statements (Von Brochowski). This restriction of free speech by the Turkish government over an event that has been proven on multiple accounts is intolerable. Cleary, Turkey are clearly trying to erase all traces of the genocide by stifling any discussion of it whatsoever.

The acts that were committed against the Armenian people were an atrocity that most individuals could not even begin to understand. The effects and near extermination of an entire race of people is one of the darkest parts of Turkish history, and those that lost their lives deserve to be recognized as victims of a horrific crime. The government of Turkey is wrong to deny such a charge, especially when the evidence of its occurrence is so strong. The best way to mend relations with the Armenians today as well as the rest of the world that has already recognized the genocide would be for Turkey to come to terms with it as well. The Armenian Genocide occurred almost a century ago, and denying it only continues to increase tension between Turkey and other parts of the world. It would be in the best interest of Turkey to finally recognize that the event occurred so that the rest of the world can finally move on from the horrible acts that occurred there.

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