

Lessons of Genocide: 1915, 1994 & 2004

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Never despair, but if you do, work on in despair

Edmund Burke, Irish politician, philosopher and orator (1729-1797)

Ten years ago, British journalist Linda Melvern set out to explore the truth about the Rwandan massacres of 1994 and to discover why the UN had been so ineffectual in preventing those massacres despite its troops being stationed on the ground. She began to turn up some uncomfortable facts about those who had turned a blind eye to mass murder. After a long struggle to find a publisher, Zed Books finally brought out her *A People Betrayed*.

Impressed by the extent of her findings, the new Rwandan Government in Kigali offered Malvern access to its files on the genocide - including full confessions by those who had presided over the slaughters. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan also gave her permission, against all UN rules, to examine the archives of the Security Council. Her findings revealed a tale of cowardice and apathy that had allowed genocide to run its course. General Romeo Dallaire, the commander of the UN forces in Rwanda who tried to protect the Tutsi victims and whose story featured in a film, *A Hotel in Rwanda*, co-operated with her.

Her second book, *Conspiracy to Murder*, encompassed all the new research material at her disposal and constituted a devastating account of the West's failure to act despite the incontrovertible evidence that a planned genocide had been taking place. Faced with general indifference, Melvern found another small publisher, Verso Books, and the book came out last year on the 10th anniversary of the Rwandan Genocide.

Melvern's story recounts the killings as much as the world's abject failure to learn from the lessons of history. France, Belgium, the USA (with its fresh trauma over Somalia) and the UN all turned their eyes away as Hutus killed Tutsis in a vendetta of past histories and grievances. The British role was also deeply distressing. At the UN, it consisted of downplaying and discouraging all talk of genocide. In Parliament, it kept describing the events as 'a civil war'. As Melvern writes in her book, silence was the redoubtable response to mass murder.

Ten years after Rwanda, another rash of mass killings has grabbed world attention again. This is in Darfur, a western province of Sudan, where the major protagonists are the Khartoum-backed Arab Muslim *Janjaweed* militias and the Black Muslim Africans from three different tribes¹. In July 2004, the US Congress passed a Resolution labelling the Darfur case as genocide. That same month, the Holocaust Museum in Washington also issued its first-ever 'genocide emergency'. The US Administration followed suit two months later, but its initial involvement has been stunted², whereas the UN has adopted a lukewarm policy of enhanced procrastination. The crisis in Darfur has grown out of several separate but intersecting conflicts, yet the silence has been deafening in its muted loudness. Eyewitness testimonies, journalists such as Nicholas D Kristof from the *New York Times* or INGO's like CAFOD have alone kept world opinion focused on this genocidal conflict. In short, and despite using the 'g-word', nobody has invoked the UN Convention of 1948³ and it is only this week that NATO finally expressed readiness to provide logistical support to the small contingent of African Union monitors in Darfur.

Proponents of applying the 'genocide' label in Darfur have emphasised two points. They have argued that the events in Sudan met general standards: the violence targeted an ethnic group for annihilation, was systematic and intentional in its plan, and was state-supported. They have also claimed that using the term 'genocide' should trigger international intervention under the Genocide Convention of 1948 in order to halt the violence.

However, others have shied away from using the term 'genocide', or even actively opposed it, for fear that such an admission would activate two key provisions of the UN Convention - namely, to "undertake to prevent and to punish" genocide and Article VIII stipulating the signatories to call on the UN "to take such action [] for the prevention and suppression" of genocide. Human Rights Watch supporter and author Samantha Power has opined that the charge in Darfur is one of ethnic cleansing rather than genocide since it has involved the forced removal of an ethnic group, not its deliberate extermination, and that genocide is hard to prove in the midst of a crisis.

¹ <http://epektasis.net/2004article9.html> & <http://epektasis.net/2004article11.html> & <http://epektasis.net/2004article14.html>

² *Darfur Accountability Act*: US bipartisan measure by Senators Corzine & Brownback to apply sanctions against Sudan that was passed unanimously in the Senate but removed in conference under pressure from the Bush Administration

³ http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/p_genoci.htm

This ongoing debate instructs us that 'genocide' is neither a legal neologism, nor for that matter an 'abracadabra' magical word, that would automatically lead to a definite intervention. It seems that the framework of the Genocide Convention does not provide sufficient impetus for action, and genocide remains a contested concept, with much disagreement over what actually qualifies for the term. In April 2004, for instance, an appeals chamber of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia addressed the matter of definition and upheld a genocide conviction of the Serb commander Radislav Krstic for his role in the massacres of Srebrenica in 1995. The tribunal concluded that "genocide" meant the destruction of a 'substantial part' of a group, which the court defined as 7,000-8,000 Bosnian Muslim men from Srebrenica. Although the ICT judgment would help qualify Darfur as genocide, some observers believe that 'genocide' means something far broader. For them, it is a campaign designed to eliminate physically a group under governmental control - such as in Rwanda or Nazi Germany.

Does any of this strike a chord with regard to the Armenian Genocide of 1915⁴? Are there any parallels between the Armenian, Rwandan and Sudanese chapters? In all three cases, contrived silences and strategic denials have played a major part in world responses to those inter-connected events. In the Armenian case, the Allies highlighted the massacres against Armenians during WWI in part to undermine Ottoman Turkey. But once the Central Powers were defeated and the geo-strategic variables had shifted, they reneged on their commitments and walked away from the [admittedly triumphalist and punitive] Treaty of Sèvres of August 1920 [that Turkey had signed but not ratified] in order to adopt the Lausanne Treaty of July 1923 and re-distribute the world map - with the new treaty being decidedly inimical to Armenian interests. All the visual and oral testimonies about pogroms - such as those by diplomats, nurses, missionaries or journalists - were conveniently swept away because of geo-political and economic factors. Just as Melvern wrote about Rwanda, Armenians too have suffered from the silence and prevarication of the British Foreign & Commonwealth Office in relation to the Armenian Genocide during WWI.

The Armenian Genocide is now ninety years old: it is no longer a crisis in the making. Moreover, historians and academics, legal analysts as well as parliaments and think tanks, have acknowledged from the extant archival documents that its constituents fulfil the provisions of the Convention. In so doing, they have subscribed to the research compiled in the HMSO "Blue Book" by Arnold Toynbee and James Bryce in 1916.

Unfortunately, there have been some recent allegations from different Turkish sources suggesting that Arnold Toynbee retracted some of the conclusions of the "Blue Book". Those sources have even portrayed the "Blue Book" as a piece of propaganda written to promote Allied interests during WWI. However, Arnold Toynbee contradicts those allegations in the last book he published before his death. Entitled *Experiences*⁵, he writes, "... I am old enough to remember the horror at the massacre of Armenian Ottoman subjects in the Ottoman Empire in 1896 at the instigation of the infamous Sultan Abdul Hamid II. But this act of genocide was amateur and ineffective compared to the largely successful attempt to exterminate the Ottoman Armenians that was made during the First World War, in 1915, by the post-Hamidian regime of 'The Committee of Union and Progress', in which the principal criminals were Talaat and Enver. [] Since the general level of technology and organisational efficiency in Germany during the dozen years of Nazi regime was considerably higher than it had been in Turkey during the ten years of the CUP regime, the German genocide of the European Jews was still more effective than the Turkish genocide of the Ottoman Armenians had been ...".

Turkey today wishes to enter the EU Club whilst at the same time denying a planned genocide that its predecessor Ottoman regime perpetrated against Armenians of Turkish citizenship living on its territory. I happen to believe that such accession could well yield positive results for Turkey and the larger EU Club - let alone for Armenia and the small community of Armenians in Turkey. But Turkey's leaders must first re-examine their policies of denial and deduce that they cannot prise this goal without re-adjusting both their mentality *and* institutions to adapt to European values of democracy, human and minorities' rights throughout the whole republic. This is not only an indispensable *sine qua non* of Eurocentric discourse, it is also a matter of complying with the Copenhagen criteria requiring not only political and economic adjustments but also the guarantee of human and minorities' rights⁶.

Just like Dr Alfred D Zayas, retired senior human rights officer at the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights⁷, I too believe that the Armenian Genocide is a human rights issue - in its most inherent form, the right

⁴ Vide www.crag.org.uk

⁵ EXPERIENCES by Arnold Toynbee (OUP, 1969); pp 241-242: Chapter headed *The Struggle between Human Feeling and Inhumanity* sub-section (ii) Human Feeling versus Genocide, Eviction and Apartheid

⁶ <http://epektasis.net/2004article13.html> & <http://epektasis.net/2004article16.html>

⁷ Human Rights, International Law and the Armenian Genocide: <http://alfreddezayas.com/Lectures/Yerevan.shtml>

to life. So instead of vilifying those historians and genocide scholars who call for the admission of the genocide, Turkey should recognise the genocide. Instead of defiling the reputation of its own Turkish historians, thinkers and writers who validate the truth, or accusing leading Turkish scholars registered to attend a conference at Bogaziçi (Bosphorus) University in Istanbul this week on *Ottoman Armenians during the Decline of the Empire: Issues of Scientific Responsibility and Democracy* of treason⁸, it should recognise the genocide. Instead of sending prolix letters to the British Parliament deprecating the truthfulness of the “Blue Book”, it should recognise the genocide⁹. Instead of appending Articles to its draft Penal Code that stifle the freedom of expression as ‘acts against the fundamental national interest of Turkey’, and rendering any mention of the Armenian Genocide a crime punishable by imprisonment (Art 305), it should recognise the genocide¹⁰. Instead of intimidating any institution, council or parliament daring to speak out in favour of legal history, it should recognise the genocide. Instead of altering the Latin zoological names of three animals found on its territories in order to remove references to Armenia and Kurdistan, it should recognise the genocide¹¹. Instead of undervaluing the grief of the Armenian people by claiming that the Armenian deaths were merely 300,000 (one Turkish official version) rather than over one million (as many international, and some Turkish, observers confirm)¹² as if this number were simply negligible, it should recognise the genocide¹³. In short, Turkey should grow out of its denial and assume its global responsibilities by recognising the Armenian Genocide.

Looking back at the overall human harvest of the 20th century, one realises that the world has reaped a macabre record of deaths: 1.5 million Armenians, 3 million Ukrainians, 6 million Jews, 250,000 Gypsies, 6 million Slavs, 25 million Russians, 25 million Chinese, 1 million Ibos, 1.5 million Bengalis, 200,000 Guatemalans, 1.7 Cambodians, 500,000 Indonesians, 200,000 East Timorese, 250,000 Burundians, 500,000 Ugandans, 2 million Sudanese, 800,000 Rwandans, 2 million North Koreans, 10,000 Kosovars¹⁴. Those are some of the approximate figures offered by Genocide Watch, and when one adds to them the mass murders of the Hereros, let alone those in Belgian Congo and Biafra, it becomes clear that genocide and crimes against humanity together killed *strictu sensu* more people in the 20th century than a combination of all the ‘official’ wars in the same period. ‘Never again’ has metamorphosed into ‘again and again’, and the world response to genocide has been expedient let alone timorous. During the Armenian Genocide and Jewish Holocaust, the world response was denial; during the Rwandan massacres, state-employed bureaucrats debated whether the event fit the definition of genocide.

Genocide remains a most pungent and prurient violation of human rights. By its very nature, it is ordinarily carried out by the forces of a country against its own people, and usually unfurls in eight stages¹⁵. Therefore, international intervention becomes quintessential whereby a rapid response force would be one key answer to any developing emergency. What is required at the beginning of the 21st century are effective early-warning systems to alert the UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide (Juan E Méndez of Argentina since April 2004), a UN rapid response force in accordance with Articles 43-47 of the UN Charter and (most crucially) legitimate backing for the arrest, indictment and trial of the perpetrators of genocide at the International Criminal Court (ICC).

When dealing with acts of genocide, one important aspect is to desist from adopting crude, demonising and ultimately judgmental “us” versus “them” patterns. This is unhelpful since the division between good and evil is horizontal, not vertical, whereby every human being bears the capacity for both good and evil. This is why I refuse pointedly to generalise that all Turks were responsible for the Armenian Genocide, just as all Germans were not culpable for the Jewish Holocaust. But if the world community persists in failing to act in its denunciation of denial, the brave language of the Genocide Convention and the UN Charter would ring hollow.

Today - ninety years after the Armenian Genocide, ten years after the Rwandan Genocide and two years into the Darfuri Sudanese genocide - it seems to me that our collective human consciousness has not yet fully grappled with genocide as a foreboding of global reality, and in the process has *ipso facto* failed to recognise the Armenian Genocide. Today, this unconscionable outcome still remains an irresponsible defeat for all humanity.

⁸ Ayla Jean Yackley (Reuters) + Anatolian News Agency: Cemil Cicek, Turkey’s Justice Minister, stated in parliament that the conference by Turkish historians who say genocide occurred was a “stab in the back of the Turkish people”

⁹ Commentary by Ismet Berkan in *Radikal* (BBC Monitoring Service, 17 May 2005) that Turkey would find itself in a real quandary if the UK Parliament responded to the said letter by affirming the validity of the “Blue Book”

¹⁰ AI Index: EUR 44/016/2005 - <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGEUR440162005?open&of=ENG-TUR>

¹¹ Story from BBC News: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/world/europe/4328285.stm>

¹² Genocide ... by Ahmet Altan: <http://www.gazetem.net/ahmetaltan.asp>

¹³ İnsan Hakları Dernegi Istanbul Subesi / Human Rights Association of Turkey

¹⁴ Extracts from Genocide Watch at <http://www.genocidewatch.org/internationalcampaign.htm> & other sources

¹⁵ The Eight Stages of Genocide, Appendix 1, by Dr Gregory H Stanton, Genocide Watch

We have learnt, rather too late, that action comes not from thought but from a readiness for responsibility
Letters and Papers from Prison, by Dr Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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