

Ignorance, Denial and Forgetfulness: the Perfect Recipe for the Perfect Crime

We all know about the famous quotation from Hitler's speech before invading Poland in 1939¹. While Hitler was not the only far right leader to employ historical examples in support of his genocidal policies during World War II², he was certainly the only one who thought people's memory was so short that he would not need centuries for acceptance, if victorious. We must remember that he was but 25 years away from the Armenian genocide, and already nobody spoke of it any longer. And Turkey had not even been among the victors in World War I. It is not without relevance that Max Erwin von Scheubner-Richner, Hitler's chief political advisor in the 1920s, had been an eyewitness to the events, in his capacity as the German Vice Consul of Erzurum, so his knowledge came from firsthand experience.

Hitler's remark summarizes, in fact, what he learned from the Armenian genocide³. Kevork B. Bardakjian remarks that the lessons he drew from the Armenian experience

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¹ See (<http://www.armenian-genocide.org/hitler.html>), accessed on November 1, 2017.

² Mihai Antonescu, the Romanian Foreign Minister of the Antonescu regime, would say, in his turn, in a meeting of the Council of Ministers on July 8, 1941: "It is of no importance to me whether history will record us as barbarians. The Roman Empire undertook a series of barbarous acts by contemporary standards, and still it remained the vastest and greatest political establishment. (...) There never was and will never be in our history a more favorable, wider, vaster, and clearer opportunity for a total ethnic unfettering, for a national revision and cleansing of our nation. (...) I urge you to be implacable. Sudsy, vaporous philosophical humanitarianism has no place here. (...) Let us use this historical moment and cleanse the Romanian land and nation of all misfortunes times have brought this country, in which we have not been able to be masters. If necessary, shoot your machine guns. (...) I take formal responsibility and tell you there is no law. (...) Today there is no law for the Romanian people as it fights for its holy rights to embody and reconstitute its national being. No law (...). So no formalities – complete freedom!" – *M.-D. Ciucă, M. Ignat* (eds.), *Transcripts of the Council of Ministers' meetings. The Ion Antonescu government (Stenogramele Ședințelor Consiliului de Miniștri. Guvernarea Ion Antonescu)*, vol. IV, July-September 1941, Bucharest, 2000, p. 57-59, quoted by *F. Constantiniu* in *The Antonescu Regime and the Jews, The Holocaust and Romania: History and Contemporary Significance*, Semne '94 Publishing House, Bucharest, 2003, p. 117.

³ A thorough discussion of Hitler's remark and its authenticity can be found in *K.B. Bardakjian, Hitler and the Armenians*, Cambridge, MA, Zoryan Institute, 1985. The remark is contained in a summary of Hitler's speech to his generals about his plans to wage a ruthless war against Poland on August 22, 1939. The summary was very probably based on Admiral Wilhelm Canaris' notes and a copy of it seems to have reached, within days, L.P. Lochner from the Associated Press in Berlin, who naturally brought the account to the attention of the American and British embassies. He subsequently published an English version of the document in his book *What About Germany?*, New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1942, p. 1-4.

affected his actions in Poland, and his subsequent decisions to annihilate the Jews and the Gypsies. Bardakjian provides evidence⁴ that Hitler was not only familiar with the facts, but also believed that the Armenians, like the Jews, were a “degenerate race”, and admired Turkey for being able to exterminate a people with such impunity. That he did his homework well was proven by his 1931 interview with Richard Breiting of the *Leipziger Neueste Nachrichten*. There he invoked the destruction of the Armenians when speaking of deportation, resettlement, and massacre as a means to providing “living space” for Germany and the Aryan race. “Think of the biblical deportations and the massacres of the Middle Ages... and remember the extermination of the Armenians. (...) One eventually reaches the conclusion that masses of men are mere biological plasticine”⁵.

Another important trait that Hitler shared with his predecessors in crime was that while advocating racial supremacy none of them were of “pure race”. Thus, if Hitler was in fact Austrian, the main leaders of the Young Turks had the most varied non-Turkish origins: Talaat was a Bulgarian *pomac* while Enver had an Albanian mother and a Circassian grandmother.

It is, in fact, improper to say that the Armenian genocide was ignored. There were a number of eyewitness accounts from various people, which recorded and publicized the events immediately after their occurrence. I am not going to enumerate them here. Suffice it to remember the story of Aurora, as one of the most famous. We also know the US reactions and British MP Lord Bryce’s Blue Book of 1916 (edited by Arthur Toynbee in 1917), which related about the deportations and condemned the Ottoman authorities. What is most interesting about this book is that it warned historians about the future revisionists.

Turks will say (after the war), “We were at war. We were fighting for our existence. The Armenians were traitors at large in a war zone”. But such excuses are entirely contradicted by facts. These Armenians were not inhabitants of a war zone. None of the towns and villages from which they were systematically deported to their death were anywhere near the seat of the hostilities⁶.

Let us recall Dwight Eisenhower’s famous quotation after the liberation of the Ohrdruf camp in 1945: “The things I saw beggar description... The visual evidence and the verbal testimony of starvation, cruelty and bestiality were so overpowering... I made the visit deliberately, in order to be in a position to give first hand evidence of these things if ever, in the future, there develops a tendency to charge these allegations to propaganda”⁷.

The diplomatic reports of the time speak of a racial genocide, but it is obvious that it was more of an ethnic and religious genocide than a racial one in the sense used to describe the Holocaust. It was, however, thought of in racial terms at the time. In his cable to the US State Department of 1915 Henry Morgenthau would mention:

⁴ *Idem*, p. 25-35.

⁵ Quoted in *R.W. Smith*, Professional Ethics and the Denial of the Armenian Genocide, in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, spring 1995, p. 1-22.

⁶ Quoted in *M.S. Strom, W.S. Parsons*, Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior, Intentional Educations Inc., Watertown, Massachusetts, p. 328.

⁷ The Holocaust Encyclopedia (<https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10006131>), accessed on November 1, 2017.

The real purpose of the deportation was robbery and destruction; it really represented a new method of massacre. When the Turkish authorities gave the orders for these deportations, they were merely giving the death warrant to a whole race; they understood this well, and, in their conversations with me, they made no particular attempt to conceal the fact⁸.

The German ambassador himself would write in his report to Berlin of 1915 that “Turks began deportations from areas now not threatened by invasion. This fact and the manner in which the relocation is being carried out demonstrate that the government is really pursuing the aim of destroying the Armenian race in Turkey”. In September 1916 the German Ambassador sent another report which included the famous phrase: “The Committee (of Union and Progress) demands... annihilation of the last remnants of the Armenians, and the government must bow to its demands” (for which Turkey immediately requested that he be dismissed from his position):

The expulsion of Armenians has begun everywhere anew. But the hungry wolves of the Committee can no longer expect anything from these unhappy people except the satisfaction of their fanatic rage for persecution. Their goods have long since been confiscated, and their capital has been liquidated by a so-called commission, which means that if an Armenian owned a house valued at, say, £T100, a Turk – a friend or member of the Committee – could have it for around £T2⁹.

It is then not so surprising that Nazi Germany made use of all these ideas later on in its own genocidal plans. But with the disciplined, hardworking and inventive German spirit, Hitler and his adepts improved the recipe by bringing in the bureaucratic factor (closely followed by their allies, Romania included). If the “Young Turks” (*i.e.* Enver, Talaat and Gemal) could not care less about the visibility of their acts (they were even proud of their lack of scruples), the “civilized” countries of World War II made it their aim to give an organized appearance to their atrocities (but also to cover their tracks, which goes to prove that they were in fact not so sure things would go as smoothly as with the Armenian genocide).

As Stefan Ihrig’s recent book “Justifying Genocide: Germany and the Armenians from Bismarck to Hitler”¹⁰ shows, although the Armenian Genocide and the Nazi Holocaust are often thought to be separated by a large distance in time and space, they were much more connected than one might think. Bismarck and then Wilhelm II staked their foreign policy on close relations with a stable Ottoman Empire. To the extent that the Armenians were restless under Ottoman rule, they were a problem for Germany too. From the 1890s onward Germany became accustomed to excusing violence against Armenians, even accepting it as a foreign policy necessity. For many Germans, the Armenians represented an explicitly racial problem and despite the Armenians’ Christianity, Germans portrayed them as the “Jews of the Orient”.

The Armenian genocide, therefore, did not go unnoticed. It was not the facts that were ignored, but their significance. Ignorance, denial and forgetfulness, in the case of the Armenian genocide, refer to the world’s failure to see in all that happened a warning. What is

⁸ *H. Morgenthau, Ambassador Morgenthau’s Story*, Doubleday Page & Company, New York, 1918.

⁹ *M.S. Strom, W.S. Parsons, Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior*, p. 329.

¹⁰ Harvard University Press, 2016.

denied here is that it was a deliberate policy, targeted at disposing of an ethnic and religious community with the only aim of ridding the place for the benefit of the rulers and their pan-Turkism dreams. Indeed there was a history of Russian supported Armenian militias killing Turkish villagers, a war context and a political power vacuum, but the treatment of the Armenians was still a systematic, premeditated, centrally-planned mass murder of a population, carried out with the assistance of death squads but also the local population. It must, however, also be mentioned here that the Turks themselves suffered from the chaotic policies of the triumvirate; according to Henry Morgenthau the empire lost a quarter of its Turkish population to starvation and misruling during the war, a fact which did not seem to impress Enver at all¹¹.

As Stefan Ihrig mentions in an article published in the Huffington Post under the title “Denial of the Armenian Genocide is Brutalizing the World”:

It must have been an interesting kind of war in which 4-year-olds and the elderly threatened the very existence of a once powerful empire to the extent that it seemed okay to kill them, in “self-defense”. And here already we have the futility of engaging with denialist discourse. This is not the contemporary military excuse of “collateral damage”. No, my Armenian sister, along with all the other sisters, brothers, granddads and grandmothers, were all rounded up and deported so that they could die. I keep seeing her in the famous pictures that Armin T. Wegner, a German writer and former field medic in the Ottoman Empire, left us – today’s iconic images of the Armenian Genocide. And I keep hearing these unsettling voices that tell me it is perfectly okay to kill my Armenian kid sister...

As a historian working on the coverage of and the debates on the Armenian Genocide during World War I and in the 1920s, I am still absolutely baffled that the debates, one hundred years later, have progressed so little – in fact, they have regularly taken steps backward. Clear proof of this was provided this week by an unlikely pair jumping forward together: Pope Francis and Kim Kardashian. That the acknowledgment of the genocide by the pope and Kim Kardashian’s trip to Armenia were so newsworthy and were hailed as such a great “PR disaster for Turkey” shows that something went terribly wrong over the course of the last century.

Instead of merely celebrating it as a victory for acceptance, one needs to ask why it took the Vatican so long, why it had given in to denialism for so many decades and why it, too, in this respect, had abandoned the world and the Armenians. And on the other hand, one needs to point out that Kim Kardashian has promoted awareness of the Armenian Genocide already before – scoring moral points way ahead of the Vatican. We – the Kardashians, my Armenian sister, the world and the denialists – have been playing this perverse game of acceptance and denial for a long time already; far too long.

The Armenian Genocide is a piece of history that is not allowed to be history. It continually seeps into the present and cannot find its own historical finality.

Although the current government is taking baby steps towards an acknowledgement of some sort, a look at the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs website and the amounts of money spent on lobbying against American recognition of the Armenian Genocide shows that much like in the case of Holocaust recognition in Romania, for instance, there is still a gap between the public discourse and what is happening in reality.

¹¹ *H. Morgenthau, Ambassador Morgenthau’s Story.*

One of the most striking similarities between the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust lies in that although not named yet, one can identify in the pattern of the former the three categories so perfectly labeled after the latter: *victims, perpetrators and by-standers*. Not only that there were not so many cases of Turkish people helping Armenians (just like few locals helped Jews during the Holocaust) but also many by-standers turned into perpetrators (in a sequence so perfectly replicated 25 years later). It is also important to remember that, as we discussed in the noon session, in many cases, both in the Armenian Genocide and in the Holocaust, the salvation came at the cost of losing one's identity and connection to one's community. If young girls saved through marriage would be able to preserve their identity this was not valid for little children. I would only remind you about the scandals at the end of World War II when Christian families who had saved Jewish children and baptized them by force refused to give them back to their families, with the Vatican's blessings...

Obviously, Holocaust denial has different roots and different aims than the denial of the Armenian genocide. Nevertheless, it is also clear that the former makes excellent use of the latter's arguments. The influence is naturally reciprocal. If denial of the Armenian genocide was initially based on arguments such as victimizing the perpetrators and demonizing the victims, under the influence of Holocaust denial it now also uses arguments such as the inexistence of a racial, systematic or centrally-planned aspect. Thus, what Hitler learned from the Armenian genocide in this respect was that he did not need to hide the crime, because indifference and disbelief would be his final allies. There are two main kinds of denial, one that says "it did not happen" and one that says "it happened but they deserved it". There are, however, two more: one is the lack of intent, and the other, which is more perverse, is the impossibility to call it genocide because the legal term was defined later and can supposedly not be used in retrospect. This is, of course, where the question of reparations comes in. What is interesting though is that while the Armenian Genocide is denied because it was supposedly not genocide, the uniqueness of the Holocaust is denied under the pretense that it is just another genocide like many others. There is also another aspect of denial that is at work in the Armenian case just like in the Jewish case: what Michael Shafir calls "competitive victimhood". We were victims too, so why would we care about your plight? Your plight was not more important than ours!

I would also like to draw your attention to an ironical fact. One of the most important moments in the remembrance of the Armenian Genocide was the publication of the novel *The 40 Days on Musa Dagh*. Not only is the name of the mountain Moses but the author of the book was Franz Werfel, a German Jew. He published it in 1933, the year of Hitler's ascension to power. The year 1941 found him in occupied Paris, married to Mahler's former wife. And when the American diplomat Varian Fry tries to get him to safety in Spain, Werfel refuses to go because he does not feel in danger. Thus, the man who wrote about what happened to the Armenians in 1915 fails to see the similarity with what he himself was witnessing. And this also reminds me to underline that similarity between the story of Musa Dagh and what happened in the Warsaw ghetto.

Moreover, as Yair Auron shows in his book *The Banality of Indifference: Zionism and the Armenian Genocide*¹², aware that the Yishuv Jews (the Jewish community in Palestine) were

¹² Y. Auron, *The Banality of Indifference: Zionism and the Armenian Genocide*, translated from the Hebrew by Maggie Bar-Tura, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, NJ/London, 2000.

in danger, Henry Morgenthau saved both a number of Armenians and a series of Jews through his interventions by the US authorities, with no less than Ben Gurion himself as the most remarkable example [who wrote privately to his father in 1919 “Jamal Pasha (then Turkish military ruler in Palestine) planned from the outset to destroy the entire Hebrew settlement in Eretz Yisrael, exactly as they did the Armenians in Armenia”]. Auron ironically remarks that among most of the top Zionists the attitude toward the Armenian genocide continually ranged from indifference to denial, while common Jews preferred the position of by-standers.

There is an incredible parallelism between the ways things evolved in the case of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust: first Armenians were labeled as exploiters, competitors, and traitors. Doesn't that sound familiar? Getting rid of the Armenians was presented as a way to “save the Homeland”, and bring “economic gains”. Does that ring a bell? The Turkish authorities used the technique of dehumanizing the target population, calling them “rats”. Any similarity? Quotes from the time mention that “There is no doubt that the government will not take any investigation into the killing, nor will it take any measures to punish those who committed a crime”. The same impunity and license to kill could be found 25 years later during the Holocaust.

Just like antisemitism, which had a long history before World War II, when anti-Jewish actions did not emerge out of nowhere, anti-Armenian feelings were nurtured in the Ottoman Empire long before the Genocide. Also, much like 19th century pogroms, anti-Armenian massacres were only a prelude to the outburst of 1915. While some say that a direct continuity between these massacres and the Genocide is far-fetched, because while the former were only part of the “normal” Ottoman violence against minorities the latter had a different aim, it is hard not to see that in fact the latter built on the former and a connection is not only possible but also unavoidable.

It is visible that both types of massacres followed the same lines and were based on similar principles. The Armenian massacres showed Hitler that you do not even need an army: playing on people's national, ethnic and religious feelings always pays off. There are, of course, many nuances and huge differences between the two instances, but the bases are there: one could not do without the hatred of the locals.

But if one were to use the hatred of the locals, one had to help locals become aware of the need and motivation for this hate. Even in this regard the Young Turks beat the Nazis to it when they had the idea of turning the Armenians from a protected minority into an internal enemy in order to convince the Moslem population to help get rid of them. The Young Turks used the Armenians as a scapegoat in their struggle to gain power and build up the dictatorship of a single party (in fact the dictatorship of three people). So did the Nazis and their allies with the Jews. Just like all Armenians suddenly became a threat to Turkey, so did the Jews suddenly become the source of all evils for the Germans, Poles, Romanians etc. Obviously, in both cases anti-feelings had been there for some time, but they had not been channeled into a coherent stream of thought for the common man with a solution at the end of the road.

Just like the Young Turks revolution promised equality and brought more oppression than ever before, the European revolutions preached more civic rights and brought a diminution of the few that were in force. Even the racist theories that paved the way to the Holocaust were not an original idea: the road to the Armenian genocide was paved by the racist theories of Zia Gokalp, who was the first to use glorification of the past as a means to stir the common man's

feelings. Pan-Turkism was in fact a precursor of Pan-Germanism. “Turkey the country of the Turks” does not differ profoundly from “Germany for the Germans” or even “the Romanianization of Romania”. (Mention must be made, though, that it was under European influence that Turks began to think of Turkey as a nation state).

Let us take two strikingly similar examples: during the winter of 1914-1915 an entire army under the command of Enver Pasha was destroyed in the eastern provinces of Turkey, near the border with the Caucasus Mountains, an area inhabited mostly by Armenians. Defeated, Enver of course accused the Armenians of helping the Russian army win and sought revenge. He motivated his anti-Armenian policies by claiming that after seeing their hopes for the establishment of two Armenian provinces, to be supervised by the European nations, sunk in disaster, in 1914 a number of Ottoman Armenians had fled to Russia. This suited Enver, who presented them as traitors, thus giving the Turkish population reasons to kill the remaining Armenians.

The Romanian authorities used a similar scenario to motivate their killing of the Jews of Bessarabia. Because there were a number of Jews who expressed their preference for the Russian side upon the Romanian army’s retreat from the area, the Romanian authorities claimed that all Jews had attacked the retreating soldiers and therefore they were all traitors and deserved being deported and murdered. There are descriptions of the deportations that will make it hard for anyone to tell whether they speak about 1915 Turkey or 1941 Romania.

Indeed little has been done to preserve the memory of the Armenian Genocide. Except for various Armenian initiatives, not much is available to research. What is needed is an Armenian Steven Spielberg: someone who could put together as many as possible of the testimonies that have been recorded, whether in writing or on camera, even second or third generation ones, in a database that can be used by scholars and the general public. If deniers of the Armenian genocide learnt something from the Holocaust, we can also learn something: how to preserve its memory in such a way that it may be debated, or even denied, but not ignored or neglected.