

THE BURNING TIGRIS

A History of
International
Human
Rights and
Forgotten
Heroes

THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE
AND AMERICA'S RESPONSE

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Author of Black Dog of Fate

THE
BURNING
TIGRIS



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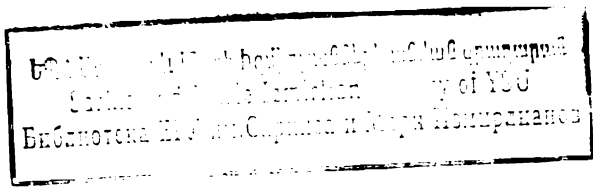
*The Armenian Genocide and
America's Response*



PETER BALAKIAN



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*To the victims and survivors
of genocide everywhere*

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PREFACE



In recent decades, the Armenian Genocide has often been referred to as “the forgotten genocide,” the “unremembered genocide,” “the hidden holocaust,” or “the secret genocide.” However, such epithets convey little sense of how large the massacres of the Armenians in the 1890s and the genocide of the Armenians in 1915 loomed in American (as well as European) consciousness and social and political life during a span of four decades. The U.S. response to the Armenian crisis, which began in the 1890s and continued into the 1920s, was the first international human rights movement in American history and helped to define the nation’s emerging global identity. It seems that no other international human rights issue has ever preoccupied the United States for such a duration. Looking back at the World War I era, President Herbert Hoover noted that “the name Armenia was in the front of the American mind . . . known to the American schoolchild only a little less than England.”¹ The breadth and intensity of American engagement in the effort to save the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire is an important chapter in American history, and one that has been lost. It is also one from which Americans today can learn a great deal.

In the past decade there has been much focus on and debate about the issue of United States engagement, response, and responsibility for crimes of genocide committed in other parts of the planet. What is the role of the

most powerful nation in the world when the ultimate crime is being perpetrated in plain view? Why was there no U.S. activist response to the Holocaust, or to Pol Pot's genocide in Cambodia in 1978, or to the Rwandan genocide in 1994, when in fact the State Department, media, and general public often knew what was happening in those killing fields? Why is U.S. policy evasive, sluggish, resistant to action (of various and creative kinds, not simply or only military intervention), and often tinged with denial? Why has there been so little political will at the top when media coverage and popular knowledge and empathy are often large and dramatic?

A deeper understanding of these questions and of the history of America's confrontation with genocide must begin with a study of the Armenian Genocide. For the Armenian Genocide is—as historians and genocide scholars Yehuda Bauer, Robert Melson, Howard M. Sachar, Samantha Power, and others have noted—the template for most of the genocide that followed in the twentieth century. In the world after September 11, 2001, Americans and U.S. leaders may find that the Armenian lesson has much to teach about the moral accountability of bystanders, trauma and survivor experience, and the immediate and far-reaching impact of mass violence committed against innocent civilians.

A hundred years ago, in 1903, the feminist writer and social critic Charlotte Perkins Gilman believed that the Armenian massacres of 1894–96 should prompt a new age of American international leadership. “The most important fact in this new century is the rapid kindling of the social consciousness; and among the shocks of pain which force that wakening the archetype is to be found in the sorrows of Armenia.” The word “Armenian,” she wrote, “has a connotation of horror; we are accustomed to see it followed by ‘atrocities,’ ‘massacre,’ ‘outrage’; it has become an adjective of incredible suffering.” Gilman’s appeal to international ethics in the Armenian case was adamant. “America has heard and responded to a certain degree,” but there must be more engagement in order to prevail “on the Turkish government to desist from its criminal conduct.” Human rights crimes such as the Armenian massacres, Gilman noted, “demand international law, to restrain, prohibit, punish; best of all, to prevent.

“Who is to do it?” she demanded. “The world . . . of civilized nations . . . advancing in united action for the common good. And America,” she answered, “with the blended blood of all peoples in her veins, with inter-

ests in every land, and duties with the interests; America, who leads in so many things, can well afford to lead in this; not only allowing human liberty here, but using her great strength to protect it everywhere.”²

Less than two decades later, during and after World War I, former president Theodore Roosevelt berated President Wilson for his refusal “to take effective action on behalf of Armenia. . . . The Armenian massacre,” Roosevelt concluded, “was the greatest crime of the war, and failure to act against Turkey is to condone it; because the failure to deal radically with the Turkish horror means that all talk of guaranteeing the future peace of the world is mischievous nonsense; and because when we now refuse war with Turkey we show that our announcement that we meant ‘to make the world safe for democracy’ was insincere claptrap.”³

Had Theodore Roosevelt answered Charlotte Gilman’s question? The dialogue posed by their statements is one that still haunts us.

During the 1890s Sultan Abdul Hamid II ordered massacres against the Armenians—the largest Christian minority culture in the Anatolian part of the Ottoman Empire—that took the lives of about two hundred thousand Armenians. In response to the Hamidian massacres taking place halfway around the globe, Americans from all classes and walks of life organized philanthropic and relief programs. Women’s groups, churches, synagogues, and civic organizations around the country organized to protest the massacres—which were covered boldly and regularly in U.S. newspapers and magazines—and to raise money. The National Armenian Relief Committee, headed by influential American industrialists—including John D. Rockefeller, Spencer Trask, and Jacob Schiff—raised hundreds of thousands of dollars in money, services, and goods, and recruited the venerable elder stateswoman Clara Barton to take her Red Cross relief teams, for the first time, out of the country—to the Armenian provinces nearly six thousand miles away. In 1896 Congress passed the Cullom resolution—the first international human rights resolution in American history—condemning the sultan for the massacres.

American intellectual and cultural leaders articulated their opinions on the Armenian atrocities and often worked for Armenian relief. Julia Ward Howe, Isabel Barrows, Alice Stone Blackwell, William Lloyd Garrison Jr., Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Stephen Crane all lent their voices

and deeds. At the forefront of the movement were women who had been abolitionists and were now at the head of the woman suffrage movement. By the second decade of the twentieth century, public figures as varied as Theodore Roosevelt, Ezra Pound, H. L. Mencken, William Jennings Bryan, and President Woodrow Wilson addressed and assessed the century's first genocide.

Much of America's moral sentiment emanated from the near century of Protestant missionary presence in the Ottoman Empire. American missionaries had first gone to Turkey in the second decade of the nineteenth century in an effort to convert the Muslim Turks, but they found more fertile ground with the Christian minorities. By the middle of the century, the missionaries had set up a network of missions, colleges, schools, and hospitals throughout Turkey for the Armenians, Greeks, and Assyrians. From their deeply entrenched place, the Protestant missionaries became witnesses to atrocities against Armenians, and often rescuers and administrators of relief. But American Catholics and Jews, as well as secular intellectuals, all worked to alleviate the Armenian crisis. The Zionist rabbi Stephen Wise, along with Wall Street financier Jacob Schiff, were prominent Jewish-Americans leading the Armenian relief campaign. The Central Conference of American Rabbis went so far as to pass a proclamation in 1909 urging the European powers to protect the Armenians from Turkish barbarism.⁴

The Armenian Genocide of 1915 spawned extraordinary heroism on the part of American foreign service officers—from consuls posted in remote areas to the U.S. ambassador in Constantinople, Henry Morgenthau. These U.S. State Department officials often risked their lives to save men, women, and orphaned children. Ambassador Morgenthau went beyond the duty of his job as he became the crucial nexus between the killing fields and the American relief community and the press back home. A man of high moral conscience, Ambassador Morgenthau was most likely the first high-ranking diplomat to confront boldly the leaders of the Ottoman government about its treatment of the Armenians. When he left his post in 1916, he wrote, "My failure to stop the destruction of the Armenians had made Turkey for me a place of horror."⁵

Eyewitness accounts of the Armenian Genocide from American for-

eign service officers stationed in the heart of the massacre and deportation zones quickly became the first body of U.S. diplomatic literature about a major foreign human rights tragedy. Their narratives were eloquent in their clean language and clinical images, and provided a certain detachment and perspective on events that might otherwise seem to surpass description. In their consistency, their narratives also corroborated one another as they disclosed the plan and process of the Turkish final solution for the Armenians.

By the early 1920s, the American response to the Armenian Genocide was divided between a passionate popular appeal for aid and justice, and the limits of the federal government—the State Department, the White House, and a powerful segment of the Senate, which was isolationist and Republican. The post–World War I power alliance with Kemal Atatürk’s new Turkish republic, and the American drive for oil in the Middle East, led to the abandonment of Armenia. In some sense this paradox would haunt the United States through the twentieth century and beyond.

In many ways it is a propitious time to study the Armenian Genocide. In the past two decades scholars have unearthed and translated a large quantity of official state records documenting the Committee of Union and Progress’s (Ottoman Turkey’s governing political party) finely organized and implemented plan to exterminate the Armenians. I have studied hundreds of U.S. State Department documents (there are some four thousand documents totaling about thirty-seven thousand pages in the National Archives) written by American diplomats that report in depth the process and devastation of the Armenian Genocide. The extermination of the Armenians is also illuminated in British Foreign Office records, and in official records from the state archives of Germany and Austria-Hungary, Ottoman Turkey’s World War I allies. The foremost scholar of the Armenian Genocide, Professor Vahakn Dadrian, has made available in translation a body of Turkish sources both primary and secondary. Dadrian has also translated and annotated the issues of *Takvimi Vekayi*, the Ottoman parliamentary gazette, that record the proceedings of post–World War I Ottoman military tribunals, with court-martial testimony that documents the process of the genocide and confessions of guilt from the Turkish perpetrators.

As scholars of the Holocaust have made clear, survivor accounts are a profound part of history and allow us into regions we would not otherwise come to know. I have found Armenian survivor narratives and memoirs, as well as oral histories on audio- and videotape, to be of great value. I have also included a broad selection of historical photographs. Some of them, such as those from the *London Graphic* in the 1890s, are landmarks in photojournalism, bringing an unprecedented human rights atrocity to the vivid view of the general public. The most important group is that of the German military medic Armin T. Wegner, who risked his life photographing extraordinary scenes of the massacres and deportations and then smuggling them out of Turkey. A comprehensive demographic map of the massacres and deportations, and a map of President Wilson's post-World War I award to Armenia, also provide a graphic view of a lost history.

Unfortunately, writing a history of the Armenian Genocide still entails addressing the Turkish government's continued denial of the facts and the moral dimensions of this history. As Richard Falk, the eminent professor of international law at Princeton University, has put it: The Turkish campaign of denying the Armenian Genocide is "sinister," singular in the annals of history, and "a major, proactive, deliberate government effort to use every possible instrument of persuasion at its disposal to keep the truth about the Armenian Genocide from general acknowledgment, especially by elites in the United States and Western Europe."⁶

Today Turkey would like the media and the public to believe there are "two sides" to the Armenian Genocide. When scholars and writers of Armenian descent write about the Armenian Genocide, the Turkish government calls this a biased "Armenian point of view." This accusation is as slanderous as it would be for the German government to claim that the work of Jewish scholars and writers represented merely a "Jewish side" of the Holocaust, which is to say a biased and illegitimate version of history.

The most notable scholar of genocide denial, Professor Deborah Lipstadt of Emory University, has written: "Denial of genocide—whether that of the Turks against Armenians, or the Nazis against Jews—is not an act of historical reinterpretation. Rather, it sows confusion by appearing to be engaged in a genuine scholarly effort." Lipstadt also notes that deniers claim that all documents are "forgeries and falsehoods." She calls denial of

genocide the “final stage of genocide,” because it “strives to reshape history in order to demonize the victims and rehabilitate the perpetrators.””

That the Turkish government today and a small group of its sympathizers work hard (spending time and money) in order to undermine and distort the history of the Armenian Genocide does not, Deborah Lipstadt concludes, comprise a legitimate debate, and certainly not an intellectual conversation worth reporting. In short, she argues, it is morally wrong to privilege the deniers by according them space in the classroom or in the media. Elie Wiesel, too, has called denying genocide, and in particular the Armenian Genocide, a “double killing,” because it murders the memory of the event.

It is troubling to find in the press today the echoes of Turkish denial when references to the Armenian Genocide use phrases like “Armenians claim” that more than a million died in the Armenian Genocide. This effort to present the Armenian Genocide as a history that has two legitimate sides, and one that can be reduced to ethnic perspectives—the victims’ and the perpetrators’—trivializes and defames a human rights crime of enormous magnitude. It is doubly ironic when one notes that in 1915 alone, the *New York Times* published 145 articles on the Armenian massacres (one about every 2.5 days). The conclusive language of the reportage was that the Turkish slaughter of the Armenians was “systematic,” “deliberate,” “authorized,” and “organized by government”; it was a “campaign of extermination” and of “systematic race extermination.”⁸

The Association of Genocide Scholars and the community of Holocaust scholars—which is to say, the professional scholars who study genocide—affirm that the extermination of the Armenians *was* genocide, and that this genocide took the lives of about two-thirds of the Armenian population of Ottoman Turkey. Genocide scholars are comfortable putting the number of dead at more than a million (some estimates put it at 1.5 million). Out of exasperation with Turkish denial, the Association of Genocide Scholars in 1997 passed unanimously a resolution stating the facts of the Armenian Genocide. In June 2000, 126 leading Holocaust scholars, also deeply troubled by Turkey’s campaign of denial, published a statement in the *New York Times*: “126 Holocaust Scholars Affirm the Incontestable Fact of the Armenian Genocide and Urge Western Democracies to Officially Recognize It.” Among the signatories were Elie Wiesel,

Yehuda Bauer, Israel Charny, Stephen Feinstein, and Ward Churchill. Inevitably, progressive Turkish scholars are also beginning to acknowledge the Armenian Genocide. Professor Taner Akçam's several recent books on the Armenian Genocide, published in Turkey, may be a signal light for a new era.

The Armenian Genocide prompted two historic responses in the evolution of international ethics. In May 1915 in the midst of World War I, the Allies meeting in London conceived of what they termed "crimes against humanity," in warning the Ottoman government that massacring the Armenian population would violate a fundamental standard of humanity and would have consequences. And during the 1930s and 1940s, when the Polish jurist Raphael Lemkin was studying and writing about what he would term *genocide*, he articulated his definition in large part by what had happened to the Armenians in 1915 and by what was happening to the Jews of Europe.

In many ways, then, the Armenian Genocide emerges as a landmark event—and one that deserves its proper place in modern history.