



Committee on Conscience

“The Armenian Genocide: An Eighty-Year Perspective”

Richard G. Hovannisian

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Genocide and Mass Murder in the Twentieth Century: A Historical Perspective

Introduction

Ms. Lydia Perry:

Welcome to the United States Holocaust Museum. I'm Lydia Perry, Acting Director of Community Programs here. Tonight's program is the second of an eight-part series, *Genocide and Mass Murder in the Twentieth Century: An Historical Perspective*.

To deliver this lecture, *the Armenian Genocide: An Eighty-Year Perspective*, I am honored to present Dr. Richard Hovannisian, Professor of Armenian and Near Eastern Studies, and the Associate Director of the G.E. von Grunebaum Center for Near Eastern Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles.

A member of the faculty since 1962, he has organized the undergraduate and graduate programs in Armenian history. He is the author of many books on the Armenian Genocide, including *The Armenian Genocide in Perspective*, and *The Armenian Genocide: History, Politics, Ethics*.

Dr. Hovannisian is one of the founders of the Armenian Assembly of America and the Society for Armenian Studies. He will take questions following his presentation. We welcome Dr. Richard Hovannisian.

“The Armenian Genocide: An Eighty-Year Perspective”

Dr. Richard Hovannisian:

Good evening. It is Halloween, and perhaps it is appropriate that we deal with ghosts and goblins, because the Armenian Genocide has both ghosts and goblins that have been floating about for 80 years.

This is a particularly significant year. You know, we seem to like years that end in zeros and other rounded numbers. So, we have made a great ado about the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, the liberation of the death camps and concentration camps in Nazi Germany. There has been a significant number of

programs relating to the subject on public television, as well as public commemorations and so forth.

In the shadow of the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, for the Armenians and those interested in the Armenian people, Armenian history, and the Armenian tragedy, this particular year, 1995, also marks the 80th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide that began in 1915. What is more, this is also the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the end of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1894-95, the year in which fire and massacres spread over all the Armenian provinces of the empire.

The 80th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide and the 100th anniversary of the massacres were passed over in silence this year. As is common in Armenian communities, Armenian groups commemorated unto themselves, but the media was not very interested, except in places having a significant concentration of Armenian inhabitants.

What does this mean, what does this say to the Armenians and to the world? The question requires some reflection. I have spoken for many years on the Armenian Genocide, and I have chosen to come to you this evening without a prepared text to try to be spontaneous. One begins to think after awhile, what is this all about—how many times does this story have to be told to be understood and accepted?

I suppose, just as young teachers who continue to educate down through the years, we must not tire of informing new generations. For me, and, I think, probably for many others who are involved in the terrible subject of genocide, the question is how does one take the singular experience of a particular group and universalize it, to make any sense out of it?

How does one give meaning and universality to such discussions, at programs such as this to which you have come from various places, while at the same time not losing or minimizing the specificity of the particular case itself?

This year, in Yerevan, the capital of the little Republic of Armenia, there were some significant events. First of all, this was the first time that the Armenian Genocide was commemorated in an independent Armenia. The Soviet Union has collapsed. That which was the Soviet Republic of Armenia, that is, about 10 percent of the land that was once called Armenia, is now trying to emerge as an independent state.

The question arises, does one continue to commemorate a genocide at the expense of annoying a very powerful, important neighbor that has the possibility of opening trade routes and allowing the small, landlocked Armenian republic to live in relative security, or, on the other hand, does one become insistent on acts of remembrance even when these may elicit various forms of retaliation, including blockades and the withholding of vital goods.

This is a very serious matter, which I suppose a state such as Israel has had to face in some form or another at some time or another. A struggling country such as Armenia now has to address the question of memory, the importance of the past and its remembrance on the scale of the needs of the present, that is, keeping people alive and a state in existence. This is certainly a critical issue today within the Armenian communities of the Diaspora and within the Republic of Armenia itself.

The conference in Yerevan was also unusual because for the first time there was a Turkish scholar in attendance, not to sit in the audience in order to heckle or to challenge, to deny, to ask questions, both relevant and non-relevant, but actually a Turkish scholar to participate in commemoration and to admit that in fact genocide had been perpetrated against the Armenian people in an organized, systematic manner.

After eight decades of unremitting denial, this was at the very least a welcome breakthrough in the solid wall of negationism. But on my return to Los Angeles, at the same time, I received from the Foreign Ministry of Turkey a very hefty volume of documents which states in the preface that the benevolent silence of Turkey over the

past decades has been misunderstood by the world community as an admission of guilt. The documents in the collection, it was asserted, would prove that, in fact, the Turkish people were the victims of a genocide perpetrated by the Armenians against them. So, now the roles have become reversed, making me wary about what the future will bring. I would hope that the little window of possible understanding, of possible dialogue, might be expanded, but this apparently must be done through individual scholars and civil rights proponents in Turkey.

What can I tell you in an hour or less? I shall try to say what I would to a group of students or any other group regarding the Armenian Genocide, that is, how can it be made relevant to our own lives and concerns today. Insofar as the historic experience of the Armenian people is concerned, I would raise three points.

The first relates to tradition and custom. In tradition-bound societies, what happens to those who try to bring about change? Let us look at the American experience in the civil rights movement, of those who attempted to alter a certain customary way of life and the results of such efforts. That case demonstrated yet again that those who are advocates of change are usually looked upon as troublemakers, and not only looked upon but often also punished by those who want to preserve the traditional inequities in the system. I want to reflect on this a bit, because it holds true, not only in the Armenian experience, but also in experiences of many other peoples, both past and present, and probably in the future as well.

The second point is that the Armenian Genocide was a prototype of twentieth century genocides. This theme has been developed by Robert Melson of Purdue University. In fact, he sees the Armenian case as being much more prototypical than the Holocaust, for the Holocaust had additional special features such as deep-seated antisemitism. Melson views the Armenian Genocide as possessing the fundamental elements that have appeared in nearly all genocides since the Holocaust, and most of

them also in the Holocaust itself. I think, therefore, looking at the Armenian Genocide as a prototype of genocide and trying to understand the conditions under which genocide, not necessarily happens, but can occur or is more likely to occur, is worthwhile and an important object lesson.

And finally, the third point relates to the reactions to genocide, including the issue of denial. Denial has been present, traumatizing Armenian survivors and successive generations, since the genocide itself, except for a very brief period after the defeat of the allied German and Turkish empires in World War I. The new Turkish government had no choice but to admit to the fact that hundreds of thousands of Armenians had been killed wrongfully, much as the German government, under duress, made similar confessions after the end of World War II in 1945.

But the histories of Turkey and of Germany diverge at that point, that is, in the immediate postwar period, because Germany remained occupied and under the control of the Allied Powers, whereas after World War I Turkey was able to turn the tables on the Allies and quickly emerge from being a defeated to a victorious power. With these developments, denial of the Armenian Genocide resumed and has continued unabated ever since.

There is something strange but perhaps logical in denial. I have recently been asked to make a comparison of denial of the Holocaust and denial of the Armenian Genocide. I get the impression that those who write denial literature about the Armenians and those who write denial literature about the Jews probably have never studied one another's publications or even read one another's writings. Yet what is striking is that the logic and arguments used are parallel, point-by-point. A brief look at this phenomenon may prove instructional.

For Jewish survivors and those interested in the Holocaust, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and many other museums and public programs assure them that

memory will not be lost; that in the struggle of memory against forgetting there are many weapons and many people engaged in the battle for memory. In the Armenian case, the same cannot be said. Memory is on the defensive, and there are those who are urging the Armenians, both the survivors and their progeny, to forget. And this advice becomes more forceful as generations pass on. We move toward a new century, so why talk about “ancient history”? There is a great deal of harm and evil in the world, it is argued, without having to dwell on old grievances.

But what is perhaps shocking to some of my colleague scholars of the Holocaust is that the very arguments put forward in the Armenian case by mainstream—not fringe but mainstream—American and European scholars had until recently been limited to the domain of the radical right, antisemitic groups vis-à-vis the Holocaust. What is frightening is that with all the information, with all the evidence, with all the museums, with the hundreds and thousands, if not millions, of documents pertaining to the Holocaust, there is today a movement from the fringe toward the center in Holocaust denial, no longer only by radical antisemites but indeed by some mainstream historians. The so-called historical debate on the Holocaust was initiated by bona fide German historians and led toward relativization and consequently trivialization of the Holocaust.

The object of such historians and their sympathizers is to make it seem that, however tragic and terrible the Holocaust, it certainly was but one of many wartime calamities. The Jewish tragedy becomes more understandable in that context, especially when compared with all the other horrible events of the twentieth century. Why, therefore, is there any need to focus on a single crime? There was, after all, the Armenian annihilation during World War I. There was, after all, the Ukraine famine, and there was the Stalin's terror, both of which claimed millions of lives. There was Vietnam. There was Pol Pot and Cambodia. There is Burundi and Rwanda. There is the Balkans.

There are many other places, and, therefore, why is the Holocaust so different when viewed in comparative and relative perspective?

Perhaps I am putting the cart before the horse by raising this subject early on, but the irony of all this is that such arguments tend to pit victim groups against one another and to provoke them to declare, "Oh, no, ours was different. Ours was worse." The argument follows that the Holocaust should not be compared with the Armenian Genocide. However tragic the Armenian experience may have been, it was not the mass extermination to the extent that characterized the Holocaust.

Such arguments issue from the pens of very fine Holocaust scholars. They may be stated only in passing, as in the case of Michael Marrus, or more extensively, as in the case of Stephen Katz. All such scholars are solicitous of Armenian suffering and voice outrage at the mass killings, yet they feel compelled to emphasize the uniqueness of the Holocaust, in part as a reaction to the historical debate in Germany that trivializes the Jewish experience. Sadly, a product of this reaction is the trivialization of genocides of other peoples.

I have heard it said among Armenians as well that their suffering really was greater than any other, before or after. With no malice, but simply to emphasize the depth of their own anguish, they might even say that gas chambers seem merciful when compared with the torment on the forced marches of six months to a year to the deserts to death, watching their family members die, one-by-one, and the indescribable hunger and thirst that make the tongue swell and stick to the top of the mouth, which in the end can no longer open even to sip a handful of water. This was the protracted process of death experienced by the Armenian women and children in the deportation caravans after the adult males had been taken away and killed.

Let me not belabor the point but simply discuss briefly the issues that I have now outlined and try to make some sense out of them.

The Armenians are an ancient people. They lived on a great highland known as the Armenian Plateau, now the eastern half of Turkey and renamed Eastern Anatolia, as well as a part of Transcaucasia or the South Caucasus, the turbulent area of the present republics of Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. Here the Armenians emerged as an identifiable people in a separate kingdom in the early part of the first millennium BCE. They lived uninterruptedly in that area until 1915.

Unlike the Jews, they were not cast entirely into Diaspora. They did have diasporan communities, for life was made difficult both by invasion and by nature, draining and devastating the land and compelling many Armenians to flee to distant lands. But always, most Armenians managed to remain on this highland, sometimes within independent Armenian kingdoms and principalities, sometimes under the shadow of great empires of East and West, but in all cases maintaining their separate national identity and separate ethno-religious culture.

After a thousand years of pre-Christian history, the Armenians adopted Christianity to become the first country in the world to proclaim Christianity as the religion of state. Religion cost them a great deal, and the tenacity with which they held to their Christian faith exacted from them, down through the centuries and before the genocide itself, virtually millions of lives.

What is important for us here is to pick up Armenian history in and around the year 1800, when most traditional Armenian lands had come within the great, powerful Ottoman Empire that extended from Constantinople or Istanbul to Hungary and the very gates of Vienna in Europe and all the way to the borders of Iran, to the Arab provinces, and to North Africa in the east and south. Armenia retained its historic name geographically but was fully incorporated into the empire politically. The Ottoman Empire was a theocratic state based on Islamic precepts. The Turkish ruling classes controlled a multinational, multiconfessional empire in which—and this may be a clue to potential

genocide—there was a plural, not pluralistic, society in which various groups lived side-by-side, next to each another, but separate and distinct. They belonged to a common state but the theocracy was founded on the institutionalized separation of the population into true believers and nonbelievers. The nonbelievers were the *gavurs*, a pejorative term meaning “infidel.” According to the precepts of Islam, toleration was to be offered to Christians and Jews, that is, to monotheists on condition that they submit to an inferior status of second class citizenship with certain financial, political, and social disabilities.

The testimony of a nonbeliever, for example, could not be admitted as evidence in a religious court against a true believer. In lieu of military service, because religious minorities were not allowed to bear arms as part of the system of keeping subject groups submissive, a poll tax was imposed on every male child. This was one of the reasons that heads of household often hid the true number of family members. There were various other restrictions—at various times and places—such as the wearing of distinctive garb, special taxes and uncompensated labor, mode of transportation, and so forth, in return for allowing the practice of pre-Islamic imperfect religions.

One could look upon this system as being rather benevolent. After all, Christian Europe at that time was frequently not so permissive of minorities. What existed nonetheless was an institutionalized structure based on religious confession. Members of the non-Muslim communities could convert, be co-opted into the dominant community of true believers, and enter into the ruling structures of the empire, but by and large the Christians and Jews, regardless of whether they became wealthy in trade or excelled in other pursuits, remained inferior and second-class.

By the 1800s, critical questions began to be asked. The Ottoman Empire was in decline, losing much of its territory in Europe. It now started to refocus back toward Asia Minor and the Armenian highland. On the other hand, the precepts of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution were having an effect on the subject nationalities of the

empire, whether Greek, Serbian, Montenegrin, Romanian, or Bulgarian, and very belatedly, Armenian. Perhaps this, too, was one of the causes of the Armenian tragedy, in that they may have stirred too late. The subject nationalities which sought emancipation relatively early were able to find European support and ultimately to seize independence, whereas the Armenians, throughout the nineteenth century, sought, not independence from the Ottoman Empire, but civil rights, equality before the law, security of life and property, and local self-government, quite some distance from independence.

As Turkish rule weakened and as the European powers, for their own selfish reasons, interfered increasingly in the affairs of the Ottoman Empire, tensions intensified between the various ethnic groups, majorities and minorities, and between the minorities themselves, Greeks and Armenians, Armenians and Jews, etcetera. More than one sultan gave in to external pressures and domestic reformers in the nineteenth century to proclaim, against traditional practice, that all his subjects were equal in his eyes and henceforth would be treated as such. This was done in an effort to hold the empire together. Unfortunately, most sultans were not sincere when they issued these decrees under duress. Nonetheless, one of the effects of the several reform edicts was to upset and arouse traditional society.

I have to tell you a story of my own youth so that you can understand better what I wish to convey. I was just out of high school. It was my first trip to the East Coast. In those days, travel was usually by train or bus. From California, I took the Southern Pacific—exciting—to New Orleans, on my way to Washington, New York, and Boston. My brief stop in New Orleans was exhilarating, the French Quarter and the Cathedral, the French Market, and so forth. As I was walking one of the streets, coming in the opposite direction was a black man much older than I, who, as we approached each other, stepped down into the street so that I, a young white boy, would be able to pass on the sidewalk. Only after I had walked on did he come back onto the sidewalk. There

was no law that said that he had to step down, but there was custom and tradition that made him know that this was the required behavior to avoid confrontation and ensure survival.

For the minorities of the Ottoman Empire, there was a comparable kind of awareness of how to behave in order to survive. If one came into contact with a true believer, a first-class citizen, even if poor, humble, and less educated, it made no difference, a certain demeanor was anticipated and required. Now, to try to alter that kind of mentality, that type of society, and suddenly proclaim that all are equal, when there is no strong, true, sincere governmental support behind the declaration, can only lead to trouble. If you will remember the case of our own civil rights laws, the adoption of legislation does not guarantee its implementation. Even with the government's backing, implementation may lag far behind the passage of laws. If the National Guard were not called out on a number of occasions, I expect that those blacks and other activists who tried to apply the rights granted by the law would have been victimized, as indeed some were, in far greater numbers than actually occurred.

While comparisons are risky business, I think one can make the connection to the Armenian case and the underpinnings of what was to lead to the ultimate elimination of the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire. They were to be portrayed and perceived as an arrogant, conniving element that was trying to achieve dominance through equality. And it was not difficult for traditionalist leaders to make the like-minded masses see that equality was tantamount to exploitation by the *gavur*. It was unfair; it was wrong; it was an attempt ultimately to seize the rights and privileges of the true believers.

That the European powers involved themselves in these matters only made things worse, and it may be a lesson for the present, that is, to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of becoming embroiled in foreign conflicts or interethnic strife as mediator and peacekeeper, of exerting various forms of pressure on recalcitrant

regimes, as happened in the Armenian case. European pressure was repeatedly applied on the Ottoman government, but it was not sustained by effective force. What is the reaction therefore of a beleaguered and frightened sultan, except to look with even more suspicion on the subject people on whose behalf the intercession is supposedly taking place.

The Armenian attempt to achieve equality through reforms in the Turkish empire was ultimately an utter and dismal failure. Equality through legislation, equality through declarations about being the children of a common fatherland and benevolent ruler, was stillborn.

When in 1895 the last important ruler of the Ottoman Empire, Sultan Abdul-Hamid II (1878-1909, was forced to sign a reform edict, his real answer to the Westerners who imposed this act on him—and to the Armenians who were seeking assistance and relief from the terrible conditions caused by the near total breakdown of law and order in the interior provinces—was the unleashing of months of death and destruction. In the autumn of 1895—this very month—October 1895, starting in the port city of Trebizond on the Black Sea and spreading in the winter months to every province of historic Armenia, there erupted mayhem lasting for up to a week during which hapless Armenians were cut down wherever they were found. Armenian shops were looted; Armenian homes were burned; Armenian villages were pillaged. Thousands of terrified people fled to the mountains or abroad, and other thousands—no longer a question of tolerance—were forcibly converted to Islam. The numbers who died will never be known. Minimally, it was placed at about 100,000, although most sources give 200,000, and some as many as 300,000.

Now, how do we interpret these massacres of 1895-96 that claimed so many Armenian lives? Was it, in fact, the beginning of the end of the Armenians? Should we regard the Armenian Genocide as starting in 1915 or rather as a continuous process

from 1895 to the end of World War I in 1918 and even beyond? This is a question that needs further thought. Is a comparison with Holocaust history in order? Was the decision in World War II made in 1942, '43; was it earlier in '33; was it 1939? Was it the exclusionary laws or Kristallnacht that began the process, or was the “final solution” different and distinct?

Whatever the answer, there was in the Armenian case a very important, qualitative and quantitative difference between 1895 and 1915. The sultan, however oppressive, however sinister, however paranoid—probably did not conceive realistically of an empire without Armenians. No, the Armenians had a place and a function in his realm. They simply had to be taught a lesson; they needed to be intimidated back into complete submission. The West, too, had to be taught a lesson. The Armenians had gotten too big for their britches; they had to be cut down to size. They had to be impoverished somewhat, and their concentrations in their historic provinces had to be diluted somewhat. Certain demographic changes were in order.

While Abdul-Hamid's actions in 1895 may be classified as genocide according to the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, in the narrower sense in which many Holocaust and Armenian Genocide scholars interpret the term as implying the attempted total annihilation of a people, it may be more proper to define the 1895-96 massacres as pogroms, even though the term was not then used for the Armenians. Although there was much bloodshed and certainly the intent was to kill an ethnic or religious group, at least in part (the U.N. definition reads “in whole or in part”), there was a beginning and an end to the violence. After several days, when the mobs had done their work, regular army units appeared to establish a degree of order.

The sultan could not allow the entire country to get out of hand. The lesson had been taught, and it was time for the government to show its authority. The survivors

were allowed to rebuild once again, and for the Armenians it seemed that they had sustained but survived another in a long series of calamities. It was time to reconstruct and go forward.

Thus, Abdul-Hamid was not trying to bring about drastic changes in society. Rather, he was attempting desperately to preserve a society that was unsalvageable, a foundering ship of state that was being sunk by external volleys and internal disintegration. Pogroms—massacres— were the vain response to the challenges to the empire.

If we wish to accept this interpretation, then we must agree that there was a very important qualitative and quantitative difference between 1895 and 1915. In 1908, Abdul-Hamid, the old sultan, was overthrown by the Committee of Union and Progress or the Young Turks, a political movement that held forth the vision of a new Ottoman Empire, based on constitutional government and the principles of equality, fraternity, and justice. It is beyond the scope of an hour's talk to try to explain in detail where that experiment went wrong. If I can harken back to Robert Melson's comparative study of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust, he maintains that both the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews and the Turkish genocide of the Armenians really stemmed from revolutions in each country that went sour, that did not achieve their objectives, in the second instance giving rise to Adolf Hitler's "final solution."

In the Ottoman Empire, the hopes placed on constitutional government in 1908 soon dimmed, partly because of European exploitation and self-interest and partly because of internal discord. By 1913, that which had started as a democratic revolution culminated in a dictatorship of an ultra-right-wing segment of the Young Turk Party. It was that extremist element that took Turkey, the Ottoman Empire, into World War I as an ally of the German Empire. A fundamental calculation was that the anticipated triumph of the Central Powers against Great Britain, France, and the old nemesis,

Russia, would allow for Turkish annexation of territories that had been lost to the tsars in one war after another. Moreover, there was the scheme of creating a new Turkish empire, no longer based in Europe or even in the Arab provinces, which though Islamic did not bend easily to Turkish rule, but rather extending eastward toward the original homelands in central Asia.

Various pan-Islamic and pan-Turkic concepts were at work, but an overriding theme of Young Turk ideologues was the unification of the Turkic-speaking peoples within a common homeland. Ideology in case of the Armenian Genocide, just as in that of the Holocaust, was very important, perhaps not a singular explanation, yet nonetheless a critical justification of extreme measures against the targeted group.

If Adolf Hitler, whose ideology or objective was to establish a new world order based on a racial formula in which there was no room for Jews, the Young Turk ideology to create a new regional order without Armenians was similarly at work. Jews and Armenians were regarded as being unworthy of assimilation in the one case and unaccepting of assimilation in the other. The tenacious Armenians had existed as a subject people for centuries and had clung to their ethno-religious identity. The so-called Armenian Question had become an excuse for European intervention, and it was feared that sooner or later the Armenians would try to follow the example of the former subject European Christian nationalities to establish a separate state, thereby becoming a major barrier to any and all pan-Turkic objectives. Thus, the time had come to implement the ideology of substituting for the old, tired concept of Ottomanism, that is, of an Ottoman state with Turks, Greeks, Armenians, Arabs, Jews, and others all living side-by-side, a modern state or empire primarily based, as in many European countries, on a single ethnicity and a single religion.

Although many Young Turk leaders were agnostics or atheists, they used religion and the traditional precepts of Islam to spread fear and suspicion of the Armenian

people. Previously, under the sultans, the loyalty of the masses was directed toward the person of the sultan—to God and king. But now with the sultan overthrown, the Young Turks made the state the new focus of allegiance.

Once more, this is clearly reminiscent of Nazi ideology. Among the new Turkish intellectuals and ideologues, such as Zia Gokalp, are heard poetic lines of exaltation of the state: "I am a soldier, it is my commander. I obey without question all its orders. With closed eyes I carry out my duty." So the state is above all else, and for its sake anything is possible.

When was the decision made? When was it determined that the solution to the Armenian Question was to be found in the elimination of the Armenian people? When was it decided that the solution to the Jewish question was, in fact, deportation and mass killing? There is much debate about this issue and still much to be understood, but again, there are eerie parallels. The mass arrests, the segregation of Armenians in the Turkish army before they were killed, and then the edicts of deportation came after the Turkish armies had suffered major setbacks on the battlefield.

The Young Turk leader and Minister of War, Enver Pasha, seized the first opportunity to strike against Russia on the Caucasus front to break through to Baku, which is now in the news again—the oil-rich center in Azerbaijan. He ordered the campaign against the advice of his general staff and military commanders, who warned that the Armenian Plateau was impassible during the winter blizzard conditions and that the Turkish army would sustain terrible casualties as much from exposure as from combat. But driven by his ideology and so fixated on achieving his objective, Enver dismissed this counsel and took personal command.

Why do I raise that issue? Because there are those who think (and those who do not) that the "final solution" was adopted when Hitler's military timetable faltered. Belgium, Netherlands, France, Norway, Denmark—all according to a precise schedule,

but Russia was another matter, and the Nazi war machine bogged down en route to Moscow, much like Enver Pasha's armies on the Armenian Plateau in December-January, 1914-15.

Some would say there is a definite connection between Enver's frustration and embarrassment and the decision to implement a genocidal campaign against the Armenians. Without the active and sincere cooperation of Turkish scholars and the Turkish government, however, these things will remain circumstantial and cannot be known with indisputable certainty. Even then, the precise decision-making processes may never be established unless the secret records of the Young Turk inner circle are revealed and made available.

From a comparative point of view, several similarities between the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust immediately come to mind: government and party becoming synonymous, with most critical decisions made at a party level and then simply confirmed by the government or perhaps not even made known to the official government. In both cases, the victims had already been proved to be vulnerable. After Kristallnacht in 1938, who intervened on behalf of the Jews? After the massacres of 1895-96, and once again in 1909, when 30,000 Armenians were killed in the region of Cilicia, there had been no intervention except for condemnatory descriptions in the press and some relief supplies. So, for the perpetrators there was no doubt about the vulnerability of the intended victims.

Another common feature was the involvement of the armed forces and the creation of special organizations to oversee the operation. If there were the SS and the Einsatzgruppen in the Holocaust, there was the *Teshkilati Mahsusa*—the Special Organization—in the Armenian Genocide. It was an organization whose ostensive purpose was to further the war effort but whose secret mandate was to supervise the destruction of the Armenian people and to make certain that recalcitrant officials would

be forced to cooperate or removed from office and punished. The Special Organization recruited hardened criminals and tribesmen into killer battalions. These fell upon the deportee caravans, usually in places of no escape, such as mountain passes and river crossings.

The use of secrecy, of deception, of metaphors, of code words, was prevalent in both cases, as were negative and positive incentives. Imagine, even in our advanced society, if we were given to understand that anything and everything that our neighbors owned could be ours for the taking with no questions asked. And the scope of possessions that could be taken extended not only to household goods and livestock but also to women and children.

Let me say while on this topic that there were many good Turks and other Muslims who felt that what was happening was a crime against humanity and against God. Some tried to protect their neighbors, their friends, at some risk to themselves. Unfortunately, denial of the genocide for eight decades has not allowed the Armenians to honor those who tried to intervene, yet nearly every survivor story entails some kind of intervention that made possible escape from certain death. Intervention was not necessarily altruistic. It could have been for need of a maid, a servant, field hands, or even girls to give personal pleasures. Nonetheless, someone intervened to pluck these people from the death caravans. It is also true that many Armenians survived only by forfeiting their identity. They were registered as Muslims and given Turkish names. They forgot or dared not use their native language, and little children even lost the memory of parents as they were absorbed into the larger new society that was being created.

The genocidal process: I have not yet addressed this question, and as time is slipping by rapidly, I shall be unable to cover all the points noted at the outset of this talk. There remain serious questions about the process that require answers. These same questions are exploited by deniers and rationalizers of genocide. If there was an intent to

kill all Jews, for example, why were hundreds of thousands alive in the camps at the end of the war? Deniers would say, well, there was no such intention. The Jews who died simply succumbed to disease and the hardships of wartime, the same as large numbers of people belonging to every other group.

But this is not my primary question here. I would turn it around to ask: If the intent is to kill, why does the perpetrator make differences in the process of destroying the victims? Why was it that the Armenian men, in city after city, town after town, and village after village, were roped up, usually by fours and taken to the nearest killing field, to the nearest river crossing, to the nearest mountain gorge, and killed outright—shot, axed, stabbed, hacked to death? In that crude form of killing, there would be two, three, or four men who emerged from the bloody heaps as living witnesses of what had occurred.

If the intent is to destroy the Armenians, then why go through the belabored process of taking hundreds and thousands of women and children and forcing them to march to death, rather than killing them in the same way as the men? And yet in most areas this is just what happened.

Women, children, elderly forced to march. What does it mean, “forced to march.” Those of you who have been on sustained walks or hikes even for one day know the meaning of fatigue. But think, if you will, of summertime in the desert. Think of marching in that desert with inadequate food and virtually no water. And imagine yourselves trying to carry with you one or two babies, think of just ten-pounds. Then try to carry that ten pounds after two weeks of malnutrition and thirst.

I shall not dwell on this aspect but will simply point out that there were many choiceless choices that had to be made during the Armenian Genocide, as in all genocides. The women whom I have interviewed while they were already in their 80s and presumably should have forgotten or at least reconciled themselves to a distant past would sob in anguish as they spoke of having two children on the deportation route

when they were prodded on by bayonets to ford a fast-flowing river. They could carry only one child without being swept away—which one to take and which to leave? And how to leave? So the choiceless choice, as one child was placed under a tree or near a boulder. The last sound to haunt the mother for the rest of her life was the child's cry not to be abandoned.

The survivors confess that at the time of the forced marches, they had become virtually senseless. They were all expecting death as they trudged on without knowing the fate of the child left behind, who perhaps through some miracle might be taken in by someone. But then the world war ends, the woman is rescued from the desert tribesmen or a Muslim household and arrives in New York, Boston, or Fresno to begin a new life. The senses return and with them unbearable memories also surface. After 50 years, after 60 years, these women were still mourning a lost child in bitter agony and self-recrimination. Such are the wages of genocide.

The aftermaths of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust are quite different. The Turkish government has engaged for decades in an unrelenting campaign of denial and suppression of memory. In the case of the Holocaust, on the other hand, the government of Germany accepted responsibility for the crimes of its predecessor regime. Reparations were paid to survivors or, if no survivors, to the state of Israel. There has been no organized effort, to my knowledge, on the part of the German government to institutionalize denial of the Holocaust. Yet even so, denial has occurred and continues, and will probably become more intense as the survivors pass from the scene. Perpetrators want all survivors to die, and this is very near in the Armenian case, because, remember, it occurred a quarter of a century before the Holocaust, so that even survivors now still alive were small children in 1915.

By the end of the twentieth century, there will be virtually no Armenian survivors left. Then the perpetrator side can say, “Were you there? Did you see it? Is your testimony allowable in a court of law? You weren't there; you're not an eyewitness.” One of the reasons that people concerned with the Holocaust are video taping so many survivors is to create a permanent record of personal testimony for posterity.

What are the denial arguments? I could expound on them at length but there is no time for that.

Propaganda: Holocaust? Armenian Genocide?—just wartime propaganda, not intended to be believed in the long term, only to demonize the enemy and arouse public opinion.

Provocation: The victims were not so innocent as has been claimed. In fact, in many ways, they were the cause of their own fate. Jews were Bolsheviks—communists; they were spies and saboteurs. It is necessary for a government to be concerned with the security of the state. Yes, some Jews did die in World War II, that is not denied, but most who were imprisoned or punished were guilty of actions against the state. In any case, most Jews were not victimized at all. The same holds true for the Armenians. They became agents of the Russians. They rebelled against the homeland, requiring the government to take security measures. Did not the United States relocate or deport its Japanese citizens during World War II, so why are fingers pointed at Turkey? Any government would do the same, especially in time of war.

Absence of Intent: There was no intent to harm the particular group. It was simply a matter of relocation during which some things may have gotten out of hand, but this was not by intent. It may be admitted that in 1915 some bureaucrats bungled the operation, which was meant to protect the interests of the state and at the same time to safeguard the Armenians themselves, but there was never a plan to kill or eliminate the

Armenians, however disloyal they may have been. Much more can be said about this argument.

Numbers: It is a big hoax to assert that six million Jews perished at the hands of the Nazis; it is a big hoax to allege that a million and a half Armenians perished at the hands of the Young Turks. Maybe a half million Jews or at most a million and maybe 100,000 Armenians or at most 200,000. The inflated figures cited by Jews and Armenians are purely for political and financial gain.

Relativization: War is hell, so why hold up a million Jews or two or three hundred thousand Armenians against the many millions who perished during the war? Why not view these losses in relative proportion to the numbers of Germans, Soviet citizens, and other millions who died in World War II and the more than 2 million Muslims who fell victim to World War I? Neither Jews nor Armenians have cause for special pleading or consideration. Deniers have learned that outright denial no longer works well, and it is more productive to rationalize and to relativize what occurred. These forms of denial are all the more sinister in that they appeal to a certain sense of fairplay and a pedagogical approach that encourages examining and weighing all sides of an issue.

Profit Motive: Those who push for recognition of the Armenian Genocide or the Holocaust have ulterior political and economic motives. They want to swindle the government of Turkey, to swindle the government of Germany. They seek reparations; they seek indemnities; they seek land. They want to strengthen a foreign state—the Soviet Union and later the Armenian state in the one case and the state of Israel in the other case—and in so doing to destabilize Turkey, to weaken Germany. In fact, those who would advance scholarship on the so-called Armenian Genocide are in fact aiding and abetting the enemies of democracy.

Cold War Considerations: Let us recall that for decades the West was engaged in a Cold War. In that competition, Turkey was an important ally of the United States, a

NATO power. Therefore, any effort to push for recognition and action relating to the Armenian Genocide was portrayed as part and parcel of a clever strategy to defame a loyal friend, weaken the West, and facilitate Soviet expansion.

Academic Freedom: Deniers of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust pose as champions of academic freedom and free speech and, as such, proponents of truth who have been suppressed and silenced by the powerful Armenian and Jewish lobbies. The deniers announce their mission to be an end to unfair stereotypes of maligned groups or countries and a fostering of mutual respect and tolerance rather than perpetuation of ancient feuds and prejudices.

And so the list of arguments continues. . . .

Well, let me say in closing that a single talk on this topic must per force leave much unsaid or inadequately covered. Perhaps it is fitting to conclude on this Halloween night with the caveat, though it may sound trite, that all people committed to human rights need to come together on these issues, and this pertains especially to victim groups. Instead to emphasizing the distinctness and non-comparability of a particular crime against humanity—there has never been anything like it, and ours was worse than yours—it seems to me that the common threat to all overshadows any internal divisions or sense of exclusivism. That is the reason that I am particularly pleased to be here in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. But you should know that even the title of my lecture, "The Armenian Genocide," has raised some eyebrows, perhaps in this and other Jewish institutions. Such reservations must be overcome through collective understanding and increased knowledge about the subject.

Finally, I sometimes end with a quotation from a book that I edited, *The Armenian Genocide in Perspective*. In his introduction to the volume, Holocaust Council member

Terrence Des Pres made an important statement about the struggle of remembering against forgetting. He wrote:

National catastrophes can be survived if (and perhaps only if) those to whom disaster happens can recover themselves through knowing the truth of their suffering. Great powers, on the other hand, would vanquish not only the peoples they subjugate, but also the cultural mechanisms that would sustain vital memory of historical crimes. . . . Against historical crimes we fight as best we can, and a cardinal part of this engagement is “the struggle of memory against forgetting.”

I suppose I am here to say that we should remember; we are compelled to remember. I am hopeful that possibly through some kind of dialogue with Turkish scholars, perhaps even with the Turkish government, it will be understood that after eight decades the time has come, no longer to spend millions on denial, but rather to initiate acts of redemption that may open the way to ultimate reconciliation.

Thank you.