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The Armenian Genocide should be recognised by historians, not by states

By Marko Attila Hoare, 17th June 2008

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1. Resolutions passed by national parliaments recognising the Armenian Genocide are harmful to the cause of genocide prevention, and should not be supported.**
- 2. Educating the international public as to the meaning of genocide is the job of scholars and teachers, and cannot realistically be carried out by parliamentary resolutions.**
- 3. Rather than alienating Turkey by singling out its historic crime as uniquely worthy of recognition, Turkey's continued democratisation**

should be encouraged, so that its intellectuals and public are free openly to acknowledge and discuss the Armenian Genocide.

Five days ago on 12 June, the Swedish parliament overwhelmingly [rejected](#) a motion to recognise the 1915 Ottoman genocide of the Armenians. However counter-intuitive it may seem, the result of this vote should not be mourned by anyone who believes in the need to educate the world public on genocide and its history.

The Armenian Genocide happened. As Donald Bloxham argues in his book *The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians* (Oxford University Press, London, 2005) - which I recommend as an intelligent and balanced introduction to the debates surrounding the topic - there is no reason whatsoever why the genocide-deniers should be allowed to set the agenda, and force us to justify the use of the term 'genocide' when we discuss the fate of the Armenians. Let us be clear about this: genocide deniers are not simply those who prefer to use a term other than 'genocide' - such as 'systematic mass-murder' or 'extermination' - when describing what happened to the Armenians, or to the Rwandan Tutsis in 1994, or to the Srebrenica Muslims in 1995. Rather, a true genocide-denier is one who, in the course of denying that a genocide occurred, seeks to whitewash the crime, minimise its magnitude and the tragedy of the victims, and usually also to shift the blame away from the perpetrators and on to the victims themselves. In other words, genocide deniers have an ideological agenda, and a very obnoxious one at that.

The Armenian case is perhaps alone, at least among the cases of genocide with which I am at all familiar, in that some historians who are in other respects actually very serious and competent are ranked among the deniers. There is always a temptation among foreign historians, who depend upon the hospitality and collaboration of the academic community and archivists of the countries they are studying, to become spokespeople for the nationalist or regime agendas of the countries in question. This is something that reflects

badly on all those who fall into this trap. It is one thing for historians to be discreet or diplomatic when touching upon such issues, or to use euphemisms like ‘extermination’ or ‘destruction’ instead of genocide, if that is the only way to keep the archives open. But if you start agitating on a denialist platform to ingratiate yourself with your hosts, you have crossed a line. As a historian, I am proud to say that I have always referred openly to the Armenian genocide; to the genocide of the native Americans; to the Soviet genocide of the Chechens, Crimean Tatars and others; to the Ustasha and Chetnik genocides in Axis-occupied Yugoslavia during World War II; and to the Bosnian genocide of the 1990s - both when writing about these topics and when teaching my students. If that ever means that some doors are closed to me that might otherwise be open, so be it. Some of us, at least, value our integrity more than our careers or our connections.

This is important, because it is ultimately historians and other scholars and teachers upon whom the task falls of educating the public about past acts of genocide. There are very sound reasons why the recognition of historic genocides in foreign countries should not be undertaken by national parliaments. In the case of the Armenian genocide - which, I repeat, should not be denied by respectable scholars - there are two crucial reasons why national parliaments should not actually vote to recognise it. The first reason concerns the context of the Armenian genocide itself, while the second reason concerns the concept of ‘genocide’ more generally.

The Armenian genocide was one of the last, and probably the largest-scale, of the series of acts of mass murder and expulsion that accompanied first the contraction, then the destruction of the Ottoman Empire and its replacement by several nation-states in the Balkans and Anatolia. The emergence from the Ottoman Empire of Greece, Serbia, Montenegro and Bulgaria as autonomous or independent nation-states during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries involved the extermination or expulsion of much of the Ottoman Muslim population that had inhabited the territories of these countries under the Ottomans. A related phenomenon was the southward expansion of Russia during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, across the northern coast of the Black Sea and into the Caucasus and the Balkans, often in collusion with

local Christian peoples and similarly involving the killing or expulsion of vast numbers of Muslims - indeed, of entire Muslim peoples such as the Crimean Nogai and the Caucasian Ubykhs.

These acts of killing and expulsion culminated in the Balkan Wars of 1912-13, when Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria and Montenegro finally destroyed the Ottoman Empire in Europe. According to Justin McCarthy (*Death and Exile: The Ethnic Cleansing of Ottoman Muslims, 1821-1922*, Darwin Press, Princeton, 1996, p. 164), the Balkan Wars resulted in the death of 27% of the Muslim population of the Ottoman territories conquered by the Christian Balkan states - 632,408 people. This is a figure comparable to death-toll of the Armenian genocide from 1915, which Bloxham estimates as claiming the lives of one million Armenians or 50% of the pre-war Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire, with another half million Armenians deported but surviving (Bloxham, p. 1).

These massacres and expulsions of Ottoman Muslims, and particularly the Balkan Wars, were both precursors and catalysts for the Armenian genocide, which was launched only a couple of years after the Balkan Wars ended. This was because a) Muslim Turkish nationalists copied the model of European-style nationalism already adopted by the Balkan Christian nationalists, involving the same principle of ethno-religious homogeneity; b) the decades of expulsions of Ottoman and Caucasian Muslims to Anatolia, culminating in the Muslim exodus from the Balkans during and after the Balkan Wars, provided a constituency of embittered refugees and their descendants whom the Turkish nationalists could mobilise in the 1910s to attack Anatolian Christians; c) the settlement of these Muslim refugees in Anatolia began the process of Muslim colonisation of historically Armenian-inhabited lands that paved the way for the genocide; and d) the Turkish nationalists who ruled the Ottoman Empire in 1915 viewed the extermination of the Armenians as the necessary alternative to what they feared would be the establishment of an Armenian state in Anatolia under Russian protection, on the model of the Balkan Christian states and involving the same acts of killing and expulsion of Ottoman Muslims that the establishment of the latter had involved (NB to point this out is not to justify the genocide; any more

than pointing out Hitler's undoubtedly sincere belief in a 'Jewish threat' to the Aryan race justifies the Holocaust).

The question is, therefore, why national parliaments in Europe or elsewhere should recognise the Armenian genocide while according no recognition whatsoever to the series of Christian crimes against Ottoman and Caucasian Muslims that both led up to and catalysed it. Historians can debate how decisive this catalyst was, or whether and to what extent the earlier crimes against Muslims should rightfully be labelled 'genocide'. But this requires a degree of nuance and sensitivity to history of which blunt, clumsy parliamentary resolutions framed by historically ignorant parliamentarians are simply not capable. At the very least, the similarity of these crimes to the Armenian genocide should not be denied; nor should they be deemed less worthy of recognition. In singling out the Armenian genocide for recognition while ignoring the destruction of the European Ottoman and Caucasian Muslims, a parliament would be saying that the victims of the one are more worthy of recognition than the victims of the other. And this is something that the Turkish public cannot legitimately be expected to swallow - given that it is itself partially descended from the survivors of the Christian crimes in question, therefore much more aware of the double standard than are most Europeans.

This brings us to the second reason why parliaments should not recognise the Armenian genocide, or indeed any other historic genocide carried out by a foreign regime in a foreign country: the danger that a genocide will only be considered a 'real' genocide if recognised by a national parliament. All those who would like to turn a blind eye to genocidal crimes - whether in Iraqi Kurdistan, Bosnia, Rwanda, Darfur or elsewhere - tend to do so by arguing that they are not 'really' genocide. They like to present genocide as something that almost never happens. Hence, they apply the term 'genocide' to only a very few historic cases - generally, to only the Holocaust, the Armenian genocide, the Cambodian genocide of the Khmer Rouge and the Rwandan genocide - or not even to all of those. Conversely, those who actually wish to see greater international efforts to prevent genocide, as well as most scholars writing about the phenomenon of genocide today, usually

prefer to apply the term to a much larger number of historic crimes of mass murder. The point is not that these latter crimes are necessarily less worthy of the ‘genocide’ label than the destruction of the Armenians or Tutsis, but that they are less well known internationally.

In principle, therefore, recognition of the Armenian genocide should be followed by the recognition of other genocides: of the Herero people of German South West Africa in the early twentieth century; of the Chechens, Crimean Tatars and other Soviet peoples in the 1940s; of the Mayan population of Guatemala in the 1970s and 80s; and so forth, amounting to dozens or hundreds of cases. But we are unlikely ever to have international teams of scholarly experts deciding which of these cases warrant recognition as ‘genocide’ - more likely, genocide will only be recognised under the pressure of powerful and determined lobbies, as has been the case with the Armenians in several European countries. This would be bad for any genuine understanding of what genocide is and bad for the memory of the innumerable victims of what will be consigned to the category of ‘unrecognised genocides’. But it will be good for all those apologists for murderous regimes who will be only too happy to claim that it is only the Holocaust and the Armenian genocide that are recognised as genocide, and that we should all turn a blind eye to ‘lesser’ crimes.

No, parliamentary recognition of historic genocides is not the way forward. Rather than alienating Turkey by singling out its historic crimes for unique recognition, we should do better to encourage its further democratisation, to the point where its intellectuals can publicly acknowledge and discuss the Armenian genocide without fear of persecution or arrest. This, ultimately, is the only way to ensure that the memory of the Armenian victims is kept alive among those who most need to remember them.

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