

A discourse of denial: memories of the Armenian genocide

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Why should we return to the now 100-year-old genocide of the Ottoman Armenian population? The study and acknowledgement of this genocide, and what it symbolises, is critical to the practice of an emancipatory politics today.



The Armenian genocide is commemorated in Yerevan. Demotix/Pan Photo. All rights reserved.

The inheritor Turkish state continues to deny the genocide of the Ottoman Armenian population in 1915. This active denialism has been stepped up in the run-up to the centenary, taking on more sophisticated strategies termed ‘denial-light’ by G.M. Goshgarian. As the centennial approaches, friends and colleagues seem surprised that people like me devote time and energy to an issue that they consider at best, tangential. There are far more zeitgeist topics to work on, especially in the pressured world of academia where your career advancement is increasingly based on ‘impact’ on society and policy-makers, though no one seems entirely clear on what this is and how it can be gauged.

What is obvious though is that the 100-year-old genocide of the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire is unlikely to be a subject that many deem as being of great relevance. And yet, over the years, it is this genocide and what it symbolises, that I keep returning to in my own research and politics. I am more convinced than ever that the Armenian Genocide, its denial and recognition, represent issues that are of vital importance in the study, research, teaching and practice of politics today.

Last month, Jo Laycock and I convened a workshop in the emerging field of Armenian-Turkish Studies at Sheffield Hallam University. This new space was opened up in the academy by the pioneering Workshop of Armenian and Turkish Studies (WATS),

established in 2000 at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor by Fatma Müge Göçek, Ron Suny and Gerard Libaridian. This worked in tandem with the increasing number of scholars working on the Armenian genocide who had no hesitancy in calling it just that, with all the political and social repercussions that it brought.

There have been ground-breaking projects on the shared past of Armenians and Turks in recent years, and key to wider political developments has been the emergence of Turkish academics engaging with these issues in a critical and decisive manner. In late 2008 an 'apology campaign' mounted by four Turkish intellectuals circulated widely, gathering over 30,000 signatures of Turks and Kurds 'apologising' for the events of 1915. The works of novelists like Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk and Elif Shafak have also had widespread international impact. They, along with other intellectuals, have inevitably been chastened by the threats from the state: Article 301 of the Turkish penal code makes it a crime to "insult the Turkish nation". Turkey has the largest number of journalists in prison, and the 'Armenian issue' remains a highly controversial topic. In January 2007, the most prominent voice for Armenians in the Turkish public sphere and symbol of Armenian-Turkish reconciliation, Hrant Dink, was murdered by nationalists, exposing a murky underworld and a 'deep state'.

Selective Memory

Growing up in the multicultural world of the Arab Gulf, I remember on many occasions wishing that I had a 'clear cut' answer to fill in the space in the 'nationality' column in my school diary. My friends were Indian, or British, Egyptian, Bahraini, Sri Lankan and so on. It seemed to me that everyone was sure of what they were and 'going home' every summer was an unproblematic statement. My stock answer of "Armenian Cypriot" was the official line, though even to my young ears this sounded both hollow and weighty. Being Armenian felt like a burden which set us aside from our friends. This was epitomised in my parents' diktat of "speak Armenian" whenever they heard my brothers and I conversing in English (it remains our natural language of communication).

Growing up outside an Armenian community also meant that every time we met Armenians anywhere, or when we returned to Cyprus where there is a vibrant Armenian community, we were aware of our failings, of not being Armenian enough. Being a 'good Armenian' meant knowing the language, culture and history, being embedded in a strong extended family, and active in Armenian community life. My dad's rows of Armenian history and literature texts (nearly all in English, reflecting his schooling in colonial Cyprus) which lined our bookshelves, and the newspapers and journals he subscribed to (mostly from the US) seemed an attempt to document something that had been irrevocably lost.

The experience of being 'third culture kids', with an acute sense of the liminality or hybridity of identity, is of course a common one. What distinguished us from the other expatriate or mixed background kids in the 1980s was that there was no collective narrative in the public sphere to have recourse to. Few had even heard of Armenians or Armenia, which was Soviet until 1991, and foreign to us Armenians from the Ottoman, as

opposed to the Russian, Empire. Our identities seemed quaint and somehow suspect, even to us. We did not fit into the nation-state model of the world; diaspora was a concept and term that had yet to be rejuvenated. We could barely articulate our own story with any knowledge or conviction, let alone present it to others. Growing up without an Armenian diasporic community meant there was no collective narrative, no accepted version of events like a Holocaust, no clear homeland or home. And alongside all these absences there was the looming presence of the Turkish state, denying us our collective memories and narratives, the platforms from which to express them and to have them heard.

At the Sheffield workshop, I realised that my childhood experience of growing up in the pre-internet age and lacking a master-narrative to counter the denialist stronghold in the public realm was shared by many of my contemporaries. Being Armenian in the diaspora was a 'fuzzy' identity whose tenets and pillars were unclear, distant or simply too foreign to relate to. The nationalist discourse espoused by Armenian diasporan political projects, however worthy, felt too formulaic, too forced (and too masculine) to relate to.

Throughout my childhood, my paternal grandmother and maternal great-grandmother shared their stories of the old country. But these stories were told sparingly, as they were invariably accompanied by great sorrow, which often overcame the sense of duty about the act of recounting. In the telling, these women were transformed into the little girls they were when they witnessed these horrors. In her final days, my paternal grandmother was more focused on stories of the shadowy family members whose lives had been cut tragically short. We particularly liked the figure of her gregarious uncle Hagop who had a flowing ginger beard, and whose booming singing would herald his arrival. My youngest brother has a touch of red in his facial hair, and so this spirited ancestor is remembered every time my brother stops shaving. Hagop, who must have been in his early twenties when he was killed, so full of vigour for a life un-lived, a life that we can only imagine for him.

My grandmothers' stories were very much edited, full of gaps and holes which I rarely felt able to probe, however curious I was about details. It would be too cruel to prolong the revisiting of these tales. Editing is a skill that most of us acquire to deal with what life throws at us. My father only recently told me that his father continued for years to pay fixers in the port city of Kyrenia for any news of his relatives from whom he had been separated for decades. Every now and again there would be an alleged lead, which would mean more money shelled out and more hopeful trips to Kyrenia (with my father as a small boy in tow). My heart breaks for this man who I never met, whose cycles of hope and despair prolonged a pain that was never fully articulated or acknowledged.

Amidst the cloudy knowledge we picked up as children, it was our survivor grandmothers that made the past tangible. The grandmother as a transmitter of contested memories can act as a gatekeeper of the lived past and a connection to it. Human rights lawyer Fethiye Çetin's *My Grandmother* has been nothing short of revolutionary in its rippling impact in Turkey and beyond. Çetin's memoir deals with her grandmother's deathbed confession that she had been born Armenian and survived the genocide by being taken

in by a Turkish family, keeping her secret her whole life. The powerful impact of this modest book lies in its poignant human story. Columnist Tuba Akyol stated: “stories can do what large numbers or concepts cannot do...Concepts are cold, stories can touch you inside”. Ayşe Gül Altınay has written of how the book successfully uses “Arendtian storytelling to open up a creative space for historical critique and reconciliation”.

The need to articulate one’s story, where one came from, is essential to the dignity of the human being. Gayatri Spivak, when asking “Can the Subaltern speak?”, argues that a narrative of identity is a necessary condition for agency and subjectivity. Hannah Arendt says that the need to hear one’s story from others is key to constructions of identity and also to social relations. Michel Foucault and Edward Said have brilliantly deconstructed epistemological projects, revealing the power structures and agendas they reflect and perpetuate. By denying the genocide that killed our ancestors and dispersed the remnants all over the globe, the Turkish state continues its genocide of Armenians, negating their right to have a clear and undisputed past.

A contested past means the present is only half known and owned, the future uncertain. Being able to write, read and tell our stories and to have them acknowledged and understood by others restores wholeness to ourselves and reinforces our shared humanity. Postcolonial studies was all about retrieving, reclaiming and re-appropriating histories and identities from below, which had not been written into state narratives: the lives of women, the oppressed, minorities of all descriptions, in short, those who have been excluded from master-narratives. My father, when browsing in the history section of a bookshop, would flip to the index of books he was interested in to check whether there was any entry for ‘Armenians’. He was seeing whether for this author, we were worth a citation, even as a footnote in history. I did not recognise this for the political act it was then, but I sometimes find myself doing the same thing now.

All nations are built on forgetting and remembering selectively. In the Turkish case, the denial of the realities of the Ottoman past are at the foundation of the nationalist state and are constantly reproduced in the hegemonic narrative. Historically the co-existence of different narratives has not been tolerated, and even now (with the democratic opening since 2000) they are interpreted as developments that need to be suppressed, monitored and controlled. Despite this, recent oral history projects have unearthed an emerging space for counter-memories and counter-narratives. This has led to a proliferation of exciting projects in the sphere of art and culture, but also projects with a more overt political slant, which have extended to transnational civil society, despite the lack of change in high politics.

The ‘decentring of the state’ in the past eight years has meant that there are multiple engaged actors in Turkish civil society, some of which have been at the vanguard of challenging state discourse and leading critical initiatives on Armenian-Turkish relations. Important as these developments are, they are still confined to the tiny minority and rarely permeate beyond a self-selecting group of intellectuals, activists, artists, human rights and civil society actors. Some might say, as Chris Sisserian does, that

Turkish civil society has reached “a glass ceiling of understanding” when it comes to Armenian matters; that we are preaching to the choir and there is an impenetrable boundary with the rest of the populace.

But what is happening in Turkey today goes beyond the proliferation of counter-narratives and counter-memories circulating and undermining the denialist discourse. In the last few years, there have been a number of Armenian diasporans visiting Turkey, as tourists, as pilgrims, and as detectives trying to piece together their past lives. Ani King-Underwood’s powerful documentaries for Al Jazeera demonstrate the need, in her words, to “concretise memories”. For her mother and aunt, the journey to find the house their mother had forcibly left behind was an essential experience which restored their own identities and confirmed that the stories they had grown up with were actually true. Finding their family home which had taken on a mythical quality in their mother’s narratives, made those lives, and the past, real. The fuzzy qualities of being an Armenian originating from these lands is sharpened when there is physical evidence, in the face of denialism.

This desire for the physical ‘proof’ of past Armenian lives and culture in the Ottoman lands explains the recent phenomenon of the restoration of Armenian churches in Anatolia, financially backed mostly by North American diasporans. At the heart of this project (and others like it) seems the need to validate (and consecrate) the past co-existence of Armenians alongside Turks, Kurds, Greeks and others in Anatolian lands. One of the most notable of the projects has been the recent restoration of the sixteenth-century Armenian Apostolic Cathedral St. Giragos in Diyarbakır, the biggest Armenian church in the Middle East with a capacity of 3000. It is important to recognise that in the wider Armenian-Turkish terrain, the struggle for negotiating co-existence is premised upon the perceived need to document past co-existence, and the past lives of Armenians in these, their historic homelands. The fact that these past inhabitants were forcefully expelled or annihilated makes this an extremely charged and complex mission. By renovating the churches, Armenian diasporans, together with their Kurdish and Turkish colleagues and associates, are physically documenting a history that official narratives challenge.

The Armenian perspective

For many of us working in these fields, there is the danger for complacency to set in. The tide has turned and the British academy feels like a very different place than it did 15 years ago thanks to the pioneers who have changed the discourse and its framing. Then, references to the ‘so-called genocide’ were the norm and anything Armenian was presented in the denialist framework, and thereby delegitimised and belittled. Many western diasporans have close Turkish friends and colleagues, something unimaginable even ten years ago. Our personal and political lives have been enriched and deeply blessed by these relationships. In a way, these friendships and associations hark back to the pre-genocide days, to our grandmothers’ villages where Armenians and Turks (and others) were friends and neighbours, and where many Turkish families sought to save

their Armenian neighbours from the savagery that was to come. And yet, beyond this small safe space that we have actively created and claimed through our friendships and activism, there is still much work to be done. I was reminded of this a few weeks ago.

A colleague told me of her English friend, a postgraduate student who had gone to Istanbul, staying at Airbnb. He had got on tremendously well with his young male hosts and their friends, who shared his left-wing politics and had taken him on a tour of Gezi park. One night, the discussion in the flat turned to 'the Armenian issue'. A huge fight ensued and the young man was asked to leave the next morning. He was shocked that his liberal, progressive and charming hosts were transformed beyond recognition, to the extent of kicking him out of the accommodation. This story while poignant in itself, is indicative of a wider reality: that Turkey's 'Armenian Opening' has been patchy, that there are chasms and dark recesses that are impossible to discuss in mainstream company; that the protestors at Gezi Park demanding democratic freedoms are in many cases profoundly intolerant of counter-narratives and threats to the integrity of their national story.

In the same week, at a conference in Europe, I met a professor at one of our leading universities, who works on Turkey. Within minutes I was astonished to encounter a version of the 'denialist-light' argument, framed around the 'it was a war, and there were deaths on both sides' discourse. My surprise was palpable; it had been a long time since I had heard that position articulated, at least to my face. I tried to engage him in a discussion but it was clear that he had taken a position many years ago, and that it had served him well. He was not interested in hearing 'the Armenian perspective' as he called it.

The challenge here is that 'the Armenian perspective' is a moral stance, a political position, a counter-hegemonic narrative which represents the experience of the dispossessed and the marginalised. This goes well beyond the Armenian genocide and its recognition. It challenges questions of what we teach, what we write, how we research and what we believe. If the voices from below are not acknowledged and our own part in their silencing unexposed, then we are complicit in this project of denialism. That is why the acknowledgement of the Armenian genocide is a tiny cog in our commitment to an emancipatory politics which attempts to redress the balance between the powerful and the weak and rewrite pre-ordained political scripts and identities.

My thanks to my colleagues and friends who participated in the workshop of 9 June 2014, especially my co-convenor Jo Laycock. We are also grateful to Sheffield Hallam University's History Department which funded and hosted the workshop.