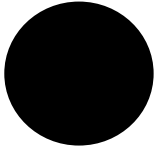


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Turks, Armenians, and the “G-Word”

Belinda Cooper and Taner Akcam

History has its long-buried minefields posted with warnings that trespassers can enter only at their peril. Given the risks, it is heartening that a new generation of Turks and Armenians are looking afresh at a major historical event that has divided them for decades—the mass killing of Armenians that occurred in the crumbling Ottoman Empire between 1915 and 1920. The Turkish Republic that arose from that empire has adamantly refused almost from the start to admit responsibility for the massacres, characterizing them as the result of Armenian efforts to aid Turkey’s enemies during and after the First World War. Yet historians elsewhere consider the killings the first genocide of the twentieth century; indeed, the term itself was inspired by the blood-letting in Anatolia.

The argument has never been purely academic for the two peoples themselves: Turkish intellectuals who question the official version of the Armenian genocide face censure, and the Turkish government has gone to great lengths to fight foreign governments’ adoption of resolutions acknowledging the genocide, while Armenians in a large worldwide diaspora have long made Turkish accountability a touchstone for improved relations between the two peoples. Turkey’s bid to join the European Union has brought fresh attention to the ongoing dispute. To many Europeans, the Turkish refusal to address the Armenian genocide has called into question Ankara’s commitment to civil and human rights. At the same time, some Europeans have seized on the dispute as an excuse to block or delay

the accession of a nation with a Muslim majority.

Fortunately, the end of the Cold War not only stirred up forces pushing Turkey toward a confrontation with its past but also provided a fresh context in which to view it, and therefore new possibilities for resolution. In the past two decades, the experiences of numerous countries moving out of periods of violent conflict or dictatorial rule have spawned the new field of “transitional justice.” Activists and scholars alike are interested in the ways in which countries deal with the legacies of past injustice and how this process relates to the development of peaceful, democratic societies.

Transitional justice provides a useful conceptual framework within which to locate the conflict between Turks and Armenians. From this perspective, Turkey—like postwar Germany, post-Soviet Eastern Europe, or post-apartheid South Africa—must wrestle with, and ultimately come to terms with, the dark spots in its history before it can move forward into a more democratic future. In the process, Turks’ and Armenians’ perceptions of one another will be able to emerge from a frozen hostility stemming from events that took place nearly a century ago.

Armenians in the Ottoman Empire

In the late nineteenth century, as Western powers increasingly threatened to carve up the declining Ottoman Empire among themselves, national and religious minorities within its borders restlessly began demanding greater autonomy. The Armenians,

a Christian minority in a Muslim empire, had lived for centuries as peasants, traders, and craftspeople, mainly in today's Eastern Anatolia region. Like all non-Muslims, they possessed the status of *dhimmi*, roughly comparable to second-class citizenship but with broad autonomy in cultural, civil, and financial affairs. Despite discrimination of various kinds, they generally lived at peace with their Muslim neighbors. In the nineteenth century, however, changes in Ottoman society unsettled this balance. Christians, including Armenians, became the primary beneficiaries of preferential trade agreements forced upon the empire by the Western powers, whose nationals preferred dealing with Christians. As their economic and social power increased, Armenians became the targets of resentment and attack by Muslim Turks and other minorities. Fledgling Armenian reform and revolutionary groups demanded protection and legal equality for the Armenian population. European leaders played upon this tension to further weaken the Ottoman Empire and took up the Armenians' demands.

Adding to this external pressure, members of Russia's significant Armenian population, sometimes supported by the Tsarist government, agitated in support of reforms to benefit Ottoman Armenians. Hence this Christian minority was increasingly viewed as a dangerous, disloyal element. To rally the Muslim majority and unify the empire, between 1894 and 1896 Sultan Abdul Hamid encouraged massacres in which as many as 200,000 Armenians died, an initial bloodletting widely condemned in Europe and Armenia.

Ottoman fears of foreign intervention, as well as hostility to Armenians, were quickened by the First Balkan War of 1912—which cost the empire most of its European territories and much of its Christian population—and became acuter in 1914 when the Western powers forced the weakened Ottoman Empire to sign a pact with Russia

promising Armenians an autonomous region in Eastern Anatolia. During the First World War, Turkey allied itself with Germany, whose leaders gave wholehearted support to Ottoman resistance to Western pressure. As Russia entered the war on the Allied side, the two empires each encouraged the other's Armenian population to rebel. Nevertheless, the main Armenian organization in Turkey remained loyal to the empire, and Armenians served in the Ottoman army, even as the Russians organized voluntary Armenian military units within the Tsarist army and encouraged revolt by Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. This reinforced the long-held Ottoman belief that the Armenian population was pro-Russian, and Armenians in areas bordering Russia were targeted for violent repression and massacre. Armenian refugees fled to the eastern Turkish city of Van, where, in a bid for Russian assistance, they rebelled.

In 1915, citing the Van rebellion and suspected Armenian collaboration with the Russians as justification, the Ottoman government called for the deportation of the Armenian population from Anatolia to the Syrian and Iraqi deserts. Most scholars agree that these deportations were viewed by the ruling Ottoman party as an opportunity to eliminate the Armenian population through organized killings and death by privation. First-hand accounts of these events by European and American diplomats, politicians, missionaries, and military officers describe church burnings, mass drownings, beatings, rapes, and mutilation in graphic detail. The perpetrators were government forces (including gendarmes and a special paramilitary force) and the local population, especially Kurds. An investigative commission formed by the new Turkish government following the Ottoman defeat found that 800,000 Armenians had perished between 1915 and 1918; some estimate the toll to have been as high as 1.5 million. The killings continued between 1919 and 1922

in the war between Turkey and the short-lived postwar country of Armenia, while some Armenians carried out revenge attacks against Turks.

Turkish military successes and the founding of the Turkish Republic by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923 opened a new chapter. Emerging from the ashes of a failed empire, the republic's founders sought to establish a new national identity. They hoped in this way to eliminate the tensions between different ethnic groups that had contributed to the demise of the empire. But since, in the Kemalist view, Turkish specificity had been erased by centuries of Ottoman identification with a more universal concept of Islam, the founders of the new republic felt it necessary to reach back to a pre-Islamic, pre-Ottoman concept of Turkishness. An important aspect of the process was the "Turkification" of the language, in which the Arabic alphabet was replaced in 1928 with a Latinized script. While this was an apparent step toward modernization and westernization, the move also effectively cut off succeeding generations from their history. Most Turks today cannot read their own grandparents' diaries, let alone the historical records in Turkish archives.

Atatürk himself admitted and decried the killings of Armenians several times in the early postwar years, and his Ankara-based nationalist movement even agreed that accountability was necessary. At the urging of the occupying Allies, abortive trials of those responsible for the Armenian genocide were held in 1919, and they provided important factual evidence. But after the founding of the republic, denial set in. The actions of Ottoman forces were framed as a courageous defense of the empire against Western and Russian ambitions and the encroachments of Christianity. A number of the republic's founders had been involved in the Armenian genocide; they were glorified as heroic founding fathers,

and their crimes disappeared from official histories.

Armenians, meanwhile, scattered in a worldwide diaspora, with large communities settling in the United States, Europe, and Russia (a small Armenian community also remained in Turkey, and now numbers roughly 80,000, living mainly in Istanbul). As with Jews after the Second World War, the trauma of the genocide became a defining element in diaspora identity, hardened by continued Turkish denial. Nursing a sense of injustice, some Armenians took matters into their own hands. In 1921, a survivor, Soghomon Tehlirian, assassinated Talaat Pasha, one of the architects of the genocide, on a Berlin street. Decades later, in the early 1980s, an Armenian extremist group killed 31 Turkish diplomats, creating an additional and particularly traumatic point of friction between Turks and Armenians.

Yet, beginning in the 1980s, Armenian groups also turned to diplomacy, lobbying national governments to adopt commemorative resolutions that termed the killings in the early part of the century genocide. Turkey responded by threatening sanctions, including the closing of military bases; given Ankara's importance as a NATO ally, this generally sufficed to prevent political action. (As recently as 2000, Turkish pressure stymied an effort by the U.S. Congress to adopt such a statement.) Nevertheless, roughly a dozen countries, including France, Canada, Italy, Switzerland, and most recently Germany, have approved resolutions acknowledging the genocide, in some cases urging Turkey to do the same.

An additional complication ensued when the former Soviet republic of Armenia attained independence in 1991. That year, Armenia fought and won a war with Azerbaijan to annex the largely Armenian-populated Azeri enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. Turkey sided with Muslim Azerbaijan and closed its border with Armenia. The border has remained difficult to cross, Turkish-

Armenian relations continue to be frigid, and contact between Turkey and Armenia has been limited.

The G-Word

The term “genocide” was coined in 1944 by Raphael Lemkin, a Jew born in Poland, who as a law student in his native country was struck by a paradox on reading about the trial of Talaat Pasha’s killer in Berlin. “It is a crime for Tehlirian to kill a man, but it is not a crime for his oppressor to kill more than a million men?” Lemkin is said to have asked at the time. Although the word itself did not exist in 1915, most qualified historians today agree that the events of 1915–20 constituted genocide. In 2003, the International Center for Transitional Justice, a non-governmental human rights organization headquartered in New York, commissioned a legal opinion that concluded that the killing of Armenians did fit the accepted legal definition of the term.¹ As defined in a United Nations convention, “genocide” connotes an intent to destroy a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group, in whole or in part. It does not presuppose the murder of an entire people, nor even murder; the operative language refers to the intentional attempt to destroy a collective identity.² Although the Holocaust remains the most notorious example, after a century of genocides or near-genocides—in Cambodia, Iraq, Bosnia, and Rwanda—we are sadly aware that the crime can take many forms.

Nevertheless, Turkey emphatically denies that the killings of Armenians under the Ottoman Empire were an intentional attempt to destroy a people. It maintains that the Armenians attempted to subvert the empire in wartime and themselves massacred countless Turks, and that Ottoman authorities simply wished to relocate Armenians from a vulnerable border with Russia. Somewhat contradictorily, the Turkish version argues both that many deaths occurred on both sides in this “civil war,” and that the relocation involved little loss of life.

This view is not confined to government officials. Decades of silence, limited access to historical material, and more recently, active propaganda campaigns have persuaded much of the Turkish public of the truth of the official view. The government’s ability to frame the opposing campaign as an attack by foreign enemies on Turkish honor and national existence has given its interpretation broad popular resonance.

For Armenians, meanwhile, the word “genocide” has acquired an almost sacrosanct aura. Thus the struggle over use of the “g-word” today frequently has little to do with historical debate, but rather resembles a symbolic struggle over mutually exclusive collective identities that can deteriorate into political one-upmanship. Willingness or unwillingness to employ the term has for many become a litmus test, with Armenians taking the view that Turks must explicitly admit that the Ottoman Empire committed genocide before further discussion is possible, while Turks discount the credibility of anyone who employs the term.

The Burdens of the Past

Despite its suppression of the Ottoman historical legacy, the newborn Turkish Republic inherited the authoritarian mantle of the empire’s military and bureaucracy. The Ottoman experience with the Western powers had left Turkey’s leaders with a paranoid fear of internal and external “enemies.” Turkey’s multiethnic population was viewed as abetting those threats and as an obstacle to the creation of a homogenous Turkish identity. The government in effect declared various social and ethnic groups nonexistent. It was made illegal, for example, to claim the existence of Kurdish ethnicity or to talk about class struggle, and the assertion of Islamic values was prohibited. While no law specifically forbade mention of the Armenian genocide, this taboo was particularly pervasive.

Over the years, Turkish security forces fought leftist groups, Islamic fundamental-

ists, and Kurdish separatists. In each case, conflict ultimately led to the lifting of taboos. Today, a moderate Islamic party heads the government, Kurds may engage in their own cultural practices, and leftist parties contribute to the political debate. Only the Armenian genocide taboo remains.

There are a number of reasons for the taboo's persistence, some of which can be ascribed to the historically determined psychology of Turkish society.³ Many Turks see the accusations of genocide as a continuation of the historical tendency of the Christian West to denigrate Turks as barbaric. This contemptuous view of Turks (and Muslims) extends back to the Renaissance and continued through the First World War, when British prime minister David Lloyd George described the Ottoman Turks as "a cancer on humanity, a wound that has worked its way into the flesh of the earth that it has misruled." Ottoman Turks and later Atatürk himself took this view very seriously and were determined to combat it. But Turks still feel misunderstood and misrepresented, and believe that Westerners in particular despise them. Thus they reject the accusation of genocide as a slanderous attempt to equate Turkey with Nazi Germany.

Moreover, Armenians serve as a persistent symbolic reminder of the most traumatic event in Turkish history: the collapse of the empire and the loss of most of its territory. The final Ottoman century was dominated by constant fear of obliteration and dismemberment by European powers. This fear of annihilation runs deep, evoking memories that Turks prefer to forget. Speaking metaphorically, the Turkish Republic conceives of itself as a phoenix rising from the ashes of the failed Ottoman Empire, and the Armenians are a reminder of the ashes. Turkish culture also often shows a predilection to a fatalism rooted in the folk Islam of Anatolia.

More importantly, questioning the official version of the Armenian genocide risks opening an entire corpus of official history

to scrutiny. Since the republic was erected on a deliberately distorted version of the past, this would mean calling into question the very foundations of modern Turkey. The mere acknowledgment that some of the founders of the republic, heretofore glorified as heroes, were involved in genocide could threaten the legitimacy of the state—just as the awareness, for example, that America's founders were slaveholders, and that revered historical figures sanctioned the genocide of Native Americans, inevitably challenges our view of our own national identity. For a nation like Turkey, so unused to self-questioning, this could be seriously unsettling.

Many Turks regard discussion of historical injustice as a Pandora's box. "Where will it end?" they ask. Armenians are not the only aggrieved group, after all; the history of mass violence in Ottoman Turkey was a long one, and modern Turkey, too, has its dark spots. A freer historical debate on the Armenians could lead to a broader reconsideration of the repression not only of other non-Muslim populations in the empire but of Kurds, Greeks, and Alevites in the republic, and it could open up debate over more recent clashes between fascist nationalists and leftists, over disappearances, death squads, and torture. For a society structured along authoritarian lines, such a wide-ranging debate raises fears of potentially destabilizing consequences. A more concrete reason for the taboo's persistence—on occasion articulated by Turkish political leaders—is the fear that acknowledgment of the genocide would prompt Armenian territorial demands and calls for restitution of property confiscated a century ago.

Yet Turkish society has undergone rapid change in recent years. The end of the Cold War lessened Western willingness to indulge Turkish authoritarianism, and Turkey's desire to enter the European Union has encouraged a new openness to a more democratic culture. These changes have prompted the rise of an active civil society,

encompassing business associations and foundations, newspapers, trade unions, and human rights organizations. In this regard, Turkey has come to resemble a typical European state.

Until recently, state and society in Turkey had increasingly diverged, in a schizophrenic process similar to that seen in the later stages of East European communism. As a survival strategy, citizens publicly embraced the official version of Turkish history, but increasingly questioned it in private. Concerning the Armenian genocide, Turkey's regional and ethnic subgroups have passed down oral narratives that diverge from the government line; thus residents of Anatolia speak openly in private about their former Armenian neighbors and their fate. In the more relaxed current atmosphere, the coexisting official and private historical versions are beginning to confront one another. In the process, what Turkish scholars have called the "curtain of silence" surrounding the Armenian genocide has become more permeable, and discussion of the genocide has become possible.

Nevertheless, the Turkish government wishes to ensure that its view of the Armenian killings remains dominant. In response to rising demands from without for acknowledgment of the genocide, and the beginning of questioning from within, official silence has given way to open denial. Where schools previously provided no information on Armenians, in 2002 the Ministry of Education mandated a grade-school curriculum that actively denied the genocide, calling Armenian claims "baseless" and emphasizing Armenian separatism and the massacre of Turks under the Ottoman Empire. A 2003 directive encouraged student participation in essay contests on the "Armenian Rebellion during the First World War." Teachers were required to attend seminars on the "Fight Against Baseless Claims of Genocide." At one seminar, a teacher who questioned this formulation was briefly jailed and suspended. This oc-

curred despite Ankara's promises to revise its textbooks to eliminate bias, in accord with EU regulations.

Mention of the Armenian genocide had not traditionally been criminalized—the taboo was more psychological than legal, enforced by social pressures—but here, too, the government seems to be digging in its heels. In 2004, the EU criticized Article 305 of the revised Turkish criminal code, which prohibited "acts against fundamental national interests" by which a person "directly or indirectly [receives] benefits from foreign persons or institutions." In the official explanation of the law, the acts covered included "spreading propaganda to the press or publications which purport to claim that Armenians were subject to genocide." After heavy domestic and international criticism, the passage was removed from the published version of the law. Thus it is not yet clear how the law will be applied in such cases, though it will certainly have a chilling effect. The first formal charge was brought against an Ankara lawyer for decrying the Ottoman "massacres of Armenians," under a different section of the code prohibiting instigation of ethnic hatred (an offense contained in many European criminal codes). Previously, this provision had been used primarily against dissidents who referred to a "multicultural" Turkey. Most significantly, Turkey's renowned novelist Orhan Pamuk, whose works celebrate the richness of Ottoman history, was charged under yet another legal provision for "publicly denigrating Turkish identity" after he openly condemned the killings of Armenians and Kurds in a February 2005 interview with a Swiss newspaper. With EU accession now on the agenda and ethnic discrimination forbidden under EU human rights laws, these cases will be an important test for the Turkish judicial system.

The Turkish government also subsidizes and promotes homegrown "scholars" to produce propaganda that accords with the official view. It views scholarship outside the

official framework as subversive and threatening to the state. Scholars writing objectively on the genocide, or even on Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, are regularly accused of being in the pay of Armenians. Conversely, history written by officially approved historians, even if clearly propaganda, is touted as a legitimate source of information.

As Turkish scholars themselves have begun to challenge official history, the government has gone on the defensive. This past summer, three leading Turkish universities organized a conference on Armenians in the Ottoman Empire that was to be attended solely by scholars of Turkish origin who dissented from the official historical line. At a special parliamentary sitting shortly before the conference was to begin, the minister of justice accused participants of “plunging a dagger into the nation’s back,” while deputies from the governing and opposition parties condemned them as “traitors to the nation.” The organizers, concerned for the safety of the participants in this overheated climate, postponed the conference.

In addition to stirring strong criticism abroad, the incident sparked an unusually broad debate within the country. Even newspapers and columnists that normally support the government’s position on the Armenian question criticized its behavior as a violation of freedom of speech. Moreover, those parliamentarians and officials who had criticized the conference apparently did not speak for the entire government, reflecting internal dissension on the larger issue of EU membership. The conference was rescheduled for the fall, and other top Turkish politicians, including Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan, gave it their support.

Besides its campaign to radicalize domestic audiences through active propaganda disputing the “allegations of genocide,” the Turkish government has also turned its activities outward. In April 2005, Turkey’s national assembly, in a letter signed by both the current prime minister and the leader of

the opposition, demanded that Great Britain apologize to Turkey for the “blue book” on Turkish crimes against Armenians commissioned by the British government during the First World War. Yet it soon became apparent that the blue book, although written for propaganda purposes, contained a great deal of truth.⁴

At the same time, the Turkish government recently proposed to the Armenian government that Armenia and Turkey set up a joint historians’ commission to consider their common past. Given Ankara’s otherwise increasingly aggressive posture and strident language on the issue, however, it is doubtful that the commission it envisions would meet the demands of those pushing for an honest reassessment of history. This is particularly unlikely given the fact that the government has in the past restricted scholarly access by denying the existence of certain documents or refusing permission to work in the Ottoman archives. Although conditions are reportedly improving, scholars tell of being expelled from the archives and of having their notebooks confiscated. Staff members have refused to produce specific documents and have frequently harassed and interrogated scholars, demanding to know why they were seeking information and for whom they were working.

Broadly speaking, the Turkish government seems to view truth seeking as unproductive and even dangerous (a Turkish official told one of the authors that bringing up the Armenian genocide could anger the Turkish population and turn it against the Armenians). Yet it distinguishes between historical efforts and a more future-oriented “reconciliation” with the country of Armenia or members of the diaspora. Thus Ankara has tolerated or endorsed efforts at concrete cooperation with Armenia and diaspora Armenians on economic, educational, and cultural issues through organizations such as the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission and the Turkish-Armenian Business Development Council. Meetings

take place between professional groups from the two countries, and on occasion their foreign ministers meet to discuss bilateral relations. But, in general, Turkey has kept its relations with Armenia to a minimum.

Transitional Justice

Turkey is scarcely alone in its reluctance to face its history openly as it moves from authoritarianism to real democracy. In recent decades, as communism has ebbed, as Latin American dictatorships have been replaced by democracies, and as South African apartheid has yielded to majority rule, various societies have grappled with overcoming complicated and traumatic historical legacies. With its seminal trauma 90 years in the past, Turkey perhaps most closely resembles Russia and other countries of the Soviet bloc, where the worst violence also occurred many decades ago. As became apparent in official commemorations of the sixtieth anniversary of the Allied victory in the Second World War, Russia, too, has yet to come to terms with its own bloody, Stalinist, history.

While acknowledging the different circumstances, those who have worked with societies in transition have found that confronting difficult history is vital before a society can heal, move forward peacefully, and develop truly democratic structures.⁵ An essential element in confronting history is the simple acknowledgment of the crimes committed. Experience suggests that it eases the trauma of victims, reduces the desire for revenge, and makes it less difficult for victims to live peacefully alongside perpetrators. Acknowledgement of the culpability of one's own group lays the groundwork for preventing the mutual demonization of the "other" that frequently ensues following conflict and violence. It ensures that members of the perpetrator group are aware of the crimes committed, either by themselves, their compatriots, or their ancestors, and that they do not attempt—as with Holocaust denial—to whitewash history, thereby sowing new re-

sentments and tensions. Acknowledgement also makes it possible for the perpetrator group to examine honestly the social and political forces that made the crimes possible, and thus take steps to prevent anything similar from happening again.

When the crimes lie far in the past (as in Turkey), acknowledging them serves a broader societal and political purpose: it signals a society's maturity and its ability to accept sometimes painful criticism, which is indispensable to democracy. In Turkey's case, an honest reckoning with the past is necessary not only to overcome tensions with Armenians. Turkey's own ability to nurture a democracy in which conflicts are resolved peacefully requires it to overcome the authoritarian desire to make history serve an official narrative.

A similar process is discernible in present-day Poland. Although Poland no longer has a significant Jewish population, it has recently—in the course of its emergence from communism and accession to the EU—begun to reconsider its treatment of Jews during and prior to the Second World War and to question the official glorification of Polish history. This has led to a far wider acknowledgment of anti-Semitism in pre- and postwar Poland and an awareness that Jews were massacred not only by Nazis, but by their willing Polish collaborators. While this has made a difference in Poland's relationship with Jews, its primary importance, it may be argued, will be in its effect on Poland itself.⁶

In the Turkish context, however, some argue that transitional justice is influenced by a Western or Christian concept of history or atonement. But events elsewhere in the world (such as Chinese demands concerning Japan's acknowledgement of its wartime behavior in China) suggest that failure to engage in such confrontation perpetuates tensions regardless of cultural context.

Another argument against confronting history, popular with Turkish officialdom, is that "moving forward" politically can be ac-

complished without doing so, and that in fact historical disputes can be harmful to reconciliation by reinvigorating old animosities. But experience suggests otherwise. In former Yugoslavia, the Tito regime, like the Turkish Republic and for similar reasons, sought to avoid historical debate. Denial took the form of silence about past crimes perpetrated by various ethnic groups. Diverse peoples lived as neighbors and intermarried. Still, this did not prevent old animosities from festering, and bursting open, during the Balkan wars of the 1990s. Repression of historical memory has not proved an effective means of eliminating animosities; it simply leaves them unresolved and allows them to resurface eventually. Amnesty, and the amnesia with which it often goes hand in hand, understandably tends to be preferred by perpetrators, who have reason to forget and move on. But most observers of transitional justice reject this strategy.⁷

The confrontation with history can take a variety of forms: trials and truth commissions, reparations and other forms of affirmative action for the victims, memorials and commemorations, and official apologies. Several variables apply in the Turkish-Armenian context. Because the Armenian genocide occurred 90 years ago, and thus the perpetrators are no longer alive, retribution through trials of the guilty can no longer be sought. There can be no Turkish Nuremberg. Individual guilt is not at issue here, except in a historical sense—though even this remains a sensitive issue in Turkey.

Nor is return of territory a realistic likelihood, notwithstanding concerns voiced by the Turkish government; in today's world, borders are unlikely to shift as a result of century-old events. Nor are direct reparations possible, because survivors are no longer alive. However, this does not rule out reparations in general. Property wrongfully taken a century ago can be restituted or compensation paid to families even when the original owner is deceased, as Germany's

comprehensive (if complicated and sometimes flawed) restitution process for Jews and victims of East German property seizure shows. More importantly, reparation in such cases has often been conceived as something more than the restitution of property. Nations have made amends by commemorating those who perished, by inviting back descendants, by preserving remaining traces of destroyed communities, and through other gestures.

Confronting History

Official acknowledgment is not a necessary first step in this process. Open discussion from various perspectives by scholars, journalists, and other members of civil society can lay the groundwork. While government action is usually necessary to honor the dignity of victims and their descendants, and to provide concrete forms of reparation, civil society projects are vital to the objectives of preventing recurrence and strengthening democratic foundations.

While the Turkish government oscillates between silence, propaganda, and attempts to divert attention, civil society within and without has been working to bridge the impasse. Activists, Turkish and Armenian, have succeeded in creating a basis for historical debate. Here, as elsewhere, generational change is crucial to this new beginning between Turks and Armenians. Generally, the first generation after a traumatic conflict resists confronting the past due to its own passive or active complicity. In succeeding generations, this defensiveness abates, as does fear of being called personally to account. Thus on the Turkish side, a generation that cut its teeth on the political struggles of the 1960s and 1970s against Turkey's authoritarian regimes is leading the challenge to this final taboo, joined by even younger, more cosmopolitan Turks unimpressed by official paranoia and conspiracy theories. Many on the Armenian side, meanwhile, belong to a third diaspora generation that heard stories of genocide

from parents and grandparents. Taking a cue from children of Holocaust survivors and influenced by the identity politics of the 1960s, this Armenian generation began to explore new approaches.

When Turkey adopted a new educational curriculum with respect to the Armenians in 2002, six hundred intellectuals publicly condemned it as racist and chauvinist. Thereafter, civic organizations, including the prestigious Turkish Academy of Sciences, published a study deploring racism and sexism in textbooks. In response, the Ministry of Education agreed to remove “expressions of hostility and hate,” including phrases such as “we crushed the Greeks” and “traitor to the nation.” It also promised that newer history texts would include both Armenian and Turkish versions of events and “let the students decide.” The 2002 curriculum change has also been modified to include the Armenian view. While this shift did not go far enough for many critics, it would have been unthinkable a few years earlier.⁸

Armenian and Turkish scholars, inside Turkey and abroad, have been in the vanguard of this process. They seek to overcome the impasse caused by continued denial of culpability on the Turkish side and resistance to open debate on both sides, which has made scholarly investigation difficult. In contrast to the plethora of scholarly work on the Holocaust, little reliable research has so far been published on Ottoman Armenians. Many Armenians have resisted discussion of the political and social context in which the killings occurred: scholars attempting such broader discussion have in the past been viewed as justifying genocide. Nor can Turks easily discuss Turkish resistance to the genocide—the “good Turks,” whose documented existence could balance the negative image—so long as the genocide itself is denied.

However, in the past few years, younger scholars of Armenian background have addressed Turkish audiences and vice versa,

each discovering that the hostility they expected did not materialize. Ron Grigor Suny, an Armenian-American professor of political science at the University of Chicago, spoke before a university audience in Istanbul in 1998 and was surprised at the interest expressed when he referred to the genocide. In 2000, he joined with Müge Göçek, a colleague of Turkish descent in the United States, to organize a workshop that, for the first time, brought together scholars from varied viewpoints to discuss the Armenian experience in the Ottoman Empire. Although the organizers had to overcome suspicion on all sides and competing views of the “g-word” played a role at first, the workshop soon became an annual event. The organizers’ aim was not to determine, per se, whether the genocide had occurred, but to reach beyond that emotive question and begin a general historical investigation of the period.

Turkish scholars have similarly found that acknowledgment of wrongdoing finds a responsive audience among Armenians, even without admission of genocide, though Turks willing to actually use the word have received an understandably warm reception. Portions of the public on both sides seem eager to move beyond mutual recrimination.

Still, public references to the genocide by Turkish intellectuals at home continue to invite backlash. When Orhan Pamuk spoke openly of the genocide of the Armenians, he provoked death threats and castigation by the media, in addition to prosecution by the state. One low-level official tried to have Pamuk’s books burned (the attempt failed when none of his books could be found in the local public library). Yet, in opinion polls, large percentages of Turks express themselves eager for open debate of what are invariably termed the “Armenian allegations.” Indeed, the Armenian genocide has become one of the most publicly debated issues on Turkish television and in newspaper columns. The government-supported Armenian Research Center in Ankara has

even begun to compile newspaper coverage related to the topic.

How to Move Forward

Given the extent to which historical experience has traumatized both Armenians and Turks, attempts to promote reconciliation without squarely confronting history are doomed to failure. Meetings and exchanges are important prerequisites, but they are not ends in themselves. We would like to offer some thoughts on possible steps that could be taken to move the discussion forward.

To begin with, political and historical issues in the region should be decoupled, and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and other current disputes treated separately. Confidence-building measures—establishing diplomatic relations between Armenia and Turkey, opening the border, and improving trade relations—are desirable. The personal contacts and exchanges that would likely ensue will inevitably aid in the mutual dismantling of stereotypes.

The historical debate should, so far as possible, be taken out of the exclusive hands of parliaments and political circles. The Turkish government should heed its own argument that history is not for politicians by ceasing its production of propaganda and support for historians who advocate its viewpoint. At the same time, foreign political declarations cannot replace the scholarly work of examining history. These declarations are placeholders, helping to keep the issue on the international agenda, but they remain political statements with little scholarly significance; once real historical dialogue begins, they will no longer be needed. Ideally, national governments should facilitate discourse, but they should not make pronouncements on historical fact.

Discussion of the topic in Turkey must be decriminalized, so that discourse may take place without fear. This includes ensuring that nationalist and reactionary forces (whether or not allied with the government) do not succeed in stifling debate, as was the

case when Canadian-Armenian filmmaker Atom Egoyan's film *Ararat* could not be shown in Turkey as a result of threats by nationalist groups. Armenia also needs to shed its Soviet-era discomfort with the idea of the open society, evidenced by the recent trial in Yerevan, on apparently trumped-up charges, of a respected Turkish scholar who is critical of the official Turkish position on the genocide, and should commit to the ideal of free historical inquiry. Finally, discussion may also be desirable on the civil penalties with respect to certain kinds of historical discourse in Europe, where serious scholars have been penalized for voicing reservations about the Armenian genocide.

A historians' or truth commission would be invaluable, but it cannot be—as many fear the Turkish government wishes—government-organized and stacked with official scholars, nor can it be guided by Turkish propaganda needs or by the language of attack that has thus far been the norm. Governments may facilitate, finance, and even sponsor such meetings. But experience elsewhere has shown that civil society must be involved and that the commission must be entirely independent and self-determined, its proceedings transparent and public.

In countries with successful truth commissions, conclusions have been officially proclaimed, accepted by the government, and integrated into the nation's historical record, and suggestions for redress have been implemented. For Turkey, this public witness to truth, this self-examination and self-criticism, would be an important step toward a democratic culture. The same may well be true for Armenia, since the search for historical truth could also raise issues uncomfortable for Armenians.

The Turkish government fears the economic claims that might be made upon it if it were to acknowledge the Armenian genocide, and the experience of other countries indicates that its worries may be justified: it might be called upon to seriously consider the issue of reparations and compensation.

The International Center for Transitional Justice's report found that Turkey cannot be held legally liable under the 1948 Genocide Convention, since it had not been adopted at the time of the genocide, but other legal obligations to the descendants of Armenian victims may well exist, as the drawn-out history of Holocaust claims and the recent payments of Armenian life insurance claims by foreign banks suggest.

But even without a legal obligation, it is today widely accepted that states owe at least a moral duty to victims of human rights abuses perpetrated by governments. The United States has provided reparations to Japanese Americans forcibly relocated during the Second World War. At this late date, even token monetary restitution might go a long way toward ameliorating the psychological trauma of the Armenian genocide. But if broader monetary restitution is sought, the Turkish Republic will have to accept this as the inevitable price of reconciliation and democracy. In such cases, it is essential that the public understands the reasons for restitution so that new resentments do not result.

Elsewhere, reparation has also included various nonmonetary forms of compensation and amelioration. In this case, the restoration and preservation of the Armenian cultural heritage in Anatolia would be a desirable form of reparation, correcting the ongoing attempt to wipe out traces of the Armenian presence. This could include the reaffirmation of the Armenian contribution to the culture of Anatolia through the proper identification of cultural artifacts and architecture in the region.

A further method could be the bestowal of symbolic citizenship or special residency rights in the Republic of Turkey on descendants of deported Armenians. Germany has a similar mechanism in place.

Without in any way removing Turkey's primary burden of historical obligation, Armenians, too, might consider gestures of their own, such as reaching out to elements

of Turkish society that are making efforts to overcome the intransigence of the Turkish government. Public statements disavowing territorial claims on Turkey and condemnation of the assassination of Turkish diplomats would deprive Ankara of some of its stock arguments—arguments that resonate with the public and may act as obstacles to breaking down stereotypes.

To initiate these and other steps, Turkey and Armenia might do well to turn to a mediator. The European Union might be the ideal interlocutor, as it is already involved in monitoring Turkish compliance with its norms—including those involving human and minority rights. To be sure, a recent resolution by the EU parliament calling on Turkey to acknowledge the genocide engendered resentment in Turkey, and the fact that the resolution was welcomed by many Armenians only underscored the gulf still separating the two sides. In the current period of transition, when Turkish society seems to be on the brink of a new willingness to reassess the past, this may be the time for the EU to step in as facilitator. ●

Notes

1. The ICTJ commissioned the opinion at the request of the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission (TARC), a group of prominent Turks and Armenians from Turkey, Armenia, and the Armenian diaspora in the United States, which met sporadically in the United States, Europe, and Turkey between 2001 and 2004 under U.S. State Department sponsorship to discuss possible areas of Turkish-Armenian cooperation. Commissioning the opinion (which also concluded that the Genocide Convention of 1948 did not apply retroactively to the Armenian genocide and could not form the basis for any legal claims) was the main achievement of the TARC. The commission purposely avoided addressing the historical dispute in any other way, and otherwise has had little impact in either Turkey or Armenia. The Turkish government's willingness to tolerate the TARC's existence, however, revealed its sensitivity to international opinion on the subject of the genocide; Ankara may have hoped that the commis-

sion would deflect attention from the genocide resolutions being promoted by diaspora Armenians. For a more optimistic assessment of the TARC from the perspective of its American chair, see David L. Phillips, *Unsilencing the Past: Track Two Diplomacy and Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005).

2. The killings of Armenians also meet the definition of crimes against humanity, which include various types of government-sponsored or tolerated killings, torture, and discriminatory action. However, the charge of “genocide” has proven most controversial, perhaps because it calls up memories of the Holocaust, which has become the standard of extreme evil, and because genocide is considered the worst of international crimes.

3. For a more detailed discussion of the background and context of Turkish denial, see Taner Akcam, *From Empire to Republic: Turkish Nationalism and the Armenian Genocide* (London: Zed Books, 2004).

4. See Taner Akcam, “A Scandal: The Letter from the Turkish Parliament, or Where Are Sükrü Eledag and Justin McCarthy Leading This Country?” published in Turkish in *Birikim* (Istanbul), May 2005, pp. 89–105.

5. There is an enormous literature on the subject of transitional justice and the importance of historical memory. See, for example, Priscilla Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Confronting State Terror and Atrocity* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Ruti G. Teitel, *Tran-*

sitional Justice (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Martha Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998); Gesine Swan, *Politik und Schuld: Die Zerstörerische Macht des Schweigens* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997).

6. See, for example, the introduction to Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic, eds., *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

7. Spain is often cited as an example of a country where amnesties and national amnesia appeared to be the agreed-upon method of dealing with the history and aftermath of a bloody civil war. However, seven decades later, cracks are appearing and the descendants of victims are demanding an accounting. See, for example, Sara B. Miller, “Spain Begins to Confront Its Past,” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 6, 2003; Madeleine Davis, “Is Spain Recovering Its Memory? Breaking the *Pacto del Olvido*,” *Human Rights Quarterly*, vol. 17 (August 2005), pp. 858–80. Indeed, in most cases, amnesia seems to be a strategy that does not outlast the first or, at most, the second generation following historical trauma.

8. The changed climate for public debate on the dark spots in Turkish history was evident recently when members of a nationalist group attacked and defaced an exhibit on the persecution of another Turkish minority, the Greeks. The press and the public reacted with near-universal outrage.