

The First Holocaust

Robert Fisk

This is the final instalment of Robert Fisk's account of the Armenian Genocide. It is taken from his book The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle East (Harper Perennial (£9.99), with grateful acknowledgements to the author and the publisher for their kind permission to do so. Copies of the first instalment, which appeared in Spokesman 93, are still available.

... Any discussion of genocide in the *Independent* shows just how much it dominates the public mind. After writing about the Armenian Holocaust, the chairman of the Latvian National Council in Britain wrote to remind me that up to 11 million people died in the 'terror famine' in the Ukraine between 1930 and 1933. 'There will be no Holocaust Day for them,' he said. What of the deaths of millions of Muslims expelled from the Balkans and Russia in the nineteenth century, 'part of Europe's own forgotten past', as a historian has put it? Readers urge me to examine King Leopold II's Congo Holocaust, in which millions died – beaten or from physical exhaustion, famine or disease – in effective slave labour camps in the last century. And how are we to deal with those Spaniards who claim, with good reason, that Franco's annihilation of 30,000 political and military opponents – still buried in 600 mass graves across Spain – was a form of genocide?

When the historian Norman Davis wrote to me in 1998 to remind me that Hitler's question about the Armenians – 'Who, after all, is today speaking of the destruction of the Armenians?' – was asked in relation to the Poles and first recorded by the Berlin bureau chief of the Associated Press, Louis Lochner, in August 1939, Davis concluded that 'one is tempted to add "and who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of Poles?"' But sure enough, there was a book written anonymously just after the Second World War with a preface by, of all people, T. S. Eliot, which records the suffering of the millions of Poles deported to death and starvation by the Soviet army which had entered Poland shortly after the 1939 German invasion. And there is one passage in this book which always moves me, in which a Polish mother hopes that the deportation train will leave in the night:

for the track went round a low hill just beside the homestead, and she hoped that the children need not see it and feel all their sorrow freshly burst out again. Unfortunately, the train left during the day.

As the homestead came in sight, they saw neighbours and other members of the family standing on the hill and the parish priest with a crucifix in his hand ... As the chimneys, the orchard, and the trees came clearly into sight, Tomus cried out in a terrible voice, 'Mammy, Mammy, our orchard, our Pond, our ... cow grazing! Mammy why do we have to go away?'

That departure, the innocence of Tomus, his affection for the family cow, the growing awareness of the mother that the deportation train will pass their home, and that child's question echo those of millions of other voices that would be heard on these same railway tracks as Hitler's Holocaust of the Jews gathered momentum in the months and years to come, just as they carried back to the Armenian Holocaust twenty-four years earlier. It was a Polish-born Jew, Raphael Lemkin, who in 1944 invented the word 'genocide' for the Armenians, an act which helped to put in place the legal and moral basis for a culture of human rights (see *Spokesman 93*).

So with all the evidence, the eyewitness accounts, the diplomatic reports, the telegrams, the bones and skulls of a million and a half people, could such a genocide be denied? Could such an act of mass wickedness as the Armenian genocide be covered up? Or could it, as Hitler suggested, be forgotten? Could the world's first Holocaust – a painful irony this – be half-acknowledged but downgraded in the list of human bestiality as the dreadful twentieth century produced further acts of mass barbarity and presaged the ferocity of the twenty-first?

Alas, all this has come to pass. When I first wrote about the Armenian massacres in 1993, the Turks denounced my article – as they have countless books and investigations before and since – as a lie. Turkish readers wrote to my editor to demand my dismissal from the *Independent*. If Armenian citizens were killed, they wrote – and I noted the 'if' bit – this was a result of the anarchy that existed in Ottoman Turkey in the First World War, civil chaos in which countless Turks had died and in which Armenian paramilitaries had deliberately taken the side of Tsarist Russia. The evidence of European commissions into the massacres, the eyewitness accounts of Western journalists of the later slaughter of Armenians at Smyrna – the present-day holiday resort of Izmir, where countless British sunbathers today have no idea of the bloodbath that took place on and around their beaches – the denunciations of Morgenthau and Churchill, were all dismissed as propaganda.

Güler Köknar, head of the Assembly of Turkish American Associations, wrote to my editor, Simon Kelner, to claim that Armenians 'had defected en masse to fight for the enemy, served as Fifth Columnists, and commenced a civil war against Ottoman Muslims'. Ms Suna Çakir wrote to tell me that claims of an Armenian genocide were 'purely fabricated ... a mere figment of the imagination'. Aygen Tat of Washington DC mailed my paper to say that an article I wrote about the Armenian genocide was 'a fraud'. The Hitler quotation was 'fabricated' and 'there never was an Armenian Holocaust or Genocide but there was a Turkish massacre by Armenians and their Czarist Russian masters'. Tat's final line was to ask 'why blame Turkey and the Turks for events that occurred in 1915?' Ibrahim Tansel said interestingly that the 'so called Armenian genocide

was partially response [*sic*] of villagers. In fact to avoid more bloodshed Armenians were moved from Anatolia to Lebanon.’ This flood of mail was performing something very disturbing: it was turning the perpetrators of the Armenian genocide into the victims and the victims into murderers and liars.

Each new letter – and some were clearly organised on a ‘round robin’ basis – would add to the store of denial. S. Zorba of Rochester, New York, referred to ‘100-year-old unfortunate victims of the unfortunate event’, which he later identified as ‘the alleged genocide’. Other emails denounced me as ‘wicked’ and one, after condemning my ‘ignorance’ and ‘arrogance’, finished with a very revealing line. ‘May be there was a genocide but it is not your duty to judge. It is up to historians to find out the reality.’ This was to become a weary refrain, repeated – incredibly – even by Israeli politicians; of whom more later.

But these remarks should not be seen in isolation. They were supported by Turkish diplomats. Korkmaz Haktanir, the Turkish ambassador to London, complained in a letter to the *Independent* that ‘many members of my family and their community suffered and died at the hands of Armenian terrorists.’ He enclosed two photographs of the bodies of horribly mutilated women, killed by Armenians – according to his captions – in the villages of Subatan and Merseni Dere in 1915. Fisk had shown, he asserted, ‘an eagerness to reopen old wounds’ – which at least provided an admission that there were wounds inflicted in the first place.

Haktanir’s opposite number in Israel, Barlas Özener, made an even more extraordinary démarche – in view of the country in which he was serving – in a letter to the *Jerusalem Post Magazine* in which he accused the author of an article on Armenia’s ‘Genocide Denied’ of an attempt to rewrite history. ‘The myth of “Armenian Holocaust” was created immediately after World War I with the hope that the Armenians could be rewarded for their “sufferings” with a piece of disintegrating Ottoman state,’ he wrote. What survivors of the Jewish Holocaust were supposed to make of this piece of ‘denialism’ was beyond comprehension. The journalist, Marilyn Henry, had, according to Özener, ‘used her pen’ to target ‘the new Knesset and the new Israeli government and Turkish–Israeli relations’.

But Turkish diplomats need have no fear of Israel’s opprobrium. When a Holocaust conference was to be held in Tel Aviv in 1982, the Turkish government objected to the inclusion of material on the Armenian slaughter. Again incredibly, Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel withdrew from the conference after the Israeli foreign ministry said that it might damage Israeli–Turkish relations. The conference went ahead – with lectures on the Armenian genocide – after Shimon Peres vainly asked Israel’s most prominent expert in genocide, Israel Charney, not to include the Armenian massacres.

Peres was to go much further – and deep into the moral quagmire of Holocaust denial – in a statement he made prior to an official visit to Ankara as Israeli foreign minister in April 2001. In an interview with the *Anatolia News Agency*, Peres said that ‘we reject attempts to create a similarity between the Holocaust and the Armenian allegations. Nothing similar to the Holocaust occurred. It is a tragedy

what the Armenians went through but not a genocide.’ If a position should be taken about these ‘allegations’, Peres said, ‘it should be done with great care not to distort the historical realities’. These astonishing comments by Peres – which flew in the face of all the facts that he must himself have been aware of, all the witness testimony, all the direct German links between the 1915 genocide and the Jewish extermination – received a powerful response from Charney, who is an Israeli academic of absolute integrity.

‘It seems to me ...’ Charney wrote in a personal letter to Peres, ‘that you have gone beyond a moral boundary that no Jew should allow himself to trespass ... it may be that in your broad perspective of the needs of the State of Israel it is your obligation to circumvent and desist from bringing up the subject with Turkey, but as a Jew and an Israeli I am ashamed of the extent to which you have now entered into the range of actual denial of the Armenian Genocide, comparable to the denials of the Holocaust.’ Charney reminded Peres that at a conference on the Jewish Holocaust in Philadelphia in 2000, a large number of researchers, including Israeli historians, signed a public declaration that the Armenian genocide was factual, and that a 1997 meeting of the Association of Genocide Scholars voted a resolution that the Armenians suffered ‘full-scale genocide’. Nor did Charney flinch in his fine two-volume *Encyclopedia of Genocide*, which includes 45 pages of factual testimony and contemporary diplomatic and journalistic accounts of the Armenian slaughter, especially from the *New York Times*, and – unusually – large quotations from original Turkish sources. One of them, the distinguished Turkish historian Ahmed Refik, who served in the intelligence service of the Ottoman general staff, stated categorically that ‘the aim of *Ittihad* [the Turkish leadership of the Committee of Union and Progress] was to destroy the Armenians.’

Charney rightly pointed out that Peres’ denial was founded upon his wish to advance Israeli–Turkish relations – relations that Turkey itself endangered when it interfered with Charney’s 1982 genocide conference in Tel Aviv. According to Elie Wiesel, he was told ‘by an Israeli official ... that the Turks had let it be known there would be serious difficulties if Armenians took part in the conference.’

So for the Armenians, is there to be no justice, no acknowledgement of the terrible crime committed against them, no restitution, no return of property, no apology? Just a million and a half skeletons whose very existence the Turks still try to deny? Is Turkey so fearful, so frightened of its own past that it cannot do what Germany has done for the Jews – purged itself with remorse, admission, acknowledgement, reparations, good will? As Jonathan Eric Lewis of the Remarque Institute at New York University has asked, ‘how can the destruction of a huge portion of the Ottoman Empire’s merchant class be anything other than a central issue in Turkey’s modern history? The lands, homes, and property of the Armenians are now in the hands of those who have benefited from past crimes. The fear of having to pay reparations is but one of the many reasons why the Turkish government refuses to acknowledge the genocide.’

Yet still the denials continue. When Pope John Paul II dared to refer to ‘the

Armenian genocide, which was the prelude of future horrors', the Turkish newspaper *Milliyet* labelled him on its front page with the headline: 'The Pope has been struck with senile dementia.' Dr Salâhi Sonyel, claiming – falsely – that Hitler's question about the Armenians is a forgery, tried to disconnect it from the Nazi genocide by pointing out correctly that the German Führer was talking about the Poles, not the Jews. It sounds a strong line – until you remember that one-third of all Poles in 1939 were Jewish, the very section of the population Hitler intended to exterminate. This is the same Sonyel who entitled one of his essays: 'How Armenian Propaganda against the Ottoman Caliphate swayed the gullible Christian World'. The *real* difference between the Armenian Holocaust and the Jewish Holocaust, of course, is that Germany has admitted its responsibility while successive Turkish governments have chosen to deny the Armenian genocide.

In the United States, Turkey's powerful lobby groups attack any journalist or academic who suggests that the Armenian genocide is fact. For Turkey – no longer the 'sick man' of Europe – is courted by the same Western powers that so angrily condemned its cruelty in the last century. It is a valued member of the NATO alliance – our ally in bombing Serbia in 1999 – the closest regional ally of Israel and a major buyer of US and French weaponry. Just as we remained silent at the start of the persecution of the Kurds, so we now prefer to ignore the twentieth century's first Holocaust.

This scandalous denial now even infects journalists. When the Pope visited Armenia in September 2001, the Associated Press felt constrained to tell its subscribers that 'Turkey firmly denies Armenian charges that Ottoman Turk armies were involved in a genocide, a word that came into general use only after World War II.' Quite apart from that wonderful word 'firmly' – if the Turks are 'firm' about it, you see, maybe they are right! – the word 'charges' is a disgraceful piece of journalism, and the reference to Lemkin's definition (which was made *during*, not after, the Second World War) fails to acknowledge that he was referring to the Armenians. The BBC, covering the same papal visit, also showed contemptible standards when it told listeners that 'more than a million Armenians were killed as the Ottoman empire broke up'. Note how the Armenians were killed rather than massacred and how this mysteriously took place during the breakup of the Ottoman empire – which is in any case factually incorrect, since the empire briefly continued after the First World War.

Most outrageous of all, however, has been the *New York Times*, which so bravely recorded the truth – and scooped the world – with its coverage of the Armenian genocide in 1915. Its bravery has now turned to cowardice. Here, for example, is a key paragraph from a 26 March 1998 *New York Times* report, by Stephen Kinzer, on the 70,000 Armenians who survive in present-day Turkey:

Relations between Turks and Armenians were good during much of the Ottoman period, but they were deeply scarred by massacres of Armenians that pro-Ottoman forces in eastern Anatolia carried out in the spring of 1915. Details of what happened then are still hotly debated, but it is clear that vast numbers of Armenians were killed or left to die during forced marches in a burst of what is now called 'ethnic cleansing.'

Now I have a serious problem with this paragraph. First of all, the figure of a million and a half Armenians – or even a million Armenians – the all-important statistic that puts the Armenians in the genocide bracket, indeed marks them as victims of the first holocaust of the last century, has totally disappeared. We are left with what Kinzer calls ‘vast numbers’ of killed which, I suppose, keeps the *New York Times* out of harm’s way with the Turks. Then genocide is reduced to ‘ethnic cleansing’, a phrase familiar from the Serb wars against the Muslims of Bosnia and the Albanians of Kosovo, but on an infinitely less terrible scale than the massacres of 1915. And note how this was a ‘burst’ of ‘ethnic cleansing’; a sudden, spontaneous act rather than a premeditated mass killing. Note, too, the reference to ‘pro-Ottoman forces’ rather than the dangerous but real ‘Turkish forces’, or even ‘Turkish Ottoman forces’, that he should have been writing about. Then we are told that the issue is ‘hotly debated’. How very ‘fair’ of the *New York Times* to remind us that a campaign exists to deny the truth of this genocide without actually saying so, a lie every bit as evil as that most wicked claim that the Jewish Holocaust never happened. Another of Kinzer’s articles was headlined: ‘Armenia Never Forgets – Maybe It Should’.

I have my suspicions about all this. I think the *New York Times* reporter produced this nonsense so as to avoid offending the present Turkish government. He didn’t want his feature to be called ‘controversial’. He didn’t want to stir things up. So he softened the truth – and the Turks must have been delighted. Now let’s supply a simple test. Let us turn to that later and numerically more terrible Holocaust of the Jews of Europe. Would Kinzer have written in the same way about that mass slaughter? Would he have told us that German–Jewish relations were merely ‘deeply scarred’ by the Nazi slaughter? Would he have suggested – even for a moment – that the details are ‘hotly debated’? Would he have compared the massacre of the Jews to the Bosnian war? No, he would not have dared to do so. He should not have dared to do so. So why was he prepared to cast doubt on the Armenian genocide?

Kinzer was back to his old denial tricks in an article in the *New York Times* on 27 April 2002, about the proposed Armenian Genocide Museum in Washington:

Washington already has one major institution, the United States Holocaust Museum, that documents an effort to destroy an entire people. The story it presents is beyond dispute. But the events of 1915 are still a matter of intense debate.

Here we go again. The Jewish Holocaust is ‘undeniable’, which is true. But its undeniability is used here to denigrate the truth of the Armenian Holocaust which, by inference, is not ‘beyond dispute’ and is the subject of ‘intense debate’. The ‘hotness’ of the debate and its ‘intensity’ again gives force in both of Kinzer’s articles to the idea that the Turkish denial may be true. The same slippage reappeared in the *New York Times* on 8 June 2003, when a famous photograph of Armenian men being led by Turkish gendarmes from an anonymous town in 1915 carried the caption ‘Armenians were marched to prison by Turkish soldiers in 1915’. Scarcely any Armenians were marched off to prison. They were marched

off – prior to the deportation, rape and massacre of their womenfolk and children – to be massacred. The town in the picture is Harput – the photograph was taken by a German businessman – and the men of Harput, some of whom are in this remarkable picture, were almost all massacred. But the *New York Times* sends these doomed men peacefully off to ‘prison’.

Nor is the *New York Times* alone in its gutlessness. On 20 November 2000, the *Wall Street Journal Europe*, perhaps Israel’s greatest friend in the US press – though there are many other close contenders – went in for a little Holocaust denial of its own. While acknowledging the ‘historical fact that during World War I an estimated 600,000 Armenians, possibly more, lost their lives, many in forced deportations to Syria and Palestine orchestrated by Ottoman armies’, it goes on to say – and readers should not smile at the familiarity of this wretched language – that ‘whether the majority of these deaths were the result of a deliberate policy of extermination or of other factors is a matter of contentious scholarly debate’. Here is the same old vicious undercutting of truth. The Armenians ‘lost their lives’ – as soldiers do, though rarely have journalists referred to massacre victims in quite so bland a phrase – in deportations ‘orchestrated’ by ‘Ottoman armies’. Once more, the word ‘Turkish’ has been deleted. ‘Orchestrated’ is a get-out phrase to avoid ‘perpetrated’, which would, of course, mean that we were talking about genocide. And then at the end, we have our old friend the ‘debate’. The truth of the Armenian genocide is ‘hotly’ debated. Then it is subject to ‘intense’ debate. And now this debate is ‘contentious’ and ‘scholarly’.

And I think I know the identity of the ‘scholar’ whom the *Journal* had in mind: Heath Lowry, Atatürk Professor of Ottoman and Modern Turkish Studies at Princeton University, who has written several tracts – published in Turkey – attempting to discredit the Armenian genocide. Peter Balakian and the historian Robert Jay Lifton have done an excellent job of investigating Lowry’s work. Lowry went to Turkey with a PhD in Ottoman Studies, worked at a research institute in Istanbul and lectured at Bosphorus University, returning to America in 1986 to become director of the Institute for Turkish Studies in Washington DC. The American institute was set up by the Turkish government; from here Lowry wrote op-eds and essays denying the 1915 genocide, and lobbied Congress to defeat Armenian genocide commemorative resolutions.

What was astonishing, however, was that when the Turkish ambassador to Washington, Nüzhet Kamdemur, wrote to Robert Jay Lifton to complain about references to the Armenian genocide in his new book *The Nazi Doctors*, the diplomat accidentally enclosed with it a letter from Lowry to the embassy which was an original draft of the ambassador’s letter to Lifton himself; Lowry, in other words, was telling the Turkish ambassador how to object to the genocide references in Lifton’s book, adding for good measure that he had ‘repeatedly stressed both in writing and verbally to Ankara’ his concerns about the historians whose scholarship had been used by Lifton; they included the indefatigable Vahakn Dadrian. What was Lowry doing, advising the Turkish government how to deny the Armenian Holocaust?

There are other chairs of Turkish studies at Harvard, Georgetown, Indiana,

Portland State and Chicago. To qualify, the holders must have performed research work in archives in Turkey (often closed to historians critical of that country) and have ‘friendly relations with the Turkish academic community’ – something they are not going to have if they address the substance of the Armenian genocide. The University of California at Los Angeles had the courage to turn down a chair. All holders, of course, believe that ‘historians’ must primarily decide the truth, an expression that precludes evidence from the dwindling survivors of the massacres. All this prompted 150 Holocaust scholars and historians to call upon Turkey to end its campaign of denial; they included Lifton, Israel Charney, Yehuda Bauer, Howard Zinn and Deborah Lipstadt. They failed. It was Elie Wiesel who first said that denial of genocide was a ‘double killing’. First the victims are slaughtered – and then their deaths are turned into a non-event, an ‘un-fact’. The dead die twice. The survivors suffer and are then told they did not suffer, that they are lying.

And big guns are brought into action – almost literally – to ensure that this remains the case. When the US Congress proposed an Armenian Genocide Resolution in 2000, asking President Clinton in his annual Armenian commemoration address to refer to the killings as genocide – it had the votes to pass – Turkey warned Washington that it would close its airbases to American aircraft flying over the Iraqi ‘no-fly’ zones. The Turkish defence minister, Sabahattin Çakmaköğlü, said that Turkey was prepared to cancel arms contracts with the United States. The Israeli foreign ministry took Turkey’s side and President Bill Clinton shamefully gave in and asked that the bill be killed. It was.

All across the United States, this same pressure operates. In 1997, for example, the Ellis Island Museum removed photographs and graphic eyewitness texts of the Armenian genocide from an exhibition. It had done the same thing in 1991. In 2001, the Turkish consul-general in San Francisco objected to the use of a former First World War memorial cross as an Armenian memorial to the genocide. When I investigated this complaint in San Francisco, it turned out that a so-called ‘Center for Scholars in Historical Accuracy; Stanford Chapter’ – which, it turned out, had nothing to do with Stanford University – had claimed in an advertisement in the *San Francisco Chronicle* that such a memorial would become ‘a political advertisement to preach their [Armenian] version of history which is roundly disputed among objective scholars and historians’. Turks even circulated flyers to the local Chinese American Democratic Club – in Chinese – warning it that the memorial could lead to ‘an historical dispute that happened in the past’. So now the ‘debate’ had become a ‘dispute’, but I knew who those ‘objective scholars’ must be.

Holocaust denial is alive and well in the United States – Armenian Holocaust denial, that is. The historian Bernard Lewis, who is a strong supporter of Israel and a favourite of President George W. Bush, no longer accepts that genocide was perpetrated against the Armenians and his views in the United States go largely unchallenged. In France, however, where genocide denial is an offence, there was an outcry from Armenians; Lewis was convicted by the High Court in Paris of committing ‘an error’ (*une faute*) because he said that the word ‘genocide’ was ‘only the Armenian version of this story’. But when in 2000 the French Senate

proposed to acknowledge the Armenian genocide of 1915, the French foreign ministry secretary-general responded with a statement that might have come from the Turkish embassy. Loïc Hennekinne said this was not the work of parliament and that history 'should be interpreted by the historians'. It all sounded horribly familiar, but the Senate did pass their vote in November and the French National Assembly formally recognised the Armenian genocide two months later.

Then the sky fell. In revenge, the Turkish government cancelled a \$200 million spy satellite deal with the French company Alcatel and threw the arms company Giat out of a \$7 billion tank contract. The newspaper *Türkiye* supported the proposal of forty-two Islamist deputies in the Turkish parliament to vote to recognise 'the genocide of Algerians by the French' – a real *touché*, this, for a country that has been almost as reticent about its cruelty in the 1954-62 Algerian war as it has about its Second World War Vichy past – and reminded readers of the first wholesale massacres of Muslim Algerians around Kerrata in 1945.

President Jacques Chirac was always frightened of the Armenian mass killings. At a 1999 press conference in Beirut – where tens of thousands of Armenian descendants of the first Holocaust live – he refused to discuss the proposed assembly resolution on the genocide. 'I do not comment on a matter of domestic politics when I'm abroad,' he said. Would that, I asked myself as I listened to this dishonourable reply, have been Chirac's response to a condemnation of the Jewish Holocaust? In 2000, the best Chirac could do was to declare that he understood the 'concerns' of Armenians.¹ Turkey's application to join the European Union opened the question again. In the assembly on 14 October 2004, François Bayrou asked why the European Commission had made so much of the criminalisation of adultery in the new Turkish penal code – it was subsequently withdrawn – but ignored article 305, passed by the Turkish parliament, which states that prosecution for 'anti-national plots' included, according to the Turkish commission of justice, 'asking for the recognition of the Armenian genocide'.

But for sheer political cowardice, it would be hard to beat the performance of British prime minister Tony Blair – he who was so eager to go to war with Serbia and Iraq to end human rights abuses – when he proclaimed in 2000 that there would be an annual Holocaust Memorial Day in Britain. It would be, he said, a day to remember the Nazi genocide against the Jews. He made not a single reference – not a single pathetic remark – about the murder of one and a half million Armenians in 1915. Was it not a British government that published the Bryce report? Armenian leaders immediately protested against this grotesque omission and demanded the inclusion of their own Holocaust. The British government's response was as weasel worded as it was shaming.

Neil Frater of the Home Office's 'Race Equality Unit' – the very name speaks volumes about the politically correct orientation of Blair's administration – said that the atrocities were 'an appalling tragedy' and that the government extended its 'sympathies' to the descendants of the victims. His 'unit' had asked the 'Holocaust Memorial Day Steering Group' to consider the matter but 'after full and careful consideration' had decided not to change their plans for the Day. The

steering group, Frater said, wanted ‘to avoid the risk of the message becoming too diluted if we try to include too much history’. The purpose of Holocaust Day, he preached, was to ‘ensure a better understanding of the issues [of genocide] and promote a democratic and tolerant society that respects and celebrates diversity and is free of the influence of prejudice and racism’.

So now, it seemed, mere mention of the Armenian genocide might ‘dilute’ the ‘message’ of Holocaust Day! All this had come about because of a ‘consultation exercise’ in Whitehall. How typical it was of the Blair government to hold a ‘consultation exercise’ to decide which ethnic group would have the privilege of having its suffering commemorated and which would be ruthlessly excised from the history books. At no point, of course, did the deadly word ‘Turkey’ appear in Frater’s correspondence. But he wrote another letter of astonishing insensitivity to Armen Lucas, a prominent Armenian businessman in France, repeating the same mantra of sympathy for the Armenians but adding that the British government had considered requests to examine other atrocities, including ‘the Crusades, slavery, colonialism, the victims of Stalin and the Boer War’. The Armenian genocide was now lumped in by the government with Pope Urban II’s eleventh-century war against the Muslims of the Middle East. The principal of the Armenian Evangelical College in Beirut, deploring Frater’s committee decision, argued powerfully that ‘any serious commemoration must include the aetiology of genocide, particularly those of the twentieth century, especially if the oblivion of one encouraged the next’.

The BBC were asked to produce the official Holocaust Day commemoration, but when Lucas raised the omission of the Armenians with Daniel Brittain-Catlin, the BBC producer in charge, Brittain-Catlin admitted that the Home Office had ‘retained overall editorial control’. There then followed a breathtaking example of political arrogance. ‘Our historical frame of reference,’ Brittain-Catlin announced, ‘does not include the period of 1915-20, and in terms of the event it was never in our brief to survey all 20th century atrocities.’ However, he added, an outside broadcast on BBC2 ‘is likely to include reference to, however briefly, the Armenian genocide’. Note how the letter avoids the real issue. Lucas was not asking whether the BBC’s ‘historical frame of reference’ – whatever that is supposed to be – included the Armenian genocide, but why it did not do so. If it was never in the BBC’s ‘brief’ to survey all twentieth-century atrocities, the question is why not – and why not the Armenians? In the end, they were to be consigned – all those hundreds of thousands of slaughtered men, raped women and murdered children – to a reference, ‘however brief’. Brittain-Catlin did at least call the massacre of the Armenians a ‘genocide’, although I suspect this was a bureaucratic slip. But it would be hard to devise a more patronising letter to a man whose people were so cruelly persecuted.

All this obfuscation was based on a cynical premise by the Blair government, namely that it could get away with genocide denial to maintain good relations with Turkey. The message was very clear in 1999 when the British government stated, in a House of Lords reply, that ‘in the absence of unequivocal evidence to show

that the Ottoman administration took a specific decision to eliminate the Armenians under their control at the time, British governments have not recognised the events of 1915 and 1916 as “genocide”. Now if this statement is true – if there is no ‘unequivocal evidence’ of genocide in 1915 – then the government must believe that the Bryce report, Churchill, Lloyd George, the American diplomats posted across the Ottoman empire at the time of the massacres, Armin Wegner, the photographer of the Armenian Holocaust, and the scholar Israel Charney – not to mention the actual survivors and the 150 professors who signed a declaration that the 1915 slaughter was genocide – are or were all frauds. This is clearly not true. Baroness Ramsay of Cartvale, who delivered this meretricious statement for the British government, claimed that few other governments ‘attributed the name “genocide” to these tragic events. In our opinion that is rightly so because we do not believe it is the business of governments today to review events of over 80 years ago with a view to pronouncing on them ... And who would benefit from taking such a position?’

Certainly not Tony Blair. But another part of the statement is even more disturbing – and indicative of the Blair government’s immoral attitude towards history – when it suggests that Armenia and Turkey should ‘resolve between themselves the issues which divide them ... we could not play the role of supportive friend to both countries were we to take an essentially political position on an issue so sensitive for both.’ So acknowledging or denying genocide is a ‘political’ issue. The mass killings are now the ‘events’. And governments cannot review events of ‘over 80 years ago’ and take a position on them. What this means is that if in the year 2025 a new and right-wing Germany – from which heaven preserve us – were to deny the Jewish Holocaust, the British government might stand back and say that it could not take a position on ‘events’ that happened eighty years earlier, that the Jewish community would have to ‘resolve’ this matter with the Germans. That is the logic of claiming that the powerful Turkish successor to the Ottoman genociders must resolve this ‘sensitive’ matter with the descendants of the Armenian victims.

The British were now also following Israel’s practice of dissociating the Armenian Holocaust from the Jewish Holocaust, creating a uniqueness about the Jewish experience of persecution which no other ethnic group was to be permitted to share. Israel’s ambassador to the Armenian state crassly said the same thing in 2002.² So, two years later, did the British ambassador to Armenia.

But it is easy to be self-righteous. When Blair refused to acknowledge the Armenian genocide, I wrote a series of angry articles in the *Independent*, saying that Holocaust Day was to be an Armenian-free, Jewish-only affair. Yes, the word took a capital ‘H’ when it applied to Jews. I have always agreed with this. Mass ethnic slaughter on such a scale – Hitler’s murder of 6 million Jews – deserves a capital ‘H’. But I also believe that the genocide of other races – of any race – merits a capital ‘H’. So that’s how I wrote it in a long centre-page article in my paper. Chatting to an Armenian acquaintance, I mentioned that I had done this. It would be the ‘Armenian Holocaust’ in my report. Little could I have imagined

how quickly the dead would rise from their graves to be counted. For when my article appeared in the *Independent* – a paper which has never failed to dig into the human wickedness visited upon every race and creed – my references to the Jewish Holocaust remained with a capital ‘H’. But the Armenian Holocaust had been downgraded to a lower-case ‘h’. ‘Tell me, Robert,’ my Armenian friend asked me in suppressed fury, ‘how do we Armenians qualify for a capital ‘H’? Didn’t the Turks kill enough of us? Or is it because we’re not Jewish?’³

The *Independent* is the most outspoken paper in Britain in its demand that Turkey admit the truth about the Armenian killings. When the Turkish embassy officially complained in August 2000 that an exhibition at the Imperial War Museum in London should make textual changes to references about the Armenian killings – ‘a messy and painful affair’ was the most Turkish diplomat Mehmet Akat could bring himself to say of the genocide – an *Independent* editorial said that ‘it almost beggars belief’. Imagine, the paper said, ‘the German government declaring that, although a number of Jews died in the Second World War, it was because of poor health and as a result of the fighting’.

But even the Imperial War Museum could bow to Turkey. When it staged another exhibition, Crimes against Humanity, just over a year later – the very expression first used in 1915 about the Armenians – it included an entire panel in the Armenian section containing Turkey’s denial that the mass murders ever took place. ‘What is shocking,’ one of our readers commented after visiting a museum dedicated to Muslims murdered by Armenians at the Turkish town of Yeşilyayla, ‘is that the very language of how we respond to the Jewish Holocaust has been appropriated and applied not to the murdered Armenians but to the Turks themselves.’ Turkey had already tried to undermine the authenticity of the photographic evidence of the genocide, demanding that the Hulton Getty picture library withdraw three famous pictures of the Armenian dead – including an iconic portrait by the brave German Armin Wegner of an Armenian girl and two smaller children lying dead amid garbage in 1915 – on the grounds that there was no genocide. Hulton withdrew the pictures for three days but the agency’s general manager, Mathew Butson, dismissed the Turkish objections. ‘I think that because of their application to join the EU, the Turks want to “clean” their history,’ he said. ‘But this isn’t the way to do it!’

Back in the United States, Armenians demanded compensation from US companies with whom their families – murdered in 1915 – had insured their lives. If it took Jewish Holocaust survivors forty years to gain recompense from such companies, it took the Armenian Holocaust survivors and descendants eighty-five years. New York Life Insurance agreed to settle a class-action suit for \$20 million, but even then its chairman, Sy Sternberg – who said that a third of the claims were settled after the murders – used the neutral language favoured by Turkey. Prompt payment had been made on claims, he said, ‘when it became clear that many of our Armenian policyholders perished in the tragic events of 1915.’ Perished? Tragic events? Several companies in the United States initially declined to pay out because ‘no one came forward’ to make claims. Andrew Kevorkian, one of the most outspoken British Armenians on 1915, asked: ‘What did they expect? That

the Turks would write a little note – “To Whom It May Concern” – stating the date of the murder each time they killed these men and women?”

When the Armenian community in the United States asked George W. Bush for his policy on their genocide if he were elected president, he stated on 19 February 2000 that ‘the Armenians were subjected to a genocidal campaign ... an awful crime in a century of bloody crimes against humanity. If elected President, I would ensure that our nation properly recognizes the tragic suffering of the Armenian people.’ Once he became president, however, Bush lost his courage, failed to honour his promise to the Armenian community and resorted to the usual weasel-words. Addressing Armenians on 24 April 2001, the eighty-sixth anniversary of the start of the slaughter, Bush no longer used the word ‘genocide’. Instead, it became ‘one of the great tragedies of history’; he talked only about ‘infamous killings’ and ‘the tragedy that scarred the history of the Armenian people’ and their ‘bitter fate’ at ‘the end of the Ottoman Empire’.

On the same day a year later, Bush called the genocide ‘an appalling tragedy’, talked about ‘horrific killings’ but referred only to ‘this horrendous loss of life’. Again, ‘genocide’ had disappeared and there was even a mystifying remark about ‘the wounds that remain painful for people in Armenia, in Turkey, and around the globe’. In April 2003 it was ‘a horrible tragedy’ and ‘a great calamity’ but one which – for some reason best known to Bush – reflected ‘a deep sorrow that continues to haunt them and their neighbours, the Turkish people’. This was preposterous. The Turkish government was denying the genocide – not feeling sorry about it. In the words of the Armenian National Committee of America, Bush, despite his calls for ‘moral clarity’ in international affairs, had ‘allowed pressure by a foreign government to reduce the President of the United States to using evasive and euphemistic terminology to avoid properly identifying the Armenian genocide ...’

This, it should be remembered, was the same president who thought he was fighting a ‘war against terror’, who claimed he was fighting ‘evil’ but who, when confronted with inescapable evidence of both terror and evil on a scale outreaching anything perpetrated against Americans, got cold feet and ran away from the truth. Indeed, there are times when the very existence of the Armenian genocide – for so many nations around the world – seems to have become far more dangerous than the weapons of mass destruction Bush and Blair lied about in Iraq. In this parallel but more realistic universe, it is the Turks who are telling Bush and Blair: You are either with us or against us. And both men have lined up alongside the Turks to deny history.

So now let me shine some sad, wintry sunlight over the West’s miserable, cowardly and dangerous response to the twentieth century’s first Holocaust. The genocide of 1915 was ‘forcefully remembered’ at Westminster Abbey in 1996 when Sir Michael Mayne, the Dean Emeritus of Westminster, commissioned an Irish artist to carve a stone to lie outside the west doors. ‘REMEMBER’, the inscription reads, ‘all innocent victims of oppression, violence and war.’ Round the edge is written: ‘Is it nothing to you, all you that pass by?’ Queen Elizabeth unveiled the stone in the presence of men and women who had suffered in Auschwitz, Rwanda, Bosnia, Siberia, Soweto and Armenia. Among them was 89-

year-old Yervant Shekerdeman, who as a boy experienced the Armenian massacres and lost most of his family in the genocide.

And after the months of mean refusal to acknowledge the truth of history, an outpouring of public anger eventually forced the Blair government, at the very last moment, to give way and allow more than twenty Armenians to attend the first Holocaust Memorial Day in 2001. Shekerdeman and another genocide survivor, Anig Bodossian, were belatedly invited. The Armenian Bishop in Britain was given a place of honour with other senior clergy, including the Chief Rabbi, and was among those who lit a candle before Blair and other politicians.

Not long afterwards, on Turkish television, an extraordinary event took place. A Turkish writer and historian, Taner Akçam, lectured his people on the facts – the reality – of the 1915 Armenian genocide. In front of a nationwide audience, he advised penitence. ‘If you can’t bring yourself to describe it as genocide, call it a massacre if you want,’ he said. ‘But it was a crime against humanity ... Ask forgiveness from the Armenian people and ... make a commitment that in Turkey, political dissent and disagreement should no longer be treated as an offence.’

These were difficult, treacherous things for a Turkish audience to hear. So Akçam was interrupted during the bitter six-hour television debate on 3 February 2001. ‘How dare you let this man speak? Shut him up!’ came an imperious voice over a phone link-up. It was Semra Özal, widow of former Turkish president Turgut Özal. But Dr Akçam did not give up. ‘Unless we distance ourselves from the perpetrators of this crime, which was a genocide, we will never be able to relieve ourselves of this terrible burden,’ he said. He used the Turkish for genocide – *soykırım* – throughout the programme. ‘The constant refrain of “We are not guilty”, and the parallel blaming of the Armenians, the victims, very much hurts the cause of Turkey,’ he said. Akçam even quoted Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish state, who on 23 April 1920 denounced the ‘Armenian massacres’ as ‘a shameful act’.

Hikmet Çiçek, the editor of *Aydinlik*, immediately denounced Akçam as a ‘traitor’, but other journalists were more courageous. Columnist Ertuğrul Özkök of *Hurriyet* had written the same day that the perpetrators of the Armenian genocide were ‘our Pol Pots, Berias and Stalins and the sooner we call their crimes to account ... the better our chances of redeeming ourselves from this scourge of being accused of genocide’.

Almost exactly three years after Akçam’s television ‘debate’, more than 500 Turkish intellectuals – university teachers, authors, writers and human rights officials – protested at a new school history curriculum which ordered teachers to denounce to their children ‘the unfounded allegations’ of the Armenians. Nor was this the first time that Turkish intellectuals had confronted their government. Three Turks were prosecuted in Istanbul in March 1994 for translating into Turkish and publishing 15,000 copies of a French book on the Armenian genocide. The book had been banned in January of that year by the Istanbul State Security Court No. 3, and they had been accused of inciting ‘belligerency, racial and territorial segregation and undermining the territorial integrity of Turkey’. An

Armenian Rights Group campaigned for the three Turks.

During the Jewish Holocaust, the Jews of Europe found their ‘righteous gentiles’, the non-Jewish men and women living under Nazi occupation who risked their lives to save those of Jews. And the ghosts of another group of saviours pass through the pages of the massive Bryce report on the Armenian Holocaust. Two American witnesses record how orders arrived for Tahsin Bey, the governor of Erzurum, in 1915, instructing him ‘that all Armenians should be killed. Tahsin refused to carry this out and, indeed, all through the time he was reluctant to maltreat the Armenians, but was overruled by *force majeure*.’⁷⁴

Armenians themselves are taught at school of the brave governor of Aleppo, Jelal Pasha, who said he was a governor, not an executioner – who said ‘it is the natural right of a human being to live.’ He saved thousands of lives. But it is the small man – the good Turk – who occasionally shines out of the Bryce report. On the deportation to Ras al-Ein, Maritza Kedjedjian was the witness to the rape of young women by Kurds. ‘When they were going to carry off another girl,’ she wrote later, ‘I asked Euomer Çavuş, a Mardin man, to help us.’ Çavuş means he was a Turkish army sergeant. Maritza goes on:

He stopped them at once and did not let them take [the girl] away ... The Kurds from the surrounding villages attacked us that night. Euomer, who was in charge of us, immediately went up to the heights and harangued them in Kurdish, telling them not to attack us. We were hungry and thirsty and had no water to drink. Euomer took some of our [drinking] vessels and brought us water from a long way off ... The wife of my brother-in-law had a baby born that night. The next morning we started again. Sergeant Euomer left some women with her and kept an eye on her from a distance. Then he put the mother and the new-born child on a beast, and brought her to us in safety.

Could there be a more moving story from the bloody fields of the Armenian Holocaust? And so I return to my original question. Should not the Armenians commemorate all those brave Turks who acted out of compassion and refused to obey orders? Though these Turks were painfully few in number, Armenians would be acknowledging their humanity. And how would the Turks react? By refusing to honour these courageous fellow Turks? Or by remembering their courage and thus – by the same token – accepting the fact of the Armenian genocide? Taner Akçam deserves such a gesture. So does Sergeant Euomer.

* * *

So do the Armenians. In 2002, Aram Kevorkian sent me an account of his visit to Chunkoush, the Armenian town in Turkey where his father Karnig was born. He found the rubble of the Armenian homes of ninety years ago, and the still standing wreckage of two Armenian churches. And he went to the ravine where his people had been murdered in April 1915. ‘There the Armenians had been forced to undress, their hands had been tied, and their throats slit or their heads shattered with axes, and their bodies thrown into the pits.’ Kevorkian stood and read from Yeats’ poem of hope, ‘Lapis Lazuli’:

On their own feet they came, or on shipboard,
 Camel-back, horse-back, ass-back, mule-back,
 Old civilisations put to the sword.
 Then they and their wisdom went to rack:
 No handiwork of Callimachus,
 Who handled marble as if it were bronze,
 Made draperies that seemed to rise
 When sea-wind swept the corner, stands;
 His long lamp-chimney shaped like the stem
 Of a slender palm, stood but a day;
 All things fall and are built again ...

It is 1992, and I am at Margara on the border of Turkey and Armenia – the real Armenian state, free at last of its dark Soviet cloak – and I look at the snow-peak of Mount Ararat beyond the Turkish border; for Ararat, the national symbol of Armenia, is inside Turkey, a place to be looked at and wondered at from afar. I stand in the garden of Levon Karapegian, and above his tomato bushes and potato beds, his cucumbers and sick-looking cherry trees, I see a Turkish flag drooping in the midday heat on top of a wooden guard post. ‘Sometimes I see the Turkish soldiers standing over there by the little tree on the other side of the fence,’ Karapegian says. What Armenian, I ask myself, wants to live within 6 metres of the nation whose Ottoman rulers annihilated his people?

There are not many villagers left; today they are outnumbered by the storks that nest on the disused factory crane, on the telegraph poles, on the roof of the crumbling public library, on top of the marble podium commemorating those Armenians who fell in the 1941-45 ‘Great Patriotic War’ against Hitler. Karapegian is a teacher of Armenian history at the local secondary school, educating the great-grandchildren of those who survived the genocide and fled – in most cases from villages scarcely 25 kilometres away on the other side of the Turkish border – between 1915 and 1918.

As I sit with Levon Karapegian and his family at a table in their garden, eating plates of cherries, a cuckoo calls from beyond the trees, from Turkey, from what the family call western Armenia. And his wife points to a line of poplars behind the Turkish guard post. ‘That was our family home,’ she says. ‘I remember my father putting me on his shoulders when I was small and telling me how my grandfather planted all those trees.’

Five years later and 3,500 kilometres away, the sea mist curling over the Sussex dunes on a damp English evening, Astrid Aghajanian is pouring tea for me from a big, heavy pot. She is one of the last survivors. Eighty-two years ago, the Turks shot her grandfather, grandmother and uncle.

What was left of the family all walked and walked. At a village one night, my father who had been deported with us came to see us. He told my mother that he thought he was being allowed to say goodbye, that he would be shot with the other men. I remember my mother told me that my father’s last words were: ‘The only way to remember me is to

look after Astrid.' We never saw him again. It was a long march and the Turks and Kurds came to carry off girls for rape. My mother would run from one end of the column to the other each time she saw them attacking us. My other grandmother died along the way. So did my newly-born brother Vartkes. We had to leave him by the roadside. One day, the Turks said they wanted to collect all the young children and look after them. Some women, who couldn't feed their children, let them go. Then my mother saw them piling the children on top of each other and setting them on fire. My mother pushed me under another pile of corpses. She buried herself with me under those bodies. Even today I cannot stand to be in darkness or to be on my own. My mother saved me from the fire. She used to tell me afterwards that when she heard the screams of the children and saw the flames, it was as if their souls were going up to heaven.

Astrid Aghajanian's mother eventually carried her to a Bedouin camp and, after reaching Aleppo – with the help of a Turkish officer – she remarried and moved to the newly mandated territory of Palestine. In Jerusalem young Astrid was to meet her future husband Gaspar, whose family had lived in Palestine for generations. But her Armenian agony had not ended. They were forced to flee the 1948 Arab–Israeli war and took refuge in Jordan – where Gaspar Aghajanian secured British citizenship – and then moved to Cyprus. But when the Turks invaded the island in 1974, after the Greek *coup d'état*, the couple were dispossessed once again. Astrid was now a refugee from the Turks twice in the same century. The Turkish army moved into what had been their family home. Could history torture anyone more than this?

It could. The Aghajanians received money for their lost home, but when Gaspar demanded compensation for the couple's possessions – Persian carpets, furniture, an ancient coin collection, photographs of massacred relatives from 1915, a piano and a large library of valuable books all stolen by the Turks – he received a letter from the British Foreign Office stating that 'the Turkish Cypriot authorities ... enacted "legislation" to exclude claims made by those persons who were deemed to have Greek or Greek Cypriot connections. They have now extended this exclusion to cover claims by persons deemed to be of Armenian descent.'

The couple were never Greek Cypriots and never asked for Greek Cypriot passports. 'We were full British citizens,' Gaspar Aghajanian says. 'But we were refused compensation on grounds of our ethnic background.' When he heard that Margaret Thatcher, the British prime minister, was to visit Turkey in 1990 for ceremonies marking the 1915 Gallipoli battle – another full-circle of the catastrophe – Astrid's husband wrote to his MP to complain, adding that his wife was a survivor of the Armenian genocide. Back came a letter from Foreign Office minister Francis Maude, saying – and here the reader of this book may be permitted to scream – that while the government 'regard the loss of so many lives as a tragedy ... we have long considered that it would not be right to raise with, or attribute to, the present Turkish government acts which took place 75 years ago during the time of the Ottoman empire ...'

Catch-22 is a cliché compared to this. In order to maintain relations with Turkey, the British government no longer acknowledges that the Armenian

genocide happened. But it cannot obtain compensation for the Aghajanians because the Turks refuse to compensate British citizens of Armenian descent – because of the 1915 Armenian genocide. To this day, the couple have received nothing for their possessions.

If there was any international kindness to be bestowed upon the Aghajanians, however, it came in 2003 when a young Turkish woman, a student from Chicago, asked to see them. The girl, whose identity it is still better to protect, had moved from Turkey to the United States and found herself living among Armenians and insisted on hearing the story of their genocide. She began academic work to discover what happened in 1915. One afternoon she came to the little bungalow in Shoreham in southern England and expressed her sorrow to Astrid, and her remorse for what her Turkish people had done. She gently produced a tape recorder. And so Astrid Aghajanian's memories – of her father's last goodbye, of the death of her baby brother and of the burning children whose souls went up to heaven – are now safeguarded by a young Turkish woman⁵.

In Beirut, the Armenian home for the blind – now for all elderly Armenians – is warmer today than it was during the last days of the civil war. There are new doors and central heating, although all the Holocaust survivors I met there in 1994 are dead. There are only two new patients who are survivors. There will be no more. One is an old lady who can only remember the songs her mother taught her of the horrors of the march and the deportation. She squeals them out in Turkish because she never learned Armenian, so that the staff have to find a nurse who speaks the Turkish language to translate. I know these songs. They have been meticulously collected by an Armenian academic:

Bunches and bunches of roses are coming,
 Death is hard to bear for me,
 Wake up, sultan, tyrant sultan!
 The whole world is weeping blood!

Down the corridor, a very old man is lying on a bed. He is Haroutioun Kebedjian. He is holding in his left hand a bible in braille and his right hand is fingering the embossed paper letters. He greets me with a smile, sightlessly. It is now the year 2000 and he is ninety-three years old, so he was eight when he survived the Armenian Holocaust. His memory is as clear as his emotions:

We lived in Dortyol. My father was called Sarkis and my mother was Mariam. There were ten children including me and my brothers and sisters. The Turks collected all the people with their donkeys and horses. We were to go to Aleppo and Ras el-Ain. But they started killing us on the way. The Turks forced us to the Habur river and by the time we got there, there was only my mother and my sister and me left. They told the women and the men to take off all their clothes. My sister was eighteen and a man on a horse came and grabbed her and put her on his horse. He did this in front of us. It happened in front of my eyes. I was not blind then. And they started to beat my mother. As she begged them not to take my sister, the Turks beat her to death. I have always remembered that as she died, she screamed my name: 'Haroutioun! Haroutioun!' Later an Arab Bedouin took me

to his house and I stayed there for three years. The war was over and then people came saying they were looking for Armenian orphans. I said I was Armenian, so they took me to Aleppo. There I caught a virus that affected my eyes. I was suddenly blind and I was only eleven years old. Until I was twenty-three, I was filled with rage because the Turks took my sister and beat my mother in front of my eyes until she died. But when I was twenty-three, I felt this was not the right way to be a man, so I began to pray to God so He would see me. I was making peace with myself. Now I am ready to meet my God. I am at peace. Last year when the big earthquake happened in Turkey, it killed so many Turks. And I prayed to God for those Turks – I prayed for those poor Turkish people.

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References

1. Strangely enough, the French national airline Air France had no qualms about discussing the Armenian bloodbath. In 1999, its own onboard airline magazine ran an article about a photographic exhibition of the mass killings, referring to ‘the genocide, still denied by the Turks today’. Yet Air France continued to be allowed to fly unhindered to Turkey.
2. Rivka Cohen, the Israeli ambassador in Yerevan, said on 5 March 2002 that while the Armenian genocide was ‘a tragedy’, the (Jewish) Holocaust ‘was a unique phenomenon, since it had always been planned and aimed to destroy the whole nation’. Understandably, the Armenian government in Yerevan issued a diplomatic note of protest.
3. There are no conspiracies on the *Independent’s* subs desk; just a tough, no-nonsense rule that our articles follow a grammatical ‘house’ style and conform to what is called ‘normal usage’. And the Jewish Holocaust, through ‘normal usage’, takes a capital ‘H’. Other holocausts don’t. No one is quite sure why – the same practice is followed in newspapers and books all over the world, although it was the centre of a row in the United States, where Harvard turned down a professorial ‘Chair of Holocaust and Cognate Studies’ because academics rightly objected to the genocide of other peoples – including the Armenians – being heaped in a bin called ‘cognate’. But none of this answered the questions of my Armenian friend. To have told him his people didn’t qualify for a capital ‘H’ would have been as shameful as it would have been insulting.

‘Common usage’ is a bane to all of us journalists, but it is not sacred. It doesn’t have to stand still. My father, I told my editor, had fought in what he called the ‘Great War’ – but common usage had to be amended after 1945, to the ‘First World War’. What’s in a name? I asked in my paper. What’s in a capital letter? How many other skulls lie in the sands of northern Syria? Did the Turks not kill enough Armenians? From that day, the *Independent* printed Holocaust with a capital ‘H’ for both Jewish and Armenian genocides.
4. Elsewhere, it should be noted, Tahsin Bey does not appear in so favourable a light; but wasn’t Oskar Schindler a member of the Nazi party?
5. She later wrote to the Aghajanians. ‘I will do my best to continue working on the recognition of the genocide,’ she said in her letter, ‘and make a difference, even a small one.’