

# History Speaks

The moral case against the Armenian Genocide resolution.

By Barbara Lerner

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Prudential arguments against the Armenian genocide resolution pending in Congress are gaining traction; odds for passage in November that looked overwhelming last month look more like a toss-up today. But in the court of public opinion, genocide proponents are still winning. Most Europeans and transcultural multinationals have already proclaimed it an indisputable historical fact that the Armenian tragedy in Turkey in World War I was a genocide, perpetrated by the Turks — a deliberate government attempt to wipe out all Armenians — and growing numbers of Americans think we have a moral duty to join them. The problem, in this arena, is that prudential arguments have nothing like the emotional power and widespread popular appeal of the moral case for condemning the Turks.

We must do it, Armenian genocide proponents tell us, because the Armenian tragedy was the original Holocaust: Armenians in World War I were like the Jews in World War II; Turks in 1915 were like the Germans in the 1940s. Thus, the only moral choice is to condemn the Turks, as we condemned the Nazis. The logic here is inescapable: it is the only moral choice, if the charge is true, if Armenians really were helpless scapegoats like the Jews, and if Turks really were deliberate, genocidal monsters like the Nazis. But an analogy is only an emotional appeal, not a rational argument — let alone a moral one — unless it actually fits the historical facts. To judge whether the Holocaust analogy does, we can't just look at Jews and Germans in World War II, then at dead Armenians in World War I, and extrapolate the rest. We have to look at live Armenians and Turks in 1915; at the desperate, multi-front war Turkey was submerged in, in that bloody year; and at how ordinary people and government leaders reacted.

We know what life was like for ordinary people and government leaders in Germany in 1942-43, when the mass killing of Jews reached industrial scale. It was orderly and safe; the Nazis were still mostly winning abroad, and in full, unchallenged control at home. Jews aside, no one starved to death in Germany then, and no German civilians were massacred or raped by enemy forces. There were no enemy forces on German soil in those years. The only enemies at home were the Jews, and they were never a real threat. They were scapegoats, not objective enemies, and they were being methodically eliminated, without exception, in all German-controlled territory. Life in Turkey in 1915 was very different, but, genocide accusations aside, most Americans know nothing of it. Here, to remedy that lack, a little history. First, the backdrop to 1915 — a one-paragraph review of how Turkey got to where she was in that critical year. Then, the foreground — what was happening in Turkey in 1915, and how Turks and Armenians responded.

Turkey wasn't a country in 1915; it was an empire in dissolution, reaching the climactic endpoint of a century-long decline in wealth, power, and control over territory. The

Ottomans tried many reforms to halt the slide; all proved too little, too late. By 1915 they had already lost great swathes of territory in Crimea and the Caucasus, in a series of losing wars with their giant rival to the east, Imperial Russia. In the west, they lost most of their European territories in another series of losing wars against a rising tide of nationalist uprisings in Greece and the Balkans.

In all these lost lands, Turks and other Muslims had been at least a substantial minority; in many, a clear majority, and everywhere, they were driven from their homes in large numbers, and often brutalized. Massacres and rapes were especially common on the eastern front. Czarist troops and their local allies were no less brutal to conquered Muslim civilians than their Communist successors were to Christian civilians in the Ukraine and Eastern Europe, a few decades later. All this sent millions of Muslim refugees flooding into the Ottoman core we now know as Turkey in the years before World War I, overwhelming the Ottoman's waning power to provide even minimal assistance to many, and seriously eroding their ability to maintain order in areas farthest from the government in Istanbul. Then, on November 2, 1914, Imperial Russia declared war on the Ottomans again, and this time, Imperial Britain and Imperial France followed suit, three days later.

That's the backdrop to 1915. Here's the foreground. In January, the French, the British, and Britain's colonial troops — Australians and New Zealanders—mounted a major attack on Turkey's western front at Gallipoli, the gateway to Istanbul. Fighting there was fierce, and continued until January 1916, but, on this front, there were relatively few civilian casualties, and no massacres.

On the eastern front, the situation was grimmer. The czar's army had broken through the Ottoman defense lines in the Caucasus, and was laying waste to cities and villages in Anatolia, sending old refugees fleeing in terror once more, and adding millions of new refugees to the mounting toll. Once again, the invading Russians and their local allies often treated conquered Turkish civilians with great brutality; massacres and rapes were not rare events. In much of Anatolia, death and destruction was omnipresent, and for millions of homeless survivors, clean water and food was scarce to nonexistent. Starvation killed many; raging epidemics of dysentery, typhus, and cholera killed more. In refugee-flooded areas behind the ever-changing front lines and on the roads leading to them, chaos ruled. There was no one to keep order: all available men were needed at the fronts.

That's what the Turks were struggling with in 1915, and some Armenians struggled with them, serving in the Ottoman government, and fighting side-by-side with Turks in the Ottoman army. Most Armenians who demonstrated this kind of loyalty to the Ottoman state came from Istanbul, Izmir, and Aleppo; the wives, children, and elderly they left behind when they went off to war were not driven from their homes or subjected to massacres. After the war, these men collected their veteran's pensions, just as other veterans did; some of their descendants live there still.

But Armenians were hardly immune to the fierce currents of nationalism sweeping the region in the late 19th and early 20th century. In eastern Anatolia and the Caucasus, especially, many Armenians on both sides of the border saw the Russian invasion as their great chance to recreate their ancient Christian kingdom in Anatolia, with the aid of the Czar's mighty Christian army. Armed Armenian nationalist groups — the Dashnaks, the Hunchaks, and others — saw Armenians who fought for the Turks as traitors to the Armenian cause; many still do. Nationalist Armenians were at war with the Turks in 1915, and the Armenian generals and guerilla leaders who commanded them are still honored as Armenian heroes today. Military leaders like Generals Andranik Ozanian, Garegin Nzhdeh, Drastamat Kanahyan (“General Dro”), and Garo Pasdirmajjan (“Armen Garo”) are largely unknown to Americans whose knowledge of Armenian history is limited to the orthodox genocide literature, but well-known by Armenians. Here, again, the analogy to the Jews of the Holocaust simply does not fit. There are no statues to the Jewish generals who fought the Nazis in Germany in 1942-43, because there were none.

In 1915, Armenian generals were in the forefront of the Russian invasion: some led Russian troops; others led special Armenian battalions, made up of Armenian volunteers from both sides of the border; still others organized Turkish-Armenian military units behind the lines, capturing Anatolian cities like Van, even before the Russians arrived, joining the Russians in capturing Bitlis, Mus, and many other Turkish towns and villages, massacring Turks in a number of those places, before Ottoman reinforcements recaptured them in a long, bloody series of seesaw battles that raged throughout eastern Anatolia in 1915. Some Turkish civilians responded by massacring Armenians, and wild, outlaw tribes of Circassians and Kurds preyed on hapless civilians in both groups.

Of course, nothing justifies any of these massacres, but the claim that Ottoman government leaders ordered any of them is belied by the frequency with which, when they could, they tried and punished men responsible for them: not just Armenians, but many Turks, too, including government officials and military men found guilty of failing to protect civilians. But the Ottoman government in 1915 was no fount of wisdom. It was the product of a series of mutinies, coups, and countercoups that began in 1908, deposing one Sultan and installing another, most of whose rapidly eroding powers were seized in 1913 by three rebel leaders, Talat, Cemal and Enver. And in 1915, that triumvirate made a decision that resulted in many civilian deaths. They decided to deal with the civil war in eastern Anatolia by ordering Ottoman soldiers to march all Armenians out of the area, and resettle them in the Ottoman city of Aleppo, in what is now Syria.

Orders were given to distribute food and water as needed, and to protect the marchers. But, due to the chaos of war, the dearth of supplies, the critical shortage of troops needed at the fronts, and the competing tragedies playing out all around them, there was no chance that the transfer plan could be carried out humanely. It turned into a death march, comparable to the one our soldiers endured on Bataan in World War II, but made worse in the Armenian case by the fact that many of the marchers were the women, children, and old people left behind. Many did not survive the horrors of the trip. Still, we don't call the Bataan death march a genocide, and there is even less reason to claim the Armenian death march was intended as such. If the Ottomans wanted to kill all

Armenians, they would not have exempted Armenians from Istanbul, Izmir, and Aleppo from the transfer order, along with others serving in government and the military. Mustafa Kemal, the hero of Gallipoli who founded the modern Turkish Republic in 1923, had a more cogent view: he saw the triumvirate as incompetent, and Enver, especially, as a dangerously unrealistic commander whose poorly conceived plans resulted in the slaughter of many Ottoman soldiers; and he saw the Armenian transfer plan as more of the same.

The bottom line here is that in actual historical fact, Turks were not like Nazis; Armenians were not like Jews; and attempts to convince Americans that they were are propaganda, not history. The Armenian tragedy was real and terrible, but it was not the only terrible tragedy in Turkey in 1915 and it wasn't genocide; it was that in the midst of a wider war that brought death and destruction to millions on all sides, nationalist Armenians fought a war to claim a piece of Turkey for a country of their own, and lost. Later, they got a state of their own, but its development has been stunted from that day to this by high levels of poverty, corruption and political violence. If Armenians would accept their share of responsibility for the tragedies of 1915, trade with their increasingly prosperous Turkish neighbors could do much to alleviate that poverty. Some in Armenia have long wanted to do that, but most government leaders — and the powerful Armenian diaspora community those leaders rely on — have always insisted, instead, on demonizing Turks and whitewashing all Armenian actions in World War I. And, although they proved incompetent at governing, they achieved great success as propagandists. In this, Armenians are very similar to Palestinians; very different from both Jews and Turks.

And the urgent questions that these facts raise for us are these: How did a narrative so far from the facts gain such wide currency and power in contemporary America? What can we do to make ourselves less vulnerable to specious narratives, promoted by other groups who fail at governing, but excel at propaganda?

Barbara Lerner is a frequent NRO contributor.