

False Analogies

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Our reading of historical events are inevitably mediated by various factors. Political understandings, ethno-cultural inclinations and, very importantly, collective memories and national narratives play a role. Yet, even for many die-hard relativists, the Holocaust is a historical reality. Also, most of those who oppose policies of Israel today keep that criticism separate from the historical plight of the Jews. This is because the factual basis of the Holocaust relies not just on personal accounts and a consistent collective narrative, but on objective material evidence as well as the existence of motive on the part of the perpetrators and an accompanying socio-cultural background. That background was fed by centuries of racism in Europe which included anti-Semitic manifestations. As such, Nazism targeted Jews not because of what they did, but because of who they were. Accordingly, this crime category constituted a genocide as ascertained by the competent legal body investigating it after the war.

The recognition of the Holocaust and the sympathy accorded to Jews for their suffering are seen by most Armenian groups as an opportunity to advance their claims of having suffered the same fate under Ottoman Turkey during World War I. Recently, for example, an active member of the Armenian lobby in Canada stated that the situation of the Armenians today were even worse because, whereas only a few people deny the Holocaust, the Armenian version of the events of 1915 are denied by a whole nation, the Turks. This attempt is deeply troubling, morally as well as intellectually. It has the potential to detract from the gravity of the Holocaust and confuse the larger public. It is unfair to Jews and Turks alike.

Turks do not deny the suffering of the Armenians in the final years of the collapsing Ottoman state in WWI. Many Armenians died or were killed in that tragic period. Yet, certainly many more Turks perished in the period leading to and during that war. The fact remains that the events of 1915, contrary to the Armenian narrative, are incomparable to what happened in Nazi Germany. A highly significant primary source revealing this difference has recently been rediscovered in a library in Russia. It is no other than the original report by Hovhannes Katchaznoui, the first Prime Minister of the short lived Republic of Armenia of 1918-1919, presented to his fellow party members in 1923.

Prime Minister Katchaznoui explains, as an Armenian nationalist, how they were led to believe that the Ottomans would lose the war, that it was a mistake for them to arm and revolt against Ottoman Turkey hoping to create an Armenian homeland and support the invading Russian forces for that purpose. According to the account, Turks were massacred in this process and militant activities of the Armenian voluntary units were directed at winning over the Western public opinion. He does not, of course, excuse the death of many Armenians that occurred when the Ottoman government consequently decided to relocate the Armenians away from that war zone. However, as a prominent Holocaust scholar, Prof Guenter Levy, has recently ascertained, the conditions in Ottoman Turkey were such that the government could not even properly feed or medically treat its own army during the war, let alone civilians being relocated. The

Ottoman Army suffered heavy losses even before confronting the invading enemy forces in the east.

This is not to belittle the human suffering that Armenians experienced along with Turks and others. It is, however, important to distinguish fact from one-sided narratives. The Armenian narrative has found a sympathetic audience in the West, including Canada. After all, Armenian literature of cross references is replete with copies of a specific instruction by the Ottoman government to kill off the Armenian population. Another frequent reference is to Hitler for having said “who remembers the Armenians?” It is now scientifically proven that the document said to hold such instructions was a pure forgery – obviously created for propaganda purposes – and there is no real evidence of Hitler referring to Armenians as such. Yet, both are continuously used by Armenian groups especially to impress the less informed audiences. Add to that a discourse which portrays Turks as the strong Muslim majority and Armenians the minority Christian underdog and you have a powerful case to make today.

Canadian public deserves better. The effective Armenian lobby in Canada has been successful in getting parliamentary and governmental declarations supporting their version of events. And quite a few Canadians “believe” that Turks perpetrated a genocidal act against Armenians. Genocide is a very serious and distinct crime category. It cannot be reduced to a matter of believing. It requires the language of knowledge, not conviction. Fortunately, more Canadians now know that Turkey made a proposal to Armenia in 2005 to get to the bottom of all the claims by establishing a joint commission of historians, archivists and other experts. The findings of the commission, after investigating all relevant archives in Turkey, Armenia and elsewhere, would be shared internationally. The government of Canada supports Turkey’s proposal. The Armenian side is shying away. It apparently does not want to risk the popular support of its version by engaging in a serious study. So the proposal is conveniently brushed aside as a tactical Turkish move.

The Armenian narrative can possibly be described as what some scholars refer to as a “category of an untruth”, that is, drawing false conclusions from a reflection of events whose reality can still be attested through positive historical inquiry. Such one-sided reading of the Armenian tragedy is far from the reality of the Holocaust. I am confident that Canadians will increasingly seek to base their own judgement on more than one nationally biased interpretation.

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