NEARLY A MILLION GENOCIDE VICTIMS, COVERED IN A CLOAK OF AMNESIA

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By Sabrina Tavernise, New York Times Istanbul Bureau Chief, March 8, 2009

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In Turkey, any discussion of what happened to the Ottoman Armenians can bring a storm of public outrage. But since its publication in a book in January, the number — and its Ottoman source — has gone virtually unmentioned. Newspapers hardly wrote about it. Television shows have not discussed it.

“Nothing,” said Murat Bardakci, the Turkish author and columnist who compiled the book.

The silence can mean only one thing, he said: “My numbers are too high for ordinary people. Maybe people aren’t ready to talk about it yet.”

For generations, most Turks knew nothing of the details of the Armenian genocide of 1915 to 1918, when more than a million Armenians were killed as the Ottoman Turk government purged the population. Turkey locked the ugliest parts of its past out of sight, Soviet-style, keeping any mention of the events out of schoolbooks and official narratives in an aggressive campaign of forgetting.

But in the past 10 years, as civil society has flourished here, some parts of Turkish society are now openly questioning the state’s version of events. In December, a group of intellectuals circulated a petition that apologized for the denial of the massacres. Some 29,000 people have signed it.

With his book, “The Remaining Documents of Talat Pasha,” Mr. Bardakci (pronounced bard-AK-chuh) has become, rather unwillingly, part of this ferment. The book is a collection of documents and records that once belonged to Mehmed Talat, known as Talat Pasha, the primary architect of the Armenian deportations.

The documents, given to Mr. Bardakci by Mr. Talat’s widow, Hayriye, before she died in 1983, include lists of population figures. Before 1915, 1,256,000 Armenians lived in the Ottoman Empire, according to the documents. The number plunged to 284,157 two years later, Mr. Bardakci said.

To the untrained ear, it is simply a sad statistic. But anyone familiar with the issue knows the numbers are in fierce dispute. Turkey has never acknowledged a specific number of deportees or

deaths. On Sunday, Turkey's foreign minister warned that President Obama might set back relations if he recognized the massacre of Armenians as genocide before his visit to Turkey next month.

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire was bloody, the Turkish argument goes, and those who died were victims of that chaos.

Mr. Bardakci subscribes to that view. The figures, he said, do not indicate the number of dead, only a result of the decline in the Armenian population after deportation. He strongly disagrees that the massacres amounted to a genocide, and he says Turkey was obliged to take action against Armenians because they were openly supporting Russia in its war against the Ottoman Empire.

"It was not a Nazi policy or a Holocaust," he said. "These were very dark times. It was a very difficult decision. But deportation was the outcome of some very bloody events. It was necessary for the government to deport the Armenian population."

This argument is rejected by most scholars, who believe that the small number of Armenian rebels were not a serious threat to the Ottoman Empire, and that the policy was more the product of the perception that the Armenians, non-Muslims and therefore considered untrustworthy, were a problem population.

Hilmar Kaiser, a historian and expert on the Armenian genocide, said the records published in the book were conclusive proof from the Ottoman authority itself that it had pursued a calculated policy to eliminate the Armenians. "You have suddenly on one page confirmation of the numbers," he said. "It was like someone hit you over the head with a club."

Mr. Kaiser said the before and after figures amounted to "a death record."

"There is no other way of viewing this document," he said. "You can't just hide a million people."

Other scholars said that the number was a useful addition to the historical record, but that it did not introduce a new version of events.

"This corroborates what we already knew," said Donald Bloxham, the author of "The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians."

Mr. Bardakci is a history buff who learned to read and write Ottoman script from his grandmother, allowing him to navigate Turkey's written past, something that most Turks are unable to do. He plays the tanbur, a traditional string instrument. His grandfather was a member of the same political party of Mr. Talat, and his family knew many of the important political figures in Turkey's founding.

Though he clearly wanted the numbers to be known, he stubbornly refuses to interpret them. He offers no analysis in the book, and aside from an interview with Mr. Talat's widow, there is virtually no

text beside the original documents.

“I didn’t want to interpret,” he said. “I want the reader to decide.”

The best way to do that, he argues, is by using cold, hard facts, which can cut through the layers of emotional rhetoric that have clouded the issue for years.

“I believe we need documents in Turkey,” he said. “This is the most important.”

But some of the keenest observers of Turkish society said the silence was a sign of just how taboo the topic still was. “The importance of the book is obvious from the fact that no paper except Milliyet has written a single line about it,” wrote Murat Belge, a Turkish academic, in a January column in the liberal daily newspaper Taraf.

Still, it is a measure of Turkey’s democratic maturity that the book was published here at all. Mr. Bardakci said he had held the documents for so long — 27 years — because he was waiting for Turkey to reach the point when their publication would not cause a frenzy.

Even the state now feels the need to defend itself. Last summer, a propaganda film about the Armenians made by Turkey’s military was distributed to primary schools. After a public outcry, it was stopped.