THE EVOLUTION OF TURKISH DENIAL

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Category: Opinions

By Varouj Pogharian, Bogota, Colombia, 18 June 2026

Over more than a century, the Turkish state's response to the Armenian Genocide has passed through several distinct phases. Governments and institutions have reframed events, restricted discussion, promoted alternative interpretations, and used diplomacy to oppose international recognition. Taken together, these approaches have had the effect of obscuring the systematic destruction of the Ottoman Empire's Armenian population during World War I. Yet the historical record presents a substantial challenge to denialist narratives.

Wartime Euphemisms (1915-1918)

During the genocide itself, Ottoman authorities justified the deportation of Armenians as a military necessity. Officials alleged Armenian collaboration with Russia and portrayed the removals as temporary security measures required by wartime conditions. This explanation presented deportation as a defensive policy rather than a program of destruction.

One of many examples that illustrates the weaknesses of this justification are the events in Trebizond (modern Trabzon) located on the Black Sea coast. In 1915, local authorities organized the mass drowning of Armenian civilians, including women, children, and the elderly. Victims were reportedly taken offshore in boats and thrown into the Black Sea or drowned when the vessels were deliberately capsized.

These reports puncture the official narrative most forcefully, since the region had no land border with Russia and was far removed from the eastern front. The killings in Trebizond were not wartime accidents but systematic massacres carried out under official orders. They occurred far from the areas where Armenian insurgent activity was alleged, and targeted civilians who posed no military threat.

The nature of the victims and the method employed make it difficult to reconcile these events with claims of military necessity. Instead, they suggest that deportations often functioned as a mechanism of extermination.

Consular reports provide detailed, contemporaneous accounts stamped with credibility, that challenge the denial narratives.

Oscar Heizer (U.S. Consul, Trebizond, 1915) documented drownings in the Black Sea and the forced assimilation of Armenian children. In a July 12, 1915 dispatch to Ambassador Morgenthau, Heizer reported: *"Many of the children were loaded into boats and taken out to sea and thrown overboard. I myself saw where 16 bodies were washed ashore and buried by a Greek woman near the Italian monastery."*

Giacomo Gorrini (Italian Consul, Trebizond, 1915) publicly (and loudly) denounced the mass drownings, describing "thousands of innocent women and children driven into the sea and

drowned."

Leslie Davis (U.S. Consul, Harput, 1915–1917), recorded parallel atrocities inland where mass graves filled with the bodies of slaughtered Armenians. He stated that the evidence of extermination was on such a scale that it could not be explained away as "relocation."

These reports were written as events unfolded and originated from observers representing different countries and interests. Their accounts are reinforced by survivor testimony and other contemporary documentation. Collectively, they describe organized violence directed against a civilian population rather than deaths resulting from battlefield operations or isolated local abuses. Together, the consular testimonies present a geographic mosaic—from the Black Sea coast to the Anatolian interior—that demonstrates the coordinated nature of the genocide and exposes the contradictions at the heart of Turkish denial.

Black Sea coastline near Trabzon

Postwar Minimization (1919-1923)

Following the Ottoman defeat, the government briefly acknowledged responsibility for crimes committed during the war. The Ottoman courts-martial of 1919 and 1920 prosecuted leading officials involved in the destruction of the Armenians. Several prominent perpetrators were convicted, and some received death sentences. The judicial proceedings recognized that the violence had been organized rather than spontaneous.

The period of official acknowledgment was short-lived. As the Turkish nationalist movement under Mustafa Kemal consolidated power and established the Republic of Turkey, public discussion of wartime crimes diminished. Responsibility was increasingly attributed to local actors, wartime disorder, or the excesses of individual officials. Broader questions of state responsibility gradually disappeared from public discourse.

Silence and Suppression (1923-1960s)

During the early decades of the Republic, discussion of the Armenian Genocide largely vanished from public life. School curricula gave little attention to the Armenian presence in Anatolia or the events of 1915. Public debate was discouraged, and scholarly inquiry remained limited. While Armenian survivors and diaspora communities preserved memories of the genocide, the subject occupied little space in official Turkish narratives.

Counter-Narratives and Institutional Denial (1970s-1990s)

Beginning in the 1970s, Turkish denial became more organized and systematic. State-supported scholars and institutions promoted interpretations that framed Armenian suffering as part of broader wartime turmoil or mutual inter-communal violence. The focus shifted toward Armenian rebellion, civil conflict, and reciprocal suffering rather than the organized destruction of a civilian population.

At the same time, Turkey intensified diplomatic efforts to discourage foreign governments and international organizations from recognizing the genocide. These campaigns helped popularize the language of “mutual suffering” while diverting attention from questions of intent, planning, and responsibility.

Legalistic Denial (2000s-Present)

In recent decades, denial has increasingly relied on legal arguments. Debate has centered on the definition of genocide under international law, particularly the requirement of proving intent to destroy a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group.

Turkish officials and some scholars argue that the available evidence does not demonstrate the specific intent required by the legal definition. The state acknowledges that large numbers of Armenians died during World War I, but rejects the term “genocide,” presenting the issue as a matter of historical interpretation rather than established fact.

Turkish Archives and the Historical Record

One of the strongest rebuttals to denial is that historians have not relied on hidden or secret evidence to demonstrate the veracity of the Armenian Genocide. Much of the documentation has long been available in plain sight, in nonTurkish archives that researchers have examined for decades.

The lingering question is: if the evidence supporting the genocide is so extensive, why does the debate continue? The answer is that the dispute today is less about the existence of evidence and more about its interpretation, completeness, and legal characterization.

A common misconception is that historians who documented the genocide relied on smuggled papers or covert access to restricted records. The reality is less dramatic and more revealing: the case proving the Armenian Genocide rests on years of conventional archival research conducted in Turkey and in archives across Europe and North America.

Access to Ottoman Records

The Turkish state has long argued that the historical record should be examined through archival evidence. Over time, access to Ottoman records expanded, allowing both Turkish and foreign researchers to consult materials preserved by the state. Scholars apply for access through official procedures, register as researchers, and request documents through catalog systems. Research is conducted openly in reading rooms and increasingly through digitized collections.

Among the most influential scholars to examine these materials was ArmenianAmerican historian **Vahakn Dadrian**. Although he consulted Ottoman sources when available, his research drew heavily upon German, Austrian, British, American, and Armenian records. His work demonstrated that evidence concerning the destruction of the Armenians was not confined to a single archive or national collection.

German diplomatic and military reports proved especially important. As Germany was the Ottoman Empire's wartime ally, German officials had little incentive to invent accusations against a government with which they were closely cooperating. Dadrian also drew on Austrian diplomatic archives, American consular reports, British records, Ottoman courtmartial proceedings of 1919–1920, and contemporary newspapers and memoirs.

A major strength of Dadrian's scholarship was his ability to work in multiple languages. He crossreferenced Ottoman, German, English, French, and Armenian sources. Much of his case was built from German documents, which made them particularly difficult for denialists to dismiss.

Dadrian was not primarily an Ottoman archival researcher in the way Turkish historian **Taner Akçam** later became. During the 1980s and 1990s, Turkey gradually expanded archival access, partly to support its claim that the archives would disprove genocide allegations. Turkish officials insisted that researchers should "let the archives speak." Akçam took them at their word.

He entered the archives legally and conducted research there as other scholars did. His conclusions

challenged the Turkish state's longstanding position. By comparing Ottoman records with foreign diplomatic reports, court proceedings, and contemporary correspondence, he argued that the evidence pointed to a coordinated policy of destruction rather than isolated wartime excesses. He identified:

- Deportation orders
- Communications between provincial and central authorities
- Evidence of coordination by the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP)
- Documents that, when read alongside other sources, pointed toward a policy of extermination

Turkish nationalist critics accused him of misinterpreting documents, taking records out of context, or overstating their significance. Yet Akçam and other historians stand firm that the documentary record, viewed as a whole, supports the genocide conclusion.

The significance of scholars such as Dadrian and Akçam lies not merely in the documents they discovered but in their methodology. Neither relied upon a single source or archive. Instead, they compared records created by different governments, diplomats, military officers, missionaries, and survivors. When independent sources from different countries describe the same events in similar terms, their combined evidentiary value becomes difficult to dismiss.

One particularly contested episode concerns the socalled *Talat Pasha telegrams*. For decades, denialists argued that the documents published by Aram Andonian in the 1920s were forgeries. Akçam spent years investigating this issue. In his 2018 book *Killing Orders*, he undertook painstaking archival detective work, examining cipher systems, bureaucratic forms, signatures, and administrative procedures. He uncovered additional Ottoman documents that he argued authenticated the underlying material and demonstrated that the alleged telegrams were consistent with genuine Ottoman bureaucratic practices.

Limits and Challenges of Archival Research

The larger scholarly debate is not whether researchers can enter Turkish archives—many can and do. The debate concerns whether:

- All relevant collections survived,
- Some records were destroyed during or after the war,
- Some collections remain inaccessible,
- Cataloging practices make certain materials difficult to locate.

Akçam himself has argued that important documents were destroyed or removed at various stages of Turkish history. Many historians agree that significant records have disappeared. Yet enough material remains, both inside and outside Turkey, that the broad outline of what happened in 1915 does not depend on a single archive or a single set of documents.

Turkish officials generally maintain that their archives are open and available to researchers. Some historians argue that certain collections remain restricted. Others contend that important records were removed or destroyed long ago. It is fair to say that Turkish archives are open enough that many scholars use them. The real gatekeeper is often the language itself, followed closely by the mountain of documents the Ottomans and the Young Turks left behind.

The challenge is often not gaining entry to the Turkish archives but navigating the material. A historian typically:

1. Registers with the archive system
2. Provides identification and research information
3. Obtains a researcher card or authorization
4. Requests documents through the catalog system
5. Reviews digitized records or physical documents in reading rooms

The greater difficulties are:

- **Language:** Most Ottoman records are written in Ottoman Turkish, using Arabic script. Reading late Ottoman bureaucratic handwriting requires specialized training.
- **Scale:** The archives contain millions of documents; locating relevant materials can take years.
- **Cataloging:** Researchers depend heavily on catalog descriptions. Poor cataloging or unexpected filing can make documents difficult to find.

Conclusion

The historical case for the Armenian Genocide rests on a vast body of mutually reinforcing evidence, not on a hidden file waiting in a basement cabinet in Ankara. Even if every Ottoman archive were to vanish tomorrow, the evidence to support the genocide would still be found in German diplomatic reports, Austrian records, American consular dispatches, missionary accounts, survivor testimonies, Ottoman courtmartial proceedings, and demographic data.

What this abundance of sources reveals is that denial is not a product of missing evidence but of political will. The persistence of denial stems from the refusal to accept the moral and legal implications of what the documents already show. The historian's task, therefore, is not to uncover a "smoking gun" but to trace the convergence of independent witnesses—the bureaucrat, the diplomat, the missionary, the survivor—whose testimonies form a coherent record of intent and execution.

The endurance of denial also exposes the fragility of historical truth when confronted by state power. Archives can be opened or closed, but the moral archive—the collective memory preserved in multiple languages and nations—cannot be erased. The evidence survives because it was dispersed across borders, copied, translated, and preserved by those who refused silence.

In the end, the study of the Armenian Genocide reminds us that history's integrity depends not on the survival of a single archive but on the courage to read what is already written. The documents exist; the question is whether denialists choose to believe them.

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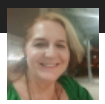
Comments

Levon – 2026-06-21 05:03:43
When the US officially recognized the genocide in 2021, Turks in response created a Turkish-English memorial in Kozan (historical Sis) in the Adana province using some old bakery claiming that Armenians burned Muslims including babies in ovens. Then the ignorant Turks and their dimwit Azeri cousins started spamming social media that will continue for years -- look! Here they burned Turks alive! This is a real place! A historian says so! And a new generation will grow up to hate Armenians after learning about fictional events, including those who walk by that place, and can justify 'whatever' happened to the Armenians. The "historian" is Halacoglu originally from Kozan, a well-known racist and genocide denier who was also the head of the Ottoman Archive Department in the late 80s early 90s when they were transitioning to digital, and no doubt continued the purge or made inaccessible documents to distort history. How can anyone expect integrity of the archives by pathetic liars, and how do any Armenians expect reconciliation with these people? The world knows what happened to the Armenians, but Turkey is more important geopolitically and economically than Armenia. It's that simple. Do we expect the world to force Turkey to do the right thing? Turkey is betting on that in another century or so, the number of Armenians will continue to decline (especially with assimilation in the diaspora) and people will move on, regardless if an Armenia exists or not. Traitors and fools in Armenia's Civil Contract party have already started the process of downplaying the genocide. Future generations won't have a close connection to the genocide that many of us old enough have to know a parent or grandparent who were survivors. Why would morally bankrupt Turkey recognize the genocide, deal with any reparations, and correct the history of their nation, when they can simply get away with it after investing in denial?

Cassandra – 2026-06-20 23:47:29
Right on, Ditord. Agree with everything you said.

Jirair Tutunjian – 2026-06-20 20:44:44
In the mid-'50s, upon the 40th anniversary of the Genocide and the valiant resistance of Urfa Armenians, a remarkable man named Aram Sahagian, published the 1,500-page "Urfai Herosamarduh" (Urfa's Heroic Battle) which included, in addition to the fight for survival, Urfa's history, leading personalities, ecclesiastical portrait, schools, culture (cuisine, songs, proverbs, jokes, puzzles, and traditions.) The vast tome also featured contemporary Urfatsis in the Diaspora. The remarkable book had at least one more edition. Since I am the son of an Urfatsi, my father-in-law, who was also Urfatsi, gave me the first edition of the book as wedding present. It's one of the most important books in my library.

Ditord – 2026-06-20 13:59:40
Dear Cassandra, I'm glad that you wrote "so-called neutral position." The collective West was not neutral. No one is ever neutral. But the charade continues. Are Armenians aware of the Sazonov-Paleologue agreement of 1915? This is a much more flagrant travesty to Armenians than the oft-cited Treaty of London or Treaty of Sevres. They were NOT neutral...! France, Germany, England ALONG WITH RUSSIA, conspired to decimate Armenian lands (Western Armenia as it's called) in a deal with Ataturk. They wanted Ataturk to weaken the Ottoman Empire, but his price (the little Tatar wearing his fez outsmarted the elite, "sophisticated" European elite) was to exterminate the Armenians. And the European happily agreed, and so did Russia. Interesting,huh? While Russia was fighting those same Western European nations in the Bolshevik Revolution AND World War I simultaneously, they were clandestinely making deals together. The situation absolutely is no different today. And now that collective West, the geniuses who gave us the enlightenment, the Great Awakening, the Renaissance... they are incompetent buffoons who have to go beg the degenerative descendants of Genghis Khan and Tatars for energy... again sacrificing Armenians. They cannot -- and never could -- see past the end of their noses. But this is specifically the pattern of behavior of a degenerate, a sociopath. So what will Armenians do? Will they ever understand that their strength and survival lies in their independence? What are Armenians doing about this? Today, Armenia is under a more dire threat than she was in 1915...



Nurnisa Erismis – 2026-06-20 12:15:20

Dear Varouj, Thank you for this very important article. One of its strongest aspects is that it shows Turkish denial not as a single, static, or crude form of rejection, but as a discourse that has changed shape over more than a century. At different moments, denial has spoken the language of "military necessity," "mutual suffering," archival openness, and, more recently, legal technicality around the question of intent. Yet behind all these changing forms lies the same basic objective: to prevent 1915 from being recognized as a state-organized policy of destruction. I found the Trebizond example especially powerful. It exposes the weakness of the "military security" argument with particular clarity. The drowning of women, children, and the elderly in the Black Sea cannot be explained as a consequence of wartime conditions or front-line security. Such examples show that deportation was not merely a matter of relocation or temporary security measures; in many places, it became a direct mechanism of extermination. Moreover, the fact that consular reports from different countries, observers, and regions reached similar conclusions makes it impossible to reduce these events to local excesses or isolated abuses. Your emphasis on archives is also very important. The official Turkish position has long used the phrase "the archives are open" almost as a shield. But the real issue is not merely whether the door of an archive is open on paper. For an archive to be truly open, the documents must have been preserved, catalogued, made practically accessible to researchers, and not subjected to arbitrary restrictions, especially in military and security-related collections. Researchers must also be able to work without intimidation or political pressure. Therefore, the claim of "open archives" cannot be separated from practical issues such as cataloguing, access, missing documents, military archives, and the safety of researchers. There is a deeper problem here. Turkey says, on the one hand, "the archives are open, come and look." On the other hand, it says, "there is no document proving genocidal intent." But if the archival field itself is incomplete, restricted, selective, or has been damaged by past destruction or removal of records, then presenting these gaps as "absence of evidence" is not a neutral method. A state cannot control the field of evidence and then interpret the gaps within that controlled field in its own favor. That is not the pursuit of historical truth; it is the bureaucratic form of denial. The legal question of "intent" is one of the most critical parts of this denial. In genocide law, special intent, that is, the intent to destroy a group in whole or in part, is indeed central. But such intent does not have to be proven only through a direct written confession. Genocidal perpetrators rarely leave historians a convenient signed document saying, "I intended to destroy this group." Intent can be inferred from the scale of the acts, the identity of the targeted group, the continuity of the policy, the methods used, the chain of command, the confiscation of property, the forced assimilation of children, and the transformation of deportation routes into routes of death. When the drownings in Trebizond, mass killings in Harput, the separation of children from their families, the forced Islamization of women, the systematic transfer of property, and the findings of the Ottoman courts-martial are read together, the claim that there was no intent collapses historically, morally, and legally. For this reason, Turkish denial is not merely an attempt to conceal "what happened in the past." In a broader sense, it is a mechanism for protecting the Republic's regime of identity, property, and citizenship. Recognizing the Armenian Genocide does not simply mean naming a historical event. It also raises questions about who received Armenian property, how the demographic structure of Anatolia was transformed, why non-Muslims were excluded from the full definition of acceptable citizenship, and how Turkish-Muslim identity became the central norm of the state. This is precisely why denial has been so persistent. The issue is not only the acknowledgment of a past crime, but also the questioning of the order built upon that crime. This is why your conclusion is so significant: the problem is not the absence of evidence. The problem is a political refusal to accept the moral and legal consequences of the evidence. The documents do not have to be found only in Turkish archives. German, Austrian, American, British, Italian, missionary, survivor, Ottoman court-martial, and demographic sources together form a broad and mutually reinforcing body of evidence. Their value does not rest on a single "secret document," but on the convergence of testimonies and records from different places. Perhaps the most dangerous form of denial today is no longer the claim that "nothing happened," but the claim that "many things happened, yet this was not genocide." In this way, death is acknowledged, but its meaning is emptied. Suffering is acknowledged, but the perpetrator disappears. Documents are acknowledged, but the conclusions they point toward are rejected. For this reason, defending historical truth is not only a matter of remembering the past; it also requires exposing how archives, law, language, and state reason operate. Your article is valuable precisely for this reason. To trace the evolution of Turkish denial is not only to offer a historical chronology. It is also to show how denial has modernized, how it has become legalistic, how it has adopted academic and diplomatic language, and yet how it has remained essentially the same. The evidence exists. The real question is why denialists still choose not to read it, or, when they do read it, why they choose not to understand it.

Cassandra – 2026-06-19 23:49:58

What our survivor ancestors may not have realized was how much was at stake for the West and East to remain in a so-called neutral position during the genocide. Otherwise, such powers could have prevented it from happening if they wanted to. The East and West also maintained another neutral or flat out pro-Turkish position thereafter which helped Turkey suppress any post genocide action regarding recognition, reparation or restitution. In fact the global powers have been in lockstep with Turkey the whole way. Humanitarian aid (which is what they offered the Armenians) is the easy part once a civilization has already been destroyed and removed from its original habitat. This is at the core of understanding why there has not been any meaningful movement towards restorative justice in spite of 111 years of Diaspora activism.