THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE WAS JUST THAT

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By Christopher Hitchens, National Post, Toronto, 8 April 2008

Even before President Barack Obama set off on his visit to Turkey this week, there were the usual voices urging him to dilute the principled position that he has so far taken on the Armenian genocide. April is the month in which the Armenian diaspora commemorates the bloody initiation, in 1915, of the Ottoman Empire's campaign to erase its Armenian population.

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Even before President Barack Obama set off on his visit to Turkey this week, there were the usual voices urging him to dilute the principled position that he has so far taken on the Armenian genocide. April is the month in which the Armenian diaspora commemorates the bloody initiation, in 1915, of the Ottoman Empire's campaign to erase its Armenian population.

The marking of the occasion takes two forms: Armenian Remembrance Day, on April 24, and the annual attempt to persuade Congress to name that day as one that abandons weasel wording and officially calls the episode by its right name, which is the word I used above.

Genocide had not been coined in 1915, but the U. S. ambassador in Constantinople, Henry Morgenthau, employed a term that was in some ways more graphic. In his urgent reports to the State Department, conveying on-the-spot dispatches from his consuls, especially in the provinces of Van and Harput, he described the systematic slaughter of the Armenians as "race murder."

A vast archive of evidence exists to support this claim. But every year, the deniers and euphemists set to work again, and there are usually enough military-industrial votes to tip the scale in favour of our Turkish client. (Of late, Turkey's opportunist military alliance with Israel has also been good for a few shame-faced Jewish votes as well.)

President Obama comes to this issue with an unusually clear and unambivalent record. In 2006, for example, the U. S. ambassador to Armenia, John Evans, was recalled for employing the word genocide. Thensenator Obama wrote a letter of complaint to then-secretary of state Condoleezza Rice, deploring the State Department's cowardice and roundly stating that the occurrence of the Armenian genocide in 1915 "is not an allegation, a personal opinion or a point of view, but rather a widely documented fact supported by an overwhelming body of historical evidence."

On the campaign trail last year, he amplified this position, saying that "America deserves a leader who speaks truthfully about the Armenian genocide and responds forcefully to all genocides. I intend to be that president."

For any who might entertain doubt on this score, I would recommend two recent books of exceptional interest and scholarship that both add a good deal of depth and texture to this drama. The first is Armenian Golgotha: A Memoir of the Armenian Genocide, by Grigoris Balakian, and the second is Rebel Land: Travels Among Turkey's Forgotten Peoples, a contemporary account by Christopher de Bellaigue.

In addition, we have just learned of shattering corroborative evidence from within the archives of the Turkish state. The Ottoman politician who began the campaign of deportation and extermination, Talat Pasha, left enormous documentation behind him. His family has now given the papers to a Turkish author named Murat Bardakci, who has published a book with the somewhat dry title The Remaining Documents of Talat Pasha. One of these "remaining documents" is a cold estimate that during the years 1915 and 1916 alone, a total of 972,000 Armenians simply vanished from the officially kept records of population.

There are those who try to say that the Armenian catastrophe was a regrettable by-product of the fog of war and of imperial collapse, and this might be partly true of the many more Armenians who were slaughtered at the war's end and after the implosion of Ottomanism.

But this is an archive maintained by the government of the day and its chief anti-Armenian politician, and it records in the very early days of the First World War indicate a population decline from 1,256,000 to 284,157. It is very seldom that a regime in its private correspondence confirms almost to an exactitude the claims of its victims.

So what will the deniers say now? The usual routine has been to insinuate that if Congress votes to assert the historic truth, then Turkey will inconvenience the NATO alliance by making trouble on the Iraqi border, denying the use of bases to the U. S. Air Force, or in other unspecified ways.

This same kind of unchecked arrogance was on view at the NATO summit last weekend, where the Ankara government had the nerve to try to hold up the appointment of a serious Danish politician, Anders Rasmussen, as the next secretary-general of the alliance, on the grounds that as Denmark's prime minister he had refused to censor Danish newspapers to Muslim satisfaction!

It is now being hinted that if either President Obama or the U.S. Congress goes ahead with the endorsement of the genocide resolution, Turkey will prove unco-operative on a range of issues, including the normalization of the frontier between Turkey and Armenia and the transit of oil and gas pipelines across the Caucasus.

When the question is phrased in this thuggish way, it can be slyly suggested that Armenia's own best interests are served by joining in the agreement to muddy and distort its own history. Yet how

could any state, or any people, agree to abolish their pride and dignity in this way?

And the question is not only for Armenians, who are economically hard-pressed by the Turkish closure of the common border. It is for the Turks, whose bravest cultural spokesmen and writers take genuine risks to break the taboo on discussion of the Armenian question.

And it is also for Americans, who, having elected a supposedly brave new President, are being told that he --and our Congress too--must agree to collude in a gigantic historical lie. A lie, furthermore, that courageous U. S. diplomacy helped to expose in the first place.

This falsification has already gone on long enough and has been justified for reasons of state. It is, among other things, precisely "for reasons of state," in other words, for the clear and vital announcement that we can't be bought or intimidated, that April 24, 2009, should become remembered as the date when we affirmed the truth and accepted, as truth-telling does, all the consequences.