

TURKEY'S 95 YEARS OF DENIAL

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By Olivia Ward, [The Toronto Star](#), 17 April 2010

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The 1915 killings of up to 1.5 million Armenians by extremists in the Ottoman Empire's "Young Turk" movement during the turmoil of World War I has been exhaustively documented by scholars, diplomats, journalists and the testimonies of survivors. Henry Morgenthau, the U.S. ambassador to the empire, cabled Washington about a "systematic plan to crush the Armenian race." After the war, a Turkish court held war crimes trials and concluded that the leaders of the massacre were guilty of murder – though they were never jailed.

 Ninety-five years after the onset of what has been labelled the 20th century's first genocide, Turkey has not come to terms with the dark event, whose ghosts still haunt relations with neighbouring Armenia. The months-long massacre is marked on April 24, the date when hundreds of Armenian intellectual leaders were deported and killed.

"Turkey has a different perspective on history," says Fadi Hakura, a Turkish expert at Chatham House in London. "It believes no genocide took place: many Armenians were expelled for security reasons or killed by the ravages of war."

Turkey maintains that local Armenians supported the invading Russian army during the war, and rose up treasonously against Ottoman authorities. And many Christian Armenians were killed along with Muslims in what amounted to a civil war. Deportations occurred, but no organized attempt to destroy the Armenian population.

Hence, no genocide.

Nearly a century later, everyone linked with the massacres is dead, along with the Ottoman Empire. Turkey is an ally of the West, a global trading partner and a candidate for European Union membership.

But Ankara's efforts to wall off the past run counter to those of other countries with clouded

histories. A German president has apologized for the Holocaust to the Israeli parliament and a former South African leader asked forgiveness for the pain and suffering of the viciously racist apartheid system. Last week, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin acknowledged the Soviet role in the slaughter of 22,000 Poles at Katyn during World War II.

But Turkey still considers the subject of Armenian genocide taboo. So international moves to recognize it continue to outrage Ankara.

When the U.S. House of Representatives foreign affairs committee recently voted to recommend Washington recognize the genocide, Turkey recalled its envoy and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip said the bill "accuses the Turkish nation of a crime it has not committed."

Canada is among 21 countries to have recognized the genocide, although more than 150 others have been reluctant to anger Turkey by formally acknowledging it.

After nearly a century, why is Ankara so intent on suppressing the grim events?

"Turkey has a duality in the way it's governed," says George Shirinian, who heads the International Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies in Toronto.

"There is a democratically elected government that runs its day to day affairs. But there is a power behind the scenes known as the 'deep state,' which consists of self-appointed protectors of the old ways, mostly military and senior civilian bureaucrats."

Turkey, he says, was founded on the ashes of the old Ottoman Empire by the military, which plays a prominent role in economic as well as security matters. It wants to avoid any aspersions on the historic military figures of a past that is "not as glorious as it appears."

While the country has modernized in a "very visible way," says Turkish expert Henri Barkey of Lehigh University in Pennsylvania, "there has never been a democratic culture in Turkey."

But there has been progress in the past decade, he adds. The rights of the Kurdish minority, whose existence was once denied, is now an acceptable topic of conversation.

The Armenian killings have remained under wraps for longer, and public discussion was repressed.

After the 2007 shooting of Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink – who called the killings genocide – protests broke out and the prosecution of outspoken intellectuals waned, although they are still taken to court by nationalists who lodge damaging civil suits. Writers and publishers have been charged with "insulting Turkishness" and jailed, or forced to pay sizeable fines.

But Turkey's young population, with an average age of 27, is more progressive than its parents. And although the establishment is slow to liberalize its views, the new generation is catching up quickly.

The government, meanwhile, has signed an historic agreement with neighbouring Armenia to launch diplomatic relations and open the borders. But the shadow of the genocide still hangs over the two

countries. Turkey says only that it would agree that a committee of historians could investigate the events of 1915.

That is unacceptable to many Armenians, who remember the missing family members whose fates are still unknown: of two million Armenians in the Ottoman Empire on the eve of World War I, fewer than 400,000 remained by 1922.

