

UNVEILING THE 'FIRST HOLOCAUST'

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 Katerina Cosgrove, [The Australian](#), 10 September 2010 

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Here you will see desecrated frescoes in 10th-century churches, towns and villages whose names have been changed.

Beneath Turkey's veneer as an easy tourist destination lies a history that is darker, a reality more complex.

Scratch the surface and the mass graves, the bloodstained banknotes and the dearth of ethnic minorities beg questions the Turks still refuse to answer.

Here took place a forgotten genocide. Robert Fisk calls it "the first Holocaust" and claims "the parallel with Auschwitz is no idle one". Turkey's reign of terror against the Armenians was an attempt to destroy the entire race. The death toll was about two million between 1915 and 1917.

Those who didn't die during the deportations were taken to concentration camps and worked to death or killed. Others were herded into underground caves in their thousands and set on fire - the world's first gas chamber, which became a model for the Nazis.

Most of the survivors are now dead, their descendants scattered, even as far as Australia. Yet there are two million Turks today with an Armenian grandparent.

Fethiye Cetin grew up proudly Turkish; reciting nationalist poems at school festivals, comfortably ensconced in her culture.

All this was shattered the day she learned that Seher, her Muslim grandmother, was really Heranush, a Christian Armenian. During a death march, Heranush was wrenched from her mother's arms by a gendarme on horseback and brought up Turkish Muslim. She kept her past secret until she was close to death. Then she finally confided in her granddaughter.

Cetin is a human rights lawyer, writer and activist for the recognition of the genocide. In her intimate, tender memoir she tells the story of a woman who was no nameless victim, nor bearer of grudges.

What occurred in Heranush's world at the dawn of the 20th century was typical of the pattern throughout eastern Turkey, the former Armenia.

When the Young Turks triumvirate took over the government from the corrupt Ottomans they promised Christian minorities equality and the right to bear arms. So when Turkish gendarmes came to Heranush's village in 1915 with guns and bayonets, they brought also a sense of betrayal. Men and boys were rounded up, taken away to be shot, their throats cut and bodies thrown into rivers or ravines. The death marches began; the endless lines of elderly and infirm forced from their villages into the Syrian desert, to the killing centres of Shaddadie and Der ez Zor.

Of course there were humane Turks who hid Armenians in their homes, adopted children, saved them. Yet the stubborn fact remains that the majority of Turks still refute the genocide today. Officially there is a culture of denial in Turkey, leading to self-censorship, trials in criminal courts, prison, even murder. In January 2007, Armenian journalist and academic Hrant Dink was gunned down outside the offices of his Turkish-Armenian newspaper Agos by an ultra-nationalist, a 17-year-old boy. Before his death, he had been convicted under infamous article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code, the crime of "anti-Turkishness".

Cetin represented him during his trial, and continues to work for his family. He wrote articles urging his own people to forget the "poisonous blood" between them and the Turks and reconcile their differences. The Turkish popular press twisted his meaning, attributing to him the words, "Turkish blood is dirty".

It has since been proven that security forces knew of plans for the murder, that his phone was tapped and his emails and correspondence intercepted. How far the government, police and judiciary are involved in reprisals is cause for debate.

Yet after Dink's death, the boy who killed him was photographed posing with the two gendarmes, smiling under a Turkish flag.

This is the same law under which Nobel Prize-winning author Orhan Pamuk was tried, after merely talking about the genocide in a Swiss magazine. He faced up to three years in prison.

"What happened to the Ottoman Armenians in 1915 was a major thing that was hidden from the Turkish nation; it was a taboo," he said. "But we have to be able to talk about the past."

In 2006, Turkish-American Elif Shafak wrote a novel, *The Bastard of Istanbul*, containing one Armenian character, descendant of those killed in the genocide. She was put on trial for the same crime of "denigrating Turkishness", but the charges were dropped. How could they not see the absurdity of pressing charges against a fictional character?

Armenia is now an eighth of its original size. Many of its western provinces were ceded to Turkey after World War I, from Lake Van to Erzerum to the Black Sea coast. Yerevan, the capital of the Republic of Armenia, is where the country's spiritual symbol, Mount Ararat, can be seen from every

window, yet it is across the border on Turkish soil.

Cetin's memoir highlights our need to officially recognise this atrocity as genocide, to record the details of these lost and grant them their place in history. It reminds us of our duty to finally put names and stories to all those in unmarked graves, mothers and fathers and children whose bones will never be found.

Katerina Cosgrove is the author of [The Glass Heart](#) and a forthcoming novel based on the Armenian genocide. She will be in conversation with [Fethiye Cetin](#) at Sydney's Gleebooks. Cetin's memoir, [My Grandmother](#) is published by Spinifex Press

✘ "In *The Glass Heart*, I seek to understand my own identity, as narrator, as heir to a long storytelling tradition, as Greek, as Australian, as a woman writing about women and their men. A narrator who is implicated in the story, always ambivalent, floating in between. Mapping, for myself, the history, the story, the inner landscapes. It is the uncharted land of my grandmother's experience, a woman's voice, a hybrid perspective. It is a land of ancient shards and half-buried bones in citrus groves.

I think I am struggling. This is a search for understanding, for meaning. And I try to record this struggle, forging a new way of writing, exploratory, discontinuous. Dissonant. Even conflicting. Yet as I write, the patterns emerge. Multiplying. The voices of the silenced, the illiterate will surprise us in a novel. Through crevices, under stones. I am tracing these irregular patterns through history. Like a child drawing for the first time, I am in a process of discovery. Creating new stories from the old voices, who were, until now, unknown."

