WHAT DO GOOGLE AND THE PROTOCOLS HAVE IN COMMON?

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TheArmenianWeekly

By Elyse Semerdjian, The Armenian Weekly, 16 October 2009

Elyse Semerdjian is associate professor of Islamic World history at Whitman College. She is the author of ***Off The Straight Path: Illicit Sex, Law, And Community In Ottoman Aleppo****.*

The protocols signed by Armenia and Turkey on October 10 engage in denial of the Armenian Genocide on several levels. Not only are the injustices of the past ignored. Those injustices rather than be acknowledged as a condition of peace are relegated to an undesignated commission that will pursue "an impartial scientific examination of the historical records." This statement is in effect a call for a commission to bury the issue of the Armenian Genocide once and for all by reducing it to a "historical dimension" rather than a genocide, a massacre, or any source of conflict for that matter.

To begin, the term "impartial" indicates that the protocols are written in state language, not the language of historians. In the field of history, we have come a long way towards realizing that impartiality doesn't exist. Many of us in the field concede that it is impossible for an historian to put aside their subjectivity while researching and writing history. Historians choose their archives and their sources. That selection process, although it can be based on a balanced scientific method, can on many occasions alter the results. Most importantly, impartiality is called into question when we recognize that the historian's ability to write history is greatly impacted by the sources in their possession.

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I often imagine the following scenario: after World War II, Germany provides only controlled access to its archives and releases only documents relating to Jewish uprisings, for example the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. With limited sources, a history much like the "provocation thesis" popular in Turkey today would have taken shape in Germany. The thesis goes: Armenians rebelled, Turks defended themselves, and the result was mutual death, a civil war not a genocide. This kind of history could easily be written based on scientific and "impartial" methods especially if a historian thought they had covered all sources available. Many of us in the field of history are familiar with the kinds of sources made public regarding the Armenians that emphasize the moments in which Armenians rebelled against orders of deportation; these sources are easily found in Turkish publications that line library bookshelves and are sometimes placed on exhibition.
What the commission proposal fails to recognize is that although historians can sometimes agree upon the facts of history; debates often multiply once historians answer the "how" and "why" questions. Historians may be settled on facts of history; for example, "the American Revolution happened," but how or why it happened is another matter. How would a commission as part of a dialogue between nations manage the multiplicity of historical interpretations? How would Turkey, a state that currently legally bars any discussion of atrocities committed against Armenians in World War I according to Article 301 of its penal code, be a trustworthy partner in any dialogue? Currently, Turkey threatens intellectuals who dare to speak out, Orhan Pamuk currently faces yet another trial, how could it, at the same time, allow freedom of expression on such a commission?

Freedom of speech issues aside, as a history professor, I struggle against attempts to homogenize history, especially as many incoming students are taught with high school textbooks that present history as fixed, while in the academic world history is much more complex. I point to this tendency existing in students, but truth be said, most people want a one-dimensional answer to complex historical issues and states most certainly do. As do states, the internet, particularly Google, is a place people go to get those easy one-dimensional answers. One student came to class having searched the internet on that day's subject matter and asked: "So, I was surfing the internet last night and saw that according the web the Armenian Genocide didn't really happen even though your syllabus frames it as though it did. What's up with that?" Although our reading that day covered the issue of genocide denial explaining how the Armenian Genocide had devolved from a historic reality to a "debate" in history, it was the googleability of the subject that took precedent that day because it offered the One fixed answer. Of course, Google is based on algorithims, rather than the truth of claims found on one website versus another. It can't replace science; it is no oracle of Delphi. But none of this reasoning can undermine the fact that a first hit is often interpreted as the most important answer and in cases its not, it is usually the first link clicked on. On Google, where the Armenian Genocide is concerned, it is a historical "debate" next to global warming and Darwin's

theory of evolution.

The protocols, like Google, treat the Armenian Genocide as a debate by avoiding the admission of guilt and by reducing the complexities of history into a singular answer in the service of the state. Imbedded in the logic of the protocols is the notion that if we are scientific and impartial enough we can find the One answer to our unnamed problem. If there is to be any future commission, even if it does result in one uniform statement, it is not the end of a debate as there will still be independent historians writing different histories. However, the commission's ruling will be presented as the new golden rule, Google's first hit; the one singular answer to the historical question of genocide. This answer will be cited by journalists and students alike as a definitive study because it was balanced and mutually agreed upon. Outside historians will be marginalized as the commission will be "impartial" whereas historians working independently will not have the same weight for they will be biased and partisan.

The idea of a commission is a concession granted to Turkey that indicates there really will be no scientific process at play. History-by-commission, in itself is a partial process. It will begin with the premise that the genocide needs to be proven first putting Armenia in the weakest possible position even as a majority of scholars agree the genocide in fact happened. By signing the agreement as currently worded, Armenia has taken the minority position of denial over the majority position of acceptance.

The idea of a commission is nothing new. South Africa had its Peace and Reconciliation Commission, Rwanda has its National Unity and Reconciliation Commission that is working on intercommunal dialogues as well as the writing of a new national history that would cover the Rwandan Genocide. These projects were initiated because states tend to need uniformity of historical interpretation, new national histories need to be agreed upon to salvage the state after the collective traumas of apartheid and genocide. There are two differences with these projects: first, they acknowledge that violence happened, and even with that acknowledgement there is a lack of satisfaction from victims who in some cases feel they have not been given due justice. Second, they are projects that deal with a national rebuilding project, and part of that includes a rewriting of the events of history, a sculpting of the common memory if you will. None of these elements are present in the protocols. No recognition. No purging of painful memories of genocide. The fact that there are two nations at stake begs the question: Can history-by-commission serve two masters?

Historians who are selected to work on the commission agreed upon by Armenia and Turkey will be part of a bogus endeavor, stooges in a commission geared to write history for the victor under the pretense of democratic exchange. The protocols use of "impartial" also gives the underlying denial a sanitized, scientific feel. A 2004 study by Jules and Maxwell Boykoff found that the use of balanced language by journalists to discuss global warming was biased because it gave the impression that there was a debate in the scholarly community over its existence while international conferences on the subject have presented a virtual consensus. Creating the impression of a debate implies a 50/50

split among the experts. Analogous to the protocols, a similar balance of denialists and affirmers of the Armenian Genocide on a future commission would presume experts in the field were split half and half split, when to the contrary a clear majority of scholars affirm that this event happened. This is the way in which innocuous terms like balance can produce bias as a way of consolidating a position, in this case genocide denial, rather than starting with a position of admission of guilt. The bottom line as I see it is that the protocols put Armenia in the weakest possible position whereby it will become a collaborator in a bogus commission geared towards propagating the denial of its own genocide. This is disconcerting as both an Armenian and an historian.

Historians are always searching the dusty recesses of the past for lessons; I have chosen Greek epic for some insight into the protocols. Homer chose to end his epic with a bloodbath; the hero Odysseus slaughters the suitors who defiled his home. Through Zeus' divine intervention, the memory of the slaughter is erased from Ithacan minds in order to protect Odysseus who would otherwise be endangered under the rules of blood vengeance; after all, the relatives of the suitors had a right to revenge according to custom. The gods choose to obliterate the communal memory in order to create a peace without justice. If we move forward to the present, a very different peace is created in the protocols. Rather than wipe out the memory of injustice committed against Armenians, the signatories have chosen to ignore issues of communal memory and justice altogether. In fact, they have chosen to not even name the source of conflict between the two parties in an attempt to assure collective amnesia. We learn from the ancient Greeks that absolute denial of justice may have only been possible through divine intervention; for, if left to societal norms and intact memories, Odysseus would have surely been punished for his actions.