



A LETTER FROM JAPAN

**STRATEGICALLY MUM:
THE SILENCE OF ARMENIANS**

Iver TORIKIAN

Editor: Hazel AĐAN ELBİR



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Abidin Daver Sok. No. 12/B Daire 4 06550 Çankaya/ANKARA

Tel: 0 (312) 438 50 23-24

Fax: 0 (312) 438 50 26

E-mail: terazi yayincilik@gmail.com

www.terazi yayincilik.com

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EDITOR

Hazel Çağan Elbir

REDACTION

Ahmet Can Öktem

Mehmet Oğuzhan Tulun

Tutku Dilaver

COVER ILLUSTRATION

Hazel Çağan Elbir

DESIGN

Ruhi Alagöz

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FOREWORD

A letter from Japan reached AVİM on August 2021. The letter was sent by Iver Torikian, an Armenian whose family once resided in Istanbul. Torikian stated that he wrote the letter as he wanted the misconceptions in the Turkish-Armenian relations to be questioned.

As AVİM, we published this letter, which reflects the sincere views of an academic of Armenian origin in a free space/atmosphere/setting and with academic objectivity by dividing it into parts that were published in five days. We now have the pleasure to present the letter as a whole in this bilingual book in English and Turkish.

Before this letter reached AVİM in August, I had an opportunity to meet and speak with Gerard Jirair Libaridian, the Armenian Historian who was invited by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey to the Antalya Diplomacy Forum as a speaker. During our talk/meeting, with regards to the one-sided Armenian narrative, Libaridian shared his thoughts which were reconciliatory and reflected hope for normalization of relations instead of radical views of adversity.

In his remarks concerning the elections on June 20th, 2021 and the conflict with Azerbaijan, Historian Libaridian, who served as an advisor to the former Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrosyan, emphasized that Armenia needs to see herself as a part of the region. During his panel speech, Libaridian highlighted those direct negotiations need to be initiated and that steps towards normalization need to be taken between Turkey and Armenia. Additionally, Libaridian expressed that Turkey is ready for normalization, however, that Armenia still has a long way to go. Furthermore, Libaridian underlined that anti-normalization propaganda activities continue in Armenia. Therefore, I

would like to state that, while publishing this book, I find it heartening/encouraging to see that many different sources share similar opinions, that Iver Torikian's views are not confined to a single academician.

Studies regarding the Armenian narrative are generally discussed in a one-sided manner. However, it is necessary to act on the basis of assessing all viewpoints in a balanced manner. There has been mutual suffering. Nonetheless, the Armenians' claims of being the sole victims do not match with historical facts and deeply hurt Turkey and the Turkish people. Accusing Turkey and the Turkish people with claims that have not been legally substantiated is unacceptable. It is a fact that our common history hurts both sides. At this point, the presence of an Armenian viewpoint that expresses both sides being hurt/harmed displays that the subject can be approached in an objective manner. Hence, I believe that publishing these objective views of Iver Torikian in a book format will serve the common good of both Turkey and Armenia and contribute to the relations, which we hope will develop to attain good neighborly relations.

Hazel ÇAĞAN ELBİR

AVİM Analyst

March 2022

About the Author



Iver Torikian was born in 1962 in New Jersey, USA. Torikian graduated from the University of California, Berkeley in 1986. He has lived for a time in the United States, Puerto Rico, Honduras, Iran, and Japan. He currently resides in Japan. He worked as an English teacher at the Kyoto Academy of International Culture and Kobe Department of Education.

Part One

My name is Iver Torikian. I'm American. My mother was born in Germany, and my father, who is Armenian, was born in Turkey. I was born and raised mostly in the US after my parents immigrated there. Now I live in Japan.

I have visited Turkey over a dozen times during my lifetime. In Rumeli Hisarı, Istanbul, my grandparents had a house just 200 meters or so from the Bosphorus. The house was on a narrow and incredibly steep cobblestoned street. Cars painstakingly maneuvered around each other, and street peddlers walked by with their wares. I once took a photo of a man who came by with a pole across his shoulders, balancing one bucket on each end of the pole. "Yogurt, yogurt, yogurt!" he shouted.

Every morning my grandfather would wake up early and do calisthenics for an hour before going to his store near the Kapalı Çarşı. It's a routine he continued until the end of his life. His hometown was Arapkir. He had come to Istanbul by himself when he was just a boy.

My grandfather did not have an easy life. In Arapkir, when he was six, he got smallpox and was blinded in one eye. Then, after coming to Istanbul, he suffered another calamity. As a teenager, he walked the streets of Istanbul selling bread. One day he had an accident with the horse he was using and lost all his teeth. Though he was just a teenager, from that time on he had to use dentures. And yet, despite all these setbacks, he was eventually able to set up his shop and raise three sons. The eldest became my father.

My grandmother was from Gümüşhacıköy, but came to Istanbul when she was a young girl. She was the eldest of three sisters. All sisters and my grandmother came to Istanbul during the early decades of the twentieth century. Once, while I was visiting Istanbul by myself, I asked my grandmother what she had done after coming to Istanbul. She attended a madrasa, she said. Then, without any prompting from me, she demonstrated how she had learned to pray. She stood up, then kneeled down, then leaned forward, then stood up again, all while reciting prayers. It looked to me like a good exercise.

My grandmother did not choose to marry my grandfather; that decision was made for her. One day, as my grandfather was walking along a street in Istanbul selling his wares, a relative of my grandmother leaned out of the window of her house and shouted to him, "Hey, would you like a wife?" My grandfather replied, "Ah, yes, a wife would be nice." My grandmother was 19. My grandfather was in his early 30s. They got married in an Armenian church, of course, and my father was born almost exactly nine months later.

My father was lucky. My grandparents' house was within walking distance of Boğaziçi University, which was then called Robert College. My father attended junior-high school, high school, and college there. The teachers and students were of many ethnicities - "a mini UN" is how my father has described it. I have no doubt that this intermingling of teachers and students from many backgrounds was instrumental in making my father a person who is tolerant and accepting of others. Sadly, open-mindedness does not seem to be a common trait among Armenians. I have discovered over the years that many Armenians are prejudiced, particularly towards Turks.

I remember the first time I heard an Armenian telling me clearly that he didn't like Turkish people. It was on the island of Kinalı, during one of my family's summer trips to Turkey when I was nine or ten years old. During that particular summer, the family of an uncle who had immigrated to Canada was also visiting Turkey. It was nice having cousins of the same age as I with whom I could converse in English. The only thing about them that bothered me was that they said bad things about Turkish people.

So, one afternoon, while we were staying at the home of a relative on Kinalı, I decided to talk to one of these cousins about their anti-Turkishness. While we were walking home from the beach, I timidly asked my cousin why he disliked Turkish people. "I hate all Turkish people," he said nonchalantly. He pointed to a girl standing nearby who was wearing colorful, rustic clothing and whom neither of us knew. "You see that girl there?" my cousin said. "I hate her, because

she's Turkish." I didn't know what to say in response, so I said nothing.

Sadly, it is not just Armenian children like my cousin who say bad things about Turks. I know that Armenian children who disparage Turks are merely imitating Armenian adults. Once, while I was in my 20s, I went to Europe with my father and we visited Paris. My father had an Armenian friend there whom he had known when they were both growing up in Istanbul. We stayed at his house. One morning, while we were eating breakfast, the man's Armenian wife, who was also from Istanbul, began talking to me in an agitated manner. I could not understand what she was saying. As she became angrier, my father laughed nervously and explained what she wanted. She wanted me to promise her that I would never marry a Turkish woman. With the little bit of Turkish that I knew, I told her what she wanted to hear. She calmed down and we resumed breakfast.

I witnessed a third incident, worse than the two I have mentioned above, in Canada, at the home of a relative. I had wandered into the room of another cousin. He is the same age as I. On his bookshelf he had only three books, and they were all about the Second World War. Did he have an interest in history? I asked him. No, he explained, it's just that he thought Hitler did the right thing by trying to exterminate the Jewish population of Europe. It turns out that he hated Jewish people as well as Turkish people. "Jews are the small rat. Turks are the big rat," he said. No doubt he didn't like rats, either.

It makes me sad to write about these incidents. Most of the Armenians I have known have been relatives, or friends of my father. Throughout my life, all have been kind to me, including the people I've mentioned above. Maybe I am just naive, but it is hard for me to understand how people can simultaneously be nice to me while hating people they have never met.

I know that I am not the only Armenian who feels this way. The Armenian journalist Hrant Dink, who was killed in 2007 in Istanbul, also rejected the anti-Turkish bitterness of Armenians. He said that it poisons us, and I agree.

To people who are neither Turkish nor Armenian, the animosity of Armenians towards Turks may seem inconsequential. After all, there is not going to be a war between Turkey and Armenia. Turkey dwarfs Armenia in terms of population, land, and resources, not to mention military capability. Any military conflict between Turkey and Armenia would be catastrophic for Armenia.

However, Armenians' animosity is harmful to Turks and Turkey because Armenians in North America and Europe have much political clout. Armenian groups have been attacking Turkey politically and economically for decades. For instance, Armenians in the US are always pressuring Western companies and institutions not to do business in Turkey. Some of these efforts have been successful. Also, the international Armenian community is constantly trying to persuade all the governments of the world to declare that what happened to Armenians in Turkey over a century ago was a genocide. These efforts have become known as the Armenian Cause.

Supposedly, some Armenians want only an apology from the Turkish government. Other Armenians want more, like money. And some go further; they want the Turkish government to slice off part of eastern Turkey and give it to Armenia, whereby it will become Armenian territory. Such extreme demands, of course, are ludicrous. For many reasons, I do not support any part of the Armenian Cause, even the more modest demands. They foster vindictiveness towards Turks and Turkey. Furthermore, I believe that demanding reparations and territory from the present generation of Turks – who, needless to say, had nothing to do with the events of a century ago – are ultimately harmful to all of humanity.

I have to confess that I still have much to learn about Armenians, and about Ottoman history. Until recently, I had very little interest in Armenian culture, history, or politics. I cannot even speak Armenian. Likewise, I had no interest in Ottoman history. Only in early 2015 did I decide to learn more about Armenians and Ottoman history, all because of an article on Armenians that appeared in the 5 January 2015 issue of a weekly American magazine called *The New Yorker*. It is a

cultured magazine with many readers, not just in New York but all over the world. That article in the magazine was what prompted me to learn more. However, even before reading the article, I had decided to do something that would be unthinkable to most Armenians: write a letter to a US newspaper, saying that we Armenians should forgive the Turks for whatever happened long ago and seek reconciliation. I meant to do what I thought was right.

The article in *The New Yorker* was titled “A Century of Silence,” by Raffi Khatchadourian. I had put off reading the article because I knew that it would contain stories of how Armenians had suffered, of how Armenians had been driven from villages and towns in Turkey, of how Armenians had lost possessions and livelihoods, and of how Armenians had died in great numbers. I have heard similar stories from Armenian acquaintances and relatives all my life, so I had no appetite for more.

However, one day shortly after that issue of *The New Yorker* reached me in Japan in early 2015, my father called me. He had heard about the article, and he asked me if I had read it. No, but I would, I said to him. So, I did. As expected, Khatchadourian told many stories of our travails, some with lurid details. But aside from mentioning the deaths of Ottoman soldiers once, Khatchadourian says almost nothing in his article about the suffering of any other people in Turkey during that era. It was clearly an entirely one-sided article.

Unfortunately, there are very few Armenian scholars who are willing to discuss the events of that era objectively. More specifically, there are few Armenians in Europe or North America who have written about the many other people in Turkey – including Turks – and about the turmoil and suffering that they also endured about a century ago. What is worst of all, I think, is that few Armenians in Western countries are willing to admit to non-Armenians the fact that we Armenians ourselves committed many violent acts during that period. Khatchadourian’s article, for instance, contains almost nothing at all about Armenian fighters.

Part Two

Even a cursory review of Turkish history would reveal that there were, in fact, many Armenian fighters in Turkey before and during Turkey's War of Liberation. There were at least a million Armenians in Turkey before the First World War. Some immigrated to the US or Europe. However, among the young Armenian men of sound mind and body who remained in Turkey, most eventually took up arms for one side or another. Some were in the Ottoman army. Others joined the Russian army, either from the outset of the First World War, or after deserting the Ottoman army. And the rest? Outside of Istanbul, most of the other young Armenian men who could – and even a small number of Armenian women – joined one of the many Armenian militias that were roaming eastern Turkey.

In short, the allegiances of Armenians were mixed. It seems that many Armenians, especially the wealthy ones in the cities, were quite content with the Ottoman Empire and their lot within it. Other Armenians supported the Ottoman government but wanted the sultan to carry out reforms that would help Armenians, particular those who lived in rural areas. And then there were Armenians who opposed the Ottoman government wholeheartedly and wanted an independent Armenian state. I have come to the conclusion that the aims of Armenians within the Ottoman Empire were as varied as our many places in society and our many dialects.

Very little of the complexity of that era, however, or of the Ottoman Empire and Armenians' role in that empire, are evident in Khatchadourian's article in *The New Yorker*. For instance, only once in his entire 19-page article does Khatchadourian mention Armenian fighters. It is in a quote by his aunt, and that is it. Most of the article is only about the death and suffering of Armenians during that period. A person who is neither Armenian nor Turkish might say, "Well, so what? It's just one article." However, Khatchadourian's biased article is representative of most writing by Armenians regarding the events of that era. It still amazes me that it appeared in such a prestigious magazine as *The New Yorker*. When such writing is all that Westerners are exposed to, the result is an enormous distortion of history.

Khatchadourian's article did not deter me from my plan to write my letter to a newspaper. I figured that my timing was good, because 24 April was approaching. That is the day on which Armenians and their sympathizers hold demonstrations in many large cities around the world, demanding recognition and reparations. I was hoping that my letter would lessen the acrimony among Armenians that these demonstrations bring up. I went online to get more information about these demonstrations, so that I could mention them in my letter. I was not prepared for what I found.

If one does an online search of the word "Armenian," one will soon be led to sites with gruesome photos from over a century ago. On English-language websites, there are photos of corpses lying in piles or helter skelter across fields, and of emaciated women and children, and even of decapitated bodies. According to these websites, they are all photos of Armenians in Turkey in 1915. The photos are often coupled with demands related to the Armenian Cause. Needless to say, these are websites set up by Armenian individuals or organizations, or by their sympathizers. The authenticity of some of these photos at these sites has lately come into question. Most people, however, seem to accept them as authentic.

I think that all educated Turks know that Armenians suffered in great numbers a century ago. There is no need for photos, be they authentic or phony. However, all Turks also know that Turks also suffered in great numbers during that era. I have often wondered why I have never seen similarly gruesome photos from that era of dead or starving Turks. For example, why have I never seen photos of corpses of Turks who were massacred in Bulgaria or Greece a century ago? There have been allegations that some photos that supposedly depict dead or miserable Armenians are, in fact, photos of non-Armenians. However, a more valid reason for the paucity of photos of dead or starving Muslims from that era, I think, is that cameras were owned mostly by Christians, and most Christians were not concerned about the fates of Muslims. Furthermore, as far as I know, all the journalists who were covering the Middle East for Western newspapers then were

Christians, and most were biased against Muslims. This was a point made by Edith Durham, a famous British traveler and writer. In her 1905 book *The Burden of the Balkans*, she wrote the following: “When a Muslim kills a Muslim, it does not count. When a Christian kills a Muslim, it is a righteous act. When a Christian kills a Christian, it is an error of judgment better not talked about. It is only when a Muslim kills a Christian that we arrive at a full-blown atrocity.”

In any case, if one continues doing a search on the word “Armenian,” with all these websites supposedly showing dead or starving Armenians, one will also find websites of a different kind. These are the ones put up by people and organizations who oppose the Armenian Cause. They have revealed to me things that no Armenian friends or relatives ever told me. It was from these websites that I learned of how some Armenians formed groups and acquired weapons, and colluded with the governments of Russia and other countries. In the same way that non-Armenian men went to Armenian villages and committed violent acts, there were likewise many cases where Armenian men went to non-Armenian villages and committed violent acts. I’m sure that most Armenians ignore these sites and others that show Armenians in a bad light. But I did not ignore them. On the contrary, I was intrigued by all the accounts and arguments that showed me another side to the stories I’d heard all my life.

One of the first of these sites that I came upon in 2015 was that of the *Islamic Party of Britain* (islamicparty.com). In one part of their site, there’s an anonymous comment supposedly written by an Armenian contributor. The contributor says that Turks and Armenians lived in harmony in the Ottoman Empire until Jewish people came and cunningly turned all Turks and Armenians against each other. It is impossible to verify that the person who wrote those words was really Armenian. However, I have come upon anti-Semitic comments by Armenians at various other sites. This particular comment at Islamic Party of Britain’s website made me doubt the validity of everything else at this site. Still, I read on. This was one of the first websites in which I encountered the words “Hunchak” and “Dashnak.” I was to learn that the Hunchaks and the Dashnaks

were the two Armenian groups most violently opposed to the Ottoman government.

It has become clear to me that knowing about the Hunchaks and the Dashnaks is crucial to any thorough understanding of what we Armenians did and what was done to us over a century ago in Turkey. But as I browsed more sites, I felt overwhelmed. I quickly realized that my knowledge of world history, particularly the First World War, was woefully superficial. I knew nothing about the Triple Entente, or the Sykes-Picot Agreement, or even the major people or battles of the War.

Since 2015, I've done all I can to educate myself about the First World War and also the Ottoman Empire. Both were complicated. It has been relatively easy to get details about all the major battles and official alliances that took place during the War. Likewise, it is easy to find out the names of all the sultans who ruled the Ottoman Empire, along with what are considered their major achievements and failures. What has been much more difficult for me to find out is what most of the common people – particularly Armenians – were doing in the Ottoman Empire during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

There are a few reasons for my difficulty in doing research on Armenians. First, my access to information is limited. The two most active political organizations among Armenians before the First World War were the Hunchaks and the Dashnaks. They both published many documents in Armenian during their heydays, including publications meant for the general Armenian public in Turkey, Russia, and Europe. However, it is not easy to gain access to these documents. Furthermore, even if I could see these documents, I would not be able to read them. Mostly, I blame myself for that, but I also cast some blame on the international Armenian community.

All historians know that in the late 19th century, when the Hunchak and Dashnak organizations were formed, there were great upheavals among the populations of many countries all over the world. In 1867, the Japanese emperor gained power, ending the 700-year reign of the shoguns. In 1871, the Paris Commune was crushed. In the US, after the Civil War, African-

Americans in the southern states gained many new rights and improvements in their lives – but gradually lost them. From among all these conflicts, one may find translations into many languages of speeches and documents by the participants of all opposing sides. In contrast, most of the documents that were published by the Hunchaks and the Dashnaks during the late 19th and early 20th centuries have not been translated into any language. I believe that this is a deliberate attempt to keep them from the eyes of non-Armenians.

Atatürk introduced the Latin alphabet to Turkey in 1928. Even foreigners who cannot speak Turkish can now read it in a rudimentary way. In contrast, Armenian has its own script. Armenian is not a difficult language to speak, and the Armenian alphabet has only 38 letters. However, as far as I know, very few non-Armenians have ever bothered to learn how to read and write Armenian. This is as true now as it was a century ago. As such, Armenian has served as a kind of secret code language between Armenians. Simply by writing to one another in Armenian, members of the Hunchak and Dashnak organizations were able to conceal their plans from non-Armenians. There was no need for euphemisms or secret code words.

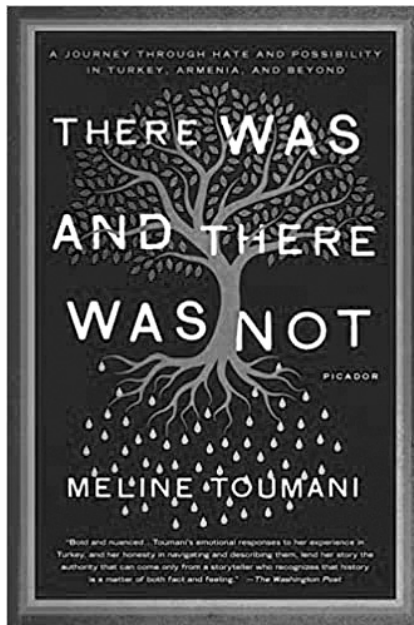
The only danger, of course, was that a fellow Armenian might expose them to the Ottoman authorities. There were a few such Armenians. One was a teacher in Van named Tigran Armirdjanian. Serving as the provincial translator from 1893 to 1897, he translated into Turkish the Armenian documents brought to him by the Ottoman authorities. Naturally, the Hunchaks and the Dashnaks did not approve of Armirdjanian's assistance to the authorities, and they reportedly tried many times to kill him. It seems that they did not succeed.

Sadly, cases of Armenians killing or trying to kill other Armenians for perceived betrayals were quite common over a century ago in the Ottoman Empire. One such assassination that was successful was that of Bedros Kapamajian, who was the mayor of Van. On 12 December 1912, as he was leaving his house and getting into his carriage, he was shot dead by two Dashnaks. Both of those Dashnaks were arrested, along with

a few other Armenians, including Aram Manukian. Manukian is a well-known figure among Armenians. When the Russian army invaded and occupied Van in 1915, Manukian was chosen by the Russians to be the governor of Van.

More recently, assassinations of Armenians by other Armenians have occurred even outside of Turkey. Perhaps the most notorious of such incidents was the murder of an Armenian bishop named Levon Tourian in New York on 24 December 1933. Nine Dashnaks in the US were convicted of complicity in the killing.

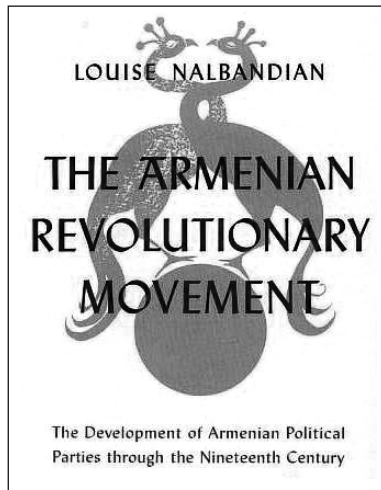
Nowadays, Armenians who are considered traitors are usually not killed by other Armenians. Instead, they are denounced and ostracized. Meline Toumani, an Armenian American, is one such person. In 2014 she published a book titled *There Was and There Was Not* in the US. It recounted her experiences of moving to and living in Istanbul, and she wrote about Turkish people in a favorable way. For this, she was criticized in Armenian publications and online. If this essay that you are reading now gets widely circulated, I expect that I will also be denounced by other Armenians.



Part Three

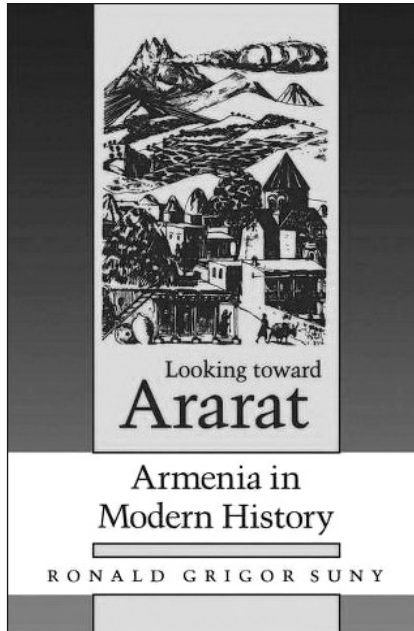
As for the Hunchaks and the Dashnaks, only a few of the documents that they published long ago have been translated into other languages. Even those few, however, are revealing. The Dashnaks in particular were explicit in their aims and methods. For instance, in a pamphlet they published in 1890 in Vienna, the Dashnaks explained that their goal was “the political and economic freedom” for the Armenians of Anatolia “by means of rebellion.” Among the methods they listed for attaining this “freedom” in Anatolia are the following: (#2) “To organize fighting bands,” (#8) “To stimulate [instigate] fighting and to terrorize government officials,” and (#11) “To expose government establishments to looting and destruction.”

The list above is presented in a book title *The Armenian Revolutionary Movement*, first published by the University of California in 1963. The author of the book was an Armenian woman named Louise Nalbandian. She was an honest scholar. She writes in detail about Armenians from ancient times until the late 19th century, and she points out all our strengths and weaknesses without embellishment. She is a prime example of the few courageous Armenians who are candid about what we did over a century ago. Unfortunately, Dr. Nalbandian died shortly after the publication of her book, from injuries she incurred in a car accident.



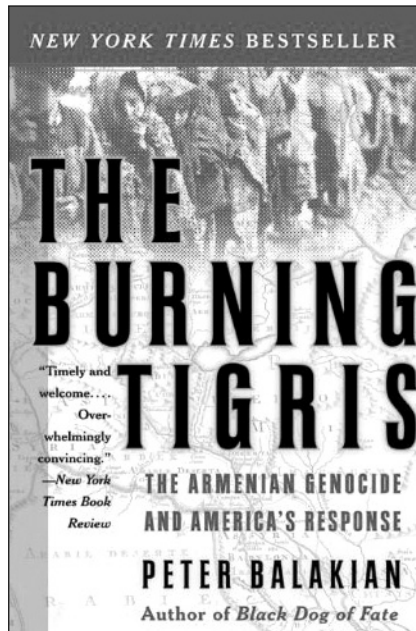
I have found very few living Armenian scholars who have written impartially about the Armenians of that era. One is an American professor named Ronald Grigor Suny. In 1993, he wrote a noteworthy book titled *Looking Toward Ararat*. He mentions, for instance, that the Hunchaks sought to use “propaganda, agitation, and terror” to achieve their goals. He also notes that, in the Caucasus during the 1890s, “the principal victims of the Armenian terrorists were Armenians themselves.” Suny is one of the very few Armenian academics to describe the violent Armenians of that era as “Armenian terrorists.” Suny’s allegiance is to Armenians and Armenia, but, like Nalbandian, he has the courage to point out our imperfections.

Unfortunately, the works of Suny and other more even-handed Armenians are not widely read or discussed by the general public. Their books get very little publicity. Instead, the most widely read books on Ottoman Armenians by Armenian writers are sensationalistic and misleading. Occasionally, they even contain blatant lies.



In 2003, an Armenian professor in the US named Peter Balakian published a book called *The Burning Tigris*, which got much praise from book critics. For me, though, it is a difficult book to read, for many reasons. One reason is that I do not like Balakian's anti-Turkish bias, which is evident on nearly every page. For example, taking two sentences quite at random, near the end of his book, Balakian writes the following regarding the years right after the end of the First World War: "The nationalist stance against Armenia became increasingly virulent. Procrastination by the Entente in Paris gave the Turks the time they needed to invade Armenia." In these two sentences Balakian attempts to disparage the Turkish nationalists who were led by Atatürk; he describes their stance towards Armenia as having been "virulent." What comments does he provide by nationalist leaders to demonstrate this virulence? None. Balakian often fails to substantiate the hundreds of claims he makes throughout his book.

The second sentence from *The Burning Tigris* demonstrates another of my objections to Balakian's book; his twisting of facts. He says that there was "procrastination" among the



nations of the Entente — Great Britain, France, and Russia — regarding the nationalists' conflict with Armenia. That is false. There was no procrastination. Surely even a high-school student in Turkey would know that the governments of Great Britain and France had simply become unwilling to fight the Turkish nationalists militarily. Instead, they sought to impose their will on Turkey diplomatically. It did not work. As for Russia, the Bolsheviks never opposed the Turkish nationalists. On the contrary, they soon became allies of the nationalists.

However, my biggest objection to the second sentence from Balakian's book lies not in what he says, but in what he leaves out. That may, in fact, be my biggest objection to the whole book. Balakian says that the Turkish nationalist army invaded Armenia. Technically, that is correct. However, Balakian neglects to write anything about the Armenians' acts of aggression towards Turkey that came right before that invasion by the nationalist army. He also neglects to mention that in 1918, the Turkish government gave thousands of tons of wheat to Armenia so that its inhabitants could survive their first winter there.

We, Armenians repaid Turkey by invading Turkey in 1919 with the assistance of the French army, committing many atrocities. It seems that the town of Oltu was particularly badly pillaged. As all Turkish historians know, it was these attacks — not any sort of “procrastination” by European governments — that compelled Atatürk's nationalist army to attack Armenia. But most Westerners, particularly Americans, are most apt to accept the tales of Balakian and other Armenians than to dig out the truth. This is unfortunate, and unfair to the people of Turkey.

I am also upset that Armenians were so stupid as to attack Turkey in 1919 when we should have been doing everything possible to make Armenia stable and more habitable instead. Our priorities were wrong. Lastly, I am upset by Armenians' ingratitude to the Turkish government after its delivery of wheat. That act of kindness by the Turkish government seems to have vanished from Armenians' consciousness.

We did other shameful things in 1919. That year, the inhabitants of Armenia held a mass celebration to mark the first year of Armenia's existence. Ordinarily, there is nothing wrong in celebrating the founding of one's country. However, in our case, Armenians celebrated by singing "Mer Hayreneek," the Armenian national anthem. In 1919, the fourth stanza of our national anthem had the words "Let Turkey be destroyed." Those lyrics have been replaced by less inflammatory lyrics. When we sing "Mer Hayreneek" now, we no longer sing the words "Let Turkey be destroyed," but those words were there in the song in 1919 and for well over a decade thereafter. For many years, all Armenians who sang Armenia's national anthem implicitly called for the destruction of Turkey.

When Balakian wrote *The Burning Tigris*, he was either unaware of all these facts, or he ignored them. In a chapter on Van in 1915, Balakian says the following in his book: "The Armenians were neither attempting to destroy the Turks or the Ottoman Empire nor attempting to secede." These are arguments that Armenians often make. Many Armenians say that any acts that we Armenians carried out a century or more earlier were only to defend ourselves. I disagree. Furthermore, many documents from that era do, in fact, show that many Armenians wanted secession from the Ottomans. As for not wanting "to destroy the Turks or the Ottoman Empire," one merely has to consider the lyrics of "Mer Hayreneek" to see the falseness of that argument.

There are other major omissions in Balakian's book. For example, Balakian says nothing about the Dashnaks' attempt to murder the Ottoman sultan Abdülhamid II in 1905. It is known in Western media as the Joris Affair, because the Dashnaks hired a Flemish man named Edward Joris to help carry out the deed. The Dashnaks arranged for the bomb to go off on 21 July 1905 in front of the Yıldız Hamidiye Mosque, where the sultan was expected to be, however, the plan failed. The bomb went off precisely as scheduled, but the sultan was unharmed. Instead, the bomb killed 28 other people and injured 58 more. Ironically, a few of the victims were

Armenians. The entire incident is completely absent from *The Burning Tigris*.

Perhaps the most glaring example of willful omission on Balakian's part is his failure to mention Andranik Ozanian anywhere in his book. Ozanian is a revered figure among Armenians all over the world. In Armenia, there are monuments dedicated to him and coins stamped with his image. He was in many major battles in Ottoman lands during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Sometimes he commanded regiments in the Bulgarian army. Other times, he commanded regiments within the Russian army, or simply battalions of Armenians independently, without any affiliation to the army of any country. Invariably, however, he and his soldiers always fought against Ottoman soldiers. That never changed. One of the most famous photos of him shows him sitting at a table in his uniform, with many medals pinned to his chest. All those medals were from the governments of countries that opposed the Ottomans. I have come to agree with many writers who have said that, to a certain extent, Ozanian's acts as a military commander are what led to the removal of Armenians from their towns and villages. Yet Balakian says nothing about him.

I must apologize if some of the things I have said so far are common knowledge among Turkish people. I do not mean to be condescending. I am not a historian, and, even after reading many books and thousands of pages of documents, I feel that I still have only a meager understanding of what happened over a century ago in Turkey and its surrounding regions. I am sure that the average elementary-school student in Turkey knows more about the country and its history than I do.

As for information about Armenians, I have come to believe that for people who do not speak Armenian, the biggest obstacle to finding out what Armenians did a century ago in Turkey is that we Armenians have no desire to reveal to non-Armenians all our cruel acts from back then. Armenian politicians and writers demand that Turkish people confess to having caused its Armenian population great harm over a century ago. However, we Armenians do not want to divulge

to the world anything about the killing and pillaging that we ourselves carried out in Anatolia and elsewhere during that era. We quietly keep it to ourselves. Meanwhile, in Armenia, we memorialize the Armenian leaders who committed those acts of violence and who led other Armenians to commit such acts.

Part Four

Turkish scholars have long argued that there is a bias in the Western media in favor of Armenians regarding the events of that era. I have come to agree. Instead of getting a truthful account of what occurred in Turkey during the 19th and early 20th centuries, most people in English-speaking countries get one-sided articles like “A Century of Silence” and misleading books like *The Burning Tigris*. Along those same lines, Khatchadourian and Balakian get remunerated and praised. In the edition of *The Burning Tigris* that I have on my shelf, in the initial pages, there are three pages of quotes excerpted from reviews of the book. One reviewer called it “a thoughtful and thorough book.” Another called it “encyclopedic.” A third called it “comprehensive.” Needless to say, I strongly disagree with all these reviewers.

Thanks to such reviews, however, so-called historical articles by Balakian continue to appear in print and online. The articles are new, but they all have the old bias against Turks and Turkey, and they all obscure Armenians’ violent acts of long ago. And Balakian remains a popular source for the English-language media. A few years ago, he even appeared on a well-known program called “Sixty Minutes” in the US. Meanwhile, writers who are fairer and more scholarly, like Ronald Grigor Suny and Professor Gerard Libaridian – a colleague of Suny’s – get far less attention.

As an Armenian, I suppose I should be happy that hundreds of millions of people around the world have great sympathy for



Armenians and are willing to turn a blind eye to all the destruction and killing that we ourselves carried out over a century ago. But I am not happy. I feel as if I am an accomplice to a huge cover-up. Our constant and wide-spread wailing about the misery we endured long ago seems designed to bury all the wrongs that we ourselves committed during that era. To demand reparations and apologies from the Turkish government while we keep silent about all the misdeeds that we ourselves carried out back then is unjust and hypocritical.

Late in 2015, just a few months after I began reading in depth about Armenians and the Ottoman Empire, I realized that my plan to send a letter to a US newspaper to foster reconciliation between Turks and Armenians had been naive. We Armenians have been nursing a grudge that has completely swallowed us. Furthermore, most Armenians, I think, are determined to continue repeating to non-Armenians a simplistic, false narrative about the events of a century ago. I no longer have any hope that large numbers of Armenians are going to acknowledge all the wrongs that we ourselves committed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Turkey. Nor are we going to stop making outlandish demands for compensation and territory.

According to Meline Toumani, who wrote *There Was and There Was Not*, the focus of most social gatherings among Armenians in North America is the Armenian Cause. It is evident even in seemingly apolitical gatherings, such as sporting events. The Armenian Cause allows us to get together and ignore all our differences in age, religion, social status, and sexual orientations. The three most conspicuous activities of Armenians – reiterating the misery we endured over a century ago, avoiding all discussion of our villainy from that same era, and demanding reparations and territory – are all inseparable and necessary for the preservation of Armenian unity. Hrant Dink himself once said that we Armenians have formed an identity not as ourselves but in opposition to Turks. He was correct.

However, I myself cannot conform to the way that most other Armenians think, talk, and behave. I find it stifling and



dishonest. I am reminded of what one contributor wrote at the site of the Islamic Party of Britain which I came upon in 2015. The contributor says that Armenian writers tend to portray everyone in the Ottoman Empire as either “white-hatted heroes” or “black-hatted villains.” But as that contributor pointed out, the distinction between good people and bad people of that era was hardly ever clear-cut. I would venture to say that there is not one single ethnic group on Earth that does not have blood on its hands. I believe, sadly, that from the moment in which we humans began living in groups, we began fighting other groups. By insisting that we Armenians did nothing wrong over a century ago, we deny that we are human. I also believe that, if we follow our present course, we may get the world’s sympathy, but we will never get the world’s respect.

Over a decade ago, about 32,000 Turks signed an online petition to express remorse for what happened to Armenians in Turkey long ago. It became known as the “I Apologize” campaign. To be honest, apologizing for something that one’s predecessors have done is troubling to me. I can apologize for things I have done, of course, and I suppose that apologizing for the misbehavior of one’s children is also appropriate. I am not sure, however, if apologies for what one’s ancestors have done carries much weight or validity. Nonetheless, I respect

each of those 32,000 people who signed that petition. They had the courage and integrity to look at what Turks had done to Armenians over a century ago, and they did what they thought was right.

Conversely, I have never heard of any Armenians at all expressing any remorse for what we did over a century ago. My mother once told me about a conversation she had many decades ago with an elderly Armenian man about the turmoil in Turkey in the early 20th century. "There was a lot of killing on both sides," he told her. It is what I have been reading for six years. And yet, nowhere – not in any document on any website, nor in any book – have I come upon any signs of contrition by an Armenian about what we did during that era. I am ashamed of Armenians' silence.

It is hard to know where to begin calculating the misery and hardships that we Armenians – Armenian men, mostly – have caused other people over the centuries. Aside from historians, most people do not know that two millennia ago we had an Armenian king who created a vast Armenian empire. His name was Tigranes. This is what my *Encyclopedia Americana* says about him: "He invaded Cappadocia in 78 and completely subjugated its inhabitants. Other wars followed and Tigranes became the mightiest king in Asia. He built a new capital, Triganocerta, whither he transplanted the inhabitants of many captive places, including Cappadocia, Syria, and Cilicia." I am particularly intrigued by the last sentence in that entry. According to my encyclopedia, Tigranes chose to create a new city, and, in order to populate it, he forcibly moved people to that city from other places. In other words, nearly twenty centuries ago, we did to people in Cappadocia, Syria, and Cilicia what the Ottoman government did to Armenians in the early 20th century, more or less. How much misery and death we caused those whom we forcibly relocated two millennia ago will never be known.

Of course, my *Encyclopedia Britannica* also has an entry on Tigranes. It is different from my *Encyclopedia Americana* in one way: it says that Tigranes's displacements of people is "much disputed." Otherwise, the information in my two

encyclopedias regarding Tigranes is much the same. My *Encyclopedia Britannica* says that, in addition to invading Cappadocia, Tigranes also invaded Syria and “destroyed the Greek town of Soli.” It adds that Tigranes “also transplanted many Arabic tribes into Mesopotamia.” In short, our empire seems to have been as ruthless as any other.

The Armenian Empire, such as it was, did not last long. After Tigranes’s death, our empire basically fell apart. Most of the territories that Tigranes had controlled were invaded and subsumed into the territories of neighboring kingdoms. At the start of the 15th century, the last remaining Armenian kingdom was decisively partitioned between Persia and the Ottoman Empire.

It is probably impossible to say for sure when we Armenians first began plotting to re-establish an Armenian kingdom or state. It may have been during the 15th century, soon after our last kingdom disappeared. In 2018, I found a long article online titled “The Armenian Rebellion of the 1720s” by an Armenian named Armen M. Aivazian, a student at the American University of Armenia, which is located in Yerevan. He writes in his essay about Armenians who were living in Karabakh. That is, of course, the same Karabakh that Armenia fought over with Azerbaijan three decades ago and also a year ago. Aivazian says in his essay that, centuries ago, Armenians in Karabakh had “a sophisticated system of weapons manufacture, which originated much earlier than the 1720s and even before 1632.” 1632 was the year in which 40,000 armed Karabakh Armenians “were ready to launch a liberation war,” according to Aivazian. So, it seems that as early as the 1630s, there were already tens of thousands of Armenians who were willing to fight to re-establish an Armenian homeland, and we were armed.

The rebellion that Aivazian alludes to in the title of his essay began in 1722 with a “Georgian-Armenian army of about 50,000.” They were prepared to fight alongside Russian soldiers, because Peter the Great had promised to help them gain liberation from the Ottomans. However, the Russian soldiers failed to show up. Instead, they attacked Persia. It did

not go well for them. They suffered heavy losses, and these losses, as Aivazian puts it, “compelled Peter the Great to renege on his promises to the Transcaucasian Christians.” It was one of the many cases of Russian involvement with the Ottoman Armenians over the next two centuries.

Part Five

I think that, over the centuries, most rebellions by Armenians occurred not in Karabakh but in Zeitun, in the southern part of central Turkey, about 125 kilometers from the Mediterranean Sea. It is now called Suleymanlı. Nalbandian says in “The Armenian Revolutionary Movement” that in 1618, Sultan Murad IV granted the inhabitants of Zeitun “nearly complete independence” so long as the Zeitunlis paid their taxes. Despite this agreement, according to Nalbandian, the inhabitants of Zeitun “fought perhaps as many as 57 battles against the Ottoman regime.” Nalbandian refers to Zeitun as “this little Montenegro” – an allusion, apparently, to the fact that the Ottomans were never able to completely subdue the Balkan nation of Montenegro.

These dozens of battles of the inhabitants of Zeitun against the Ottoman government, along with other uprisings over the centuries within the Ottoman Empire, all deserve further scrutiny. Some Armenians, like Peter Balakian, have argued that there were no uprisings by Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. Balakian and other Armenian writers insist that all acts of mass violence that we Armenians undertook long ago were entirely defensive measures for our survival. In *The Burning Tigris*, Balakian uses as an example the kaza, or district, of Sasun. He arrives at conclusions which I find dubious.

Sasun is in eastern Turkey, about 100 kilometers west of Lake Van. In 1894, there was violent conflict between the Armenians of Sasun and Ottoman soldiers. Kurds were also involved; they fought on the side of the Ottoman soldiers. Armenians have claimed that the violence was sparked by the unjustness of the double taxation imposed on Armenians. It seems that we Armenians were being forced to pay taxes both to the Ottoman government and also to local Kurdish chieftains. Balakian says in *The Burning Tigris* that this double taxation “was ruining the Armenian agrarian economy.” He does not substantiate this. In “The Armenian Revolutionary Movement,” Nalbandian says that, at least in the case of one Armenian village, what the Kurdish chieftains demanded was commensurate with what the Armenian villagers were able to pay during that era. It is clear to me that these payments demanded by the Kurds were unjust. However, I have found no

evidence that the payments demanded from the Armenian villagers were outlandishly high.

The distinction between unfair taxation and unbearable taxation is important for deciding on the justification for violent action. While Balakian and others have argued that there were never any Armenian insurrections, other Armenian writers have contradicted them, saying that we did, in fact, rebel against the Ottoman government, but only because the oppression we had to endure compelled us to rebel. In other words, we had no choice but to rebel. Possibly, it is an argument that will never be resolved to everyone's satisfaction. In any case, there is no justification for the violent acts that Armenians undertook in Istanbul and other cities.

I have already mentioned the Joris Affair of 1905, in which the Dashnaks attempted to kill the sultan. I am sure that students in Turkey also know about another attack that Armenians carried out about a decade before that: the takeover of the Ottoman Bank on 26 August 1896. 25 Armenians entered the bank shooting and occupied the bank for one full day and night. From inside the bank, they threw bombs at the people outside, killing and injuring many. Then, they left. Those Armenians who were not injured or killed were escorted out of the bank and onto a yacht, and then onto a ship that took them to France. None of the Armenians who participated in the takeover of the bank ever went to prison or were punished in any way by the authorities of any country for what they did that day.

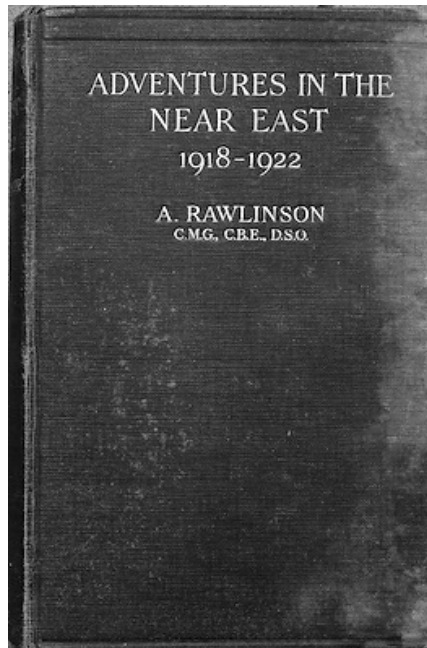
As far as I know, none of the Armenians who occupied the bank in 1896 ever expressed any shame about their actions at the bank. On the contrary, they seemed to be proud of what they did. On the ship that took them to France, the secretary to the bank manager, a man named F.A. Baker, accompanied these Armenians. He reported hearing the Armenians say that they wished they had killed more people that day.

To many contemporary Armenians, that bank takeover remains an act of heroism. Not to me. Today, it would surely – and rightly – be condemned as an act of terrorism. Furthermore, Armenians carried out other disturbances in

other parts of Istanbul that day in 1896, such as bombing the police stations in Samatya and Galatasaray. To me, all these acts were wrongheaded and immoral.

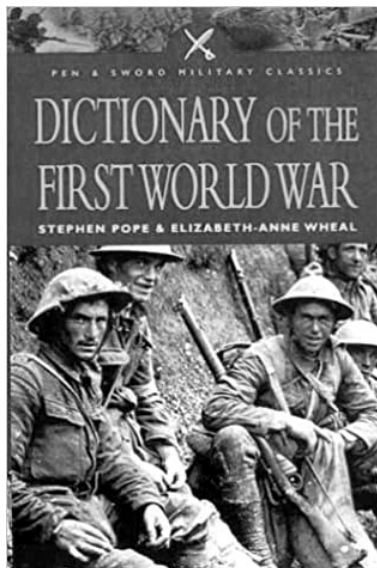
The Joris Affair and the occupation of the Ottoman Bank have been written about in great detail, and the people of Turkey are right to feel aggrieved over them. However, I suspect that the worst atrocities committed by Armenians during that era took place not in Istanbul in 1896, but later, in the countryside of eastern Turkey. Most villagers – non-Armenians as well as Armenians, including my grandmother – never learned to read or write. Whether it was Armenians harming non-Armenians or vice-versa, most of their tales of suffering were never recorded.

However, there were reports from several Westerners regarding the violent acts of Armenians in eastern Turkey. One was a British colonel named Alfred Rawlinson. He wrote a book about the time he spent in eastern Turkey titled *Adventures in the Near East*. In his book, Rawlinson describes a meeting he had with three Armenian military commanders in Anatolia in 1919. He had heard about massacres carried out



by Armenians against Muslims, and he confronted the Armenian commanders with these charges. The commanders, according to Rawlinson, were unconcerned about the charges. They justified the killings by saying that “massacres and atrocities of all kinds” are inevitable in Anatolia. Some Turkish scholars have argued that many Turkish soldiers, including some of high rank, were punished for having killed Armenians, but that no Armenians were ever punished by for having wantonly killed unarmed people in Turkey, including women and children. It is a point well taken. So far, I have not yet come upon a single record of any lawless Armenian fighter being reprimanded in any way by leaders of Dashnaks or the Hunchaks, or by the commanders of Russian battalions with whom Armenians fought. Armenian fighters seemed to have had *carte blanche*.

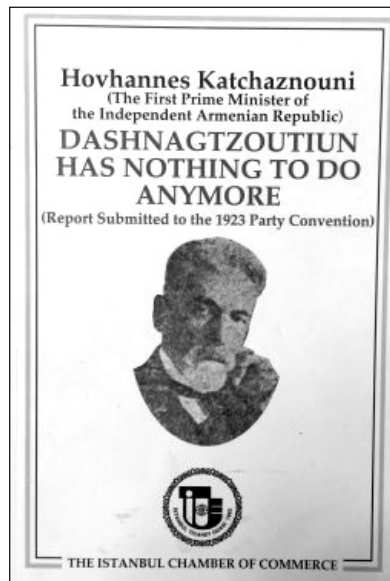
As I have already implied, I know little about the suffering and hardships that the non-Armenian people of Anatolia endured in the early 20th century. I am still trying to piece together what happened. One of the books on my shelf is a reference book titled *Dictionary of the First World War*. The first edition was published in England in 1995. According to this dictionary, Armenians killed 120,000 non-Armenians in 1914. As I’ve pointed out, as it has become increasingly difficult nowadays to conceal or ignore the violence that Armenians



carried out during that era, many Armenians like Balakian have begun to insist that all our acts of violence were in self-defense. However, this self-defense argument does not explain all the accounts of Armenians' killings of noncombatants.

Many Armenians in different parts of the world who lost relatives in Anatolia during that period insist that we Armenians need an apology and reparations from the Turkish government so that our dead relatives' souls can lie in peace. Yet, Armenians never seem to think of all the non-Armenians who were killed in Anatolia and elsewhere during that era. Many were killed by us. I believe that all the people who died in Anatolia during that era deserve to be acknowledged, not just Armenians.

In 1923, a man named Hovhannes Katchaznoui published a booklet titled *Dashnagtzoutiun Has Nothing to do Anymore*. The Dashnatsiyun were the Dashnaks. Katchaznoui had been a Dashnak. He had also been the Prime Minister of Armenia during its brief period of independence from 1918 to 1920, before it was subsumed into the USSR. He left Armenia before it became sovietized. In his booklet, Katchaznoui says that we Armenians had been foolish in trusting European powers and thinking that we could establish a large Armenian



state in Anatolia. He even suggests that removing Armenians out of Anatolia was the logical thing for the Ottoman government to do in response to the audacious plans of the Hunchaks and the Dashnaks. However, even he does not express any regret for the blood we Armenians spilled during that era. He just says that we had been foolish.

I am ashamed. I am ashamed that no Armenian has had the integrity and courage to step forward and say, “Yes, we helped the Russian army invade Turkey, and yes, we Armenians killed thousands of Ottoman soldiers, and women and children, too. We committed crimes against humanity.” It burns my fingers to type these words. However, I feel that it is a disgrace that most Armenians around the world refuse to acknowledge the outrages that we committed against tens of thousands of people in Turkey over a century ago.

It is hard for most of us in the 21st century to imagine what life was like within the Ottoman Empire. It is especially hard, I think, to get a picture of what life was like for those who lived in the countryside, whether they were Turkish, Kurdish, Armenian, or members of any of the numerous other ethnic groups. Surely, for most villagers’ life was not easy. Even before the large-scale violence of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, most people in Anatolia were the victims of poverty, disease, and injustice. Women’s lives were especially harsh, I think. The violent acts of Armenians, mostly men, along with Armenians’ cooperation with the Russian and French armies before, during, and even after the First World War compounded the misery of Anatolians. We need to learn to acknowledge our misdeeds.

We Armenians also need to learn to forgive others. It does not seem to be an easy thing for us to do. We are much better at maintaining grudges. Only once, in fact – once! – have I so far come upon a statement by an Armenian saying that we should forgive the people of Turkey. It was in a comment to an article I found at “armenians-1915.blogspot.com”. That is what I read once; I have no idea if it is true. In any case, the site has thousands of articles in its archives, including, not surprisingly, some on the “I Apologize” campaign. Article #2677 has the comment about forgiving Turks. It appears at the end of the

article, and the contributor, presumably Armenian, says that we need to demonstrate to the world that “we are a forgiving nation and people.” The name and location of the person who wrote that comment were not given. It makes me sad to think that no Armenian can declare, without fear of repercussions, that we should forgive the people of Turkey.

Comparing the harm that was done to Armenians with the harm that Armenians did to others is a dreary task. We Armenians want the harm and losses that we endured seem so monumental as to render moot any discussion about the harm and losses that we perpetrated against others. I don't agree with this way of thinking. Undoubtedly, many Armenians fear that any admission about our killings of others would weaken international support for the Armenian Cause. It's a valid fear, I think. It's not easy to simultaneously hold a halo over our heads with one hand and a gun in the other. We need to acknowledge that gun.

A century ago, mothers cried for their lost children. The tears of Turkish mothers were no less salty than the tears of Armenian mothers, or Kurdish mothers. The wind also was the same everywhere. The breezes that blew through villages that had been emptied of their Armenian or Kurdish inhabitants were no different from the breezes that blew through villages that had lost their Turkish inhabitants. And the blood from our wounds that soaked the ground left the same dark stains without any regard to the ethnicity of the victims. We all lost.

As the coronavirus has demonstrated, humanity has many challenges to face. As I wrote this essay, I often thought of what we as Armenians -- many of us highly educated and disciplined -- could accomplish if, instead of obsessing about the injustices we feel we've endured, we united and devoted our energy to solving the world's problems. How far could we get? Maybe we could stop a war, or sharply curtail infant mortality, or find cures for diseases. Maybe. I know that it's nothing more than a daydream. I know that we will continue to infantilize ourselves with a heroic past that never existed, and to implore the world to help us get what we neither need nor deserve.

One day about three decades ago, I went grocery shopping with my grandmother. We were somewhere in downtown Istanbul. We walked by a boy on the side of the street. His legs were mangled since birth. He couldn't walk. He was by the side of the street begging. We walked past him, and then my grandmother stopped. "Cocuk," she said. That means "child." My grandfather did not give my grandmother much money for groceries. But that day, my grandmother took out her purse, dug out a few coins, and gave them to the boy. I am not a Christian, but she was. Armenians generally take pride in the fact that we were the first Christian nation on Earth. It's a stab in my heart to realize that we will never live up to our potential.

End

