

Commentary

Armenian story has another side

By Norman Stone, a historian and the author of "World War I: A Short History"

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All the world knows what the end of an empire looks like: hundreds of thousands of people fleeing down dusty paths, taking what was left of their possessions; crammed refugee trains puffing their way across arid plains; and many, many people dying. For the Ottoman Empire that process began in the Balkans, the Crimea and the Caucasus as Russia and her satellites expanded. Seven million people -- we would now call them Turks -- had to settle in Anatolia, the territory of modern Turkey.

In 1914, when World War I began in earnest, Armenians living in what is now Turkey attempted to set up a national state. Armenians revolted against the Ottoman government, began what we would now call "ethnic cleansing" of the local Turks. Their effort failed and caused the government to deport most Armenians from the area of the revolt for security reasons. Their sufferings en route are well-known.

Today, Armenian interests in America and abroad are well-organized. What keeps them united is the collective memory of their historic grievance. What happened was not in any way their fault, they believe. If the drive to carve out an ethnically pure Armenian state was a failure, they reason, it was only because the Turks exterminated them.

For years, Armenians have urged the U.S. Congress to recognize their fate as genocide. Many U.S. leaders -- including former secretaries of state and defense and current high-ranking Bush administration officials -- have urged Congress either not to consider or to vote down the current genocide resolution primarily for strategic purposes: Turkey is a critical ally to the U.S. in both Iraq and Afghanistan and adoption of such a resolution would anger and offend the Turkish population and jeopardize U.S.-Turkish relations.

Given this strong opposition, why would Congress, upon the advice of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, make itself arbiter of this controversy? What makes the Armenians' dreadful fate so much worse than the dreadful fates that come with every end of empire? It is here that historians must come in.

First, allegedly critical evidence of the crime consists of forgeries. The British were in occupation of Istanbul for four years after the war and examined all of the files of the Ottoman government. They found nothing, and therefore could not try the 100-odd supposed Turkish war criminals that they were holding. Then, documents turned up, allegedly telegrams from the interior ministry to the effect that all Armenians should be wiped out. The signatures turned out to be wrong, there were no back-up copies in the archives and the dating system was misunderstood.

There are many other arguments against a supposed genocide of the Armenians. Their leader was offered a post in the Turkish Cabinet in 1914, and turned it down. When the deportations were under way, the populations of the big cities were exempted -- Istanbul, Izmir, Aleppo, where there were huge concentrations of Armenians. There were indeed well-documented and horrible massacres of the deportee columns, and the Turks themselves tried more than 1,300 men for these crimes in 1916, convicted many and executed several. None of this squares with genocide, as we classically understand it. Finally, it is just not true that historians as a whole support the genocide thesis. The people who know the background and the language (Ottoman Turkish is terribly difficult) are divided, and those who do not accept the genocide thesis are weightier. The Armenian lobby contends that these independent and highly esteemed historians are simply "Ottomanists" -- a ridiculously arrogant dismissal.

Unfortunately, the issue has never reached a properly constituted court. If the Armenians were convinced of their own case, they would have taken it to one. Instead, they lobby bewildered or bored parliamentary assemblies to "recognize the genocide."

Congress should not take a position, one way or the other, on this affair. Let historians decide. The Turkish government has been saying this for years. It is the Armenians who refuse to take part in a joint historical review, even when organized by impeccably neutral academics. This review is the logical and most sensible path forward. Passage of the resolution by the full House of Representatives would constitute an act of legislative vengeance and would shame well-meaning scholars who want to explore this history from any vantage point other than the one foisted upon the world by ultranationalist Armenians.

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