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Elizabeth Kolbert 80 Turkey and the Armenian genocide.

Elizabeth Kolbert (Books, p. 120) is the author of "Field Notes from a Catastrophe: Man, Nature, and Climate Change."

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BOOKS

DEAD RECKONING

The Armenian genocide and the politics of silence.

BY ELIZABETH KOLBERT

On September 14, 2000, Representatives George Radanovich, Republican of California, and David Bonior, Democrat of Michigan, introduced a House resolution—later to be known as H.R. 596—on the slaughter of the Armenians. The measure urged the President, in dealing with the matter, to demonstrate “appropriate understanding and sensitivity.” It further instructed him on how to phrase his annual message on the Armenian Day of Remembrance: the President should refer to the atrocities as “genocide.” The bill was sent to the International Relations Committee and immediately came under attack. State Department officials reminded the committee that it was U.S. policy to “respect the Turkish government’s assertions that, although many ethnic Armenians died during World War I, no genocide took place.” Expanding on this theme, Secretary of Defense William Cohen, in a letter to Dennis Hastert, the Speaker of the House, wrote that while he in no way wanted to “downplay the Armenian tragedy... passing judgment on this history through legislation could have a negative impact on Turkish-Armenian relations and on our security interests in the region.” After committee members voted, on October 3rd, to send H.R. 596 to the floor, Turkish officials warned that negotiations with an American defense contractor, Bell Textron, over four and a half billion dollars’ worth of attack helicopters were in jeopardy. On October 5th, the leaders of all five parties in the Turkish parliament issued a joint statement threatening to deny the U.S. access to an airbase in Incirlik, which it was using to patrol northern Iraq. Finally, on October 19th, just a few hours before H.R. 596 was scheduled to be debated in the House, Hastert pulled it from the agenda. He had, he said, been informed by President Clinton that passage of the resolution could “risk the lives of Americans.”

The defeat of H.R. 596 is a small

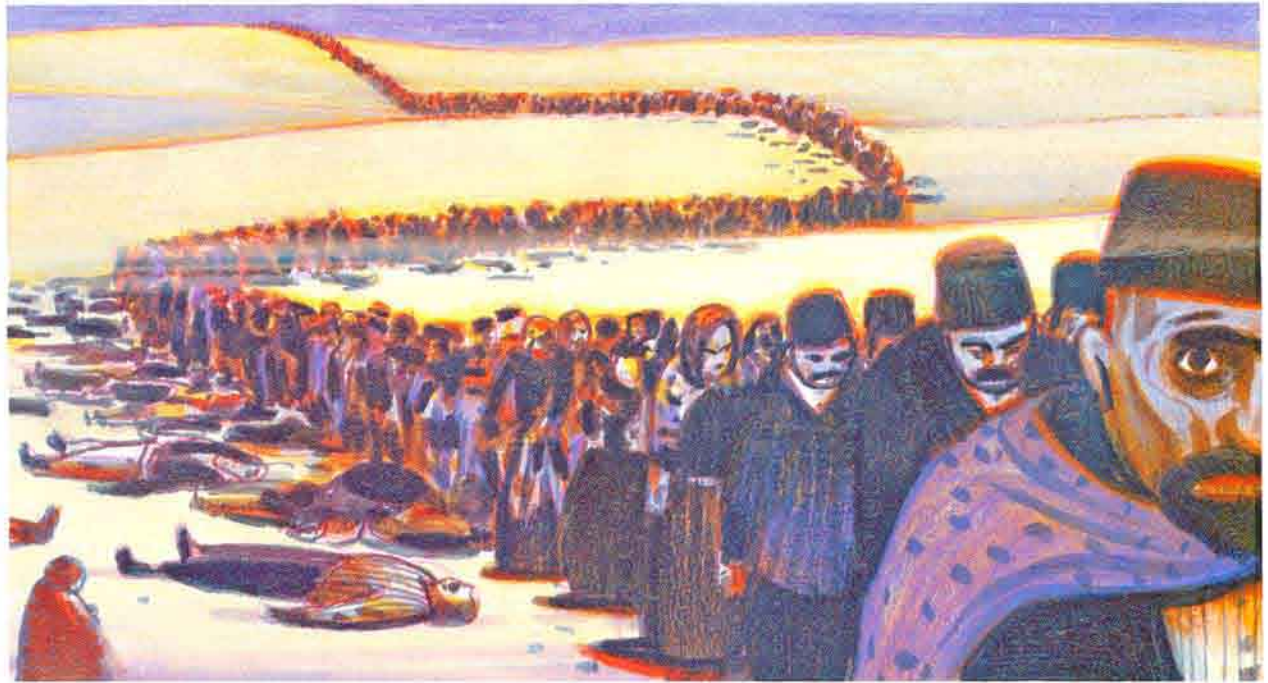
but fairly typical episode in a great campaign of forgetting. Like President Clinton, President Bush continues to “respect the Turkish government’s assertions” and to issue Armenian Remembrance Day proclamations each year without ever quite acknowledging what it is that’s being remembered. If in Washington it’s politically awkward to refer to the genocide, it is positively dangerous to do so in Istanbul. Last year, Turkey’s leading author, Orhan Pamuk, was prosecuted merely for having brought up the subject in a press interview. “A million Armenians were killed and nobody but me dares to talk about it,” he told the Sunday magazine of the Swiss newspaper *Tages-Anzeiger*. Pamuk, now a recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature, was accused of having violated Section 301 of the Turkish penal code, which outlaws “insulting Turkishness.” (The charge was eventually dropped, on a technicality.) A few months later, another prominent Turkish novelist, Elif Shafak, was charged with the same offense, for having a character in her most recent novel, “The Bastard of Istanbul,” declare, “I am the grandchild of genocide survivors who lost all their relatives at the hands of Turkish butchers in 1915, but I myself have been brainwashed to deny the genocide.” The charges were dropped after Shafak argued that the statement of a fictional person could not be used to prosecute a real one, then reinstated by a higher court, and then dropped again.

It is in this context that Taner Akcam’s new history, “A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility” (Metropolitan; \$30), must be considered. The book is dryly written and awkwardly translated, but nevertheless moving. Akcam grew up in far northeastern Turkey and was educated at Ankara’s Middle East Technical University, where he

became the editor of a leftist journal. In 1976, he was arrested and sentenced to ten years in prison for spreading propaganda. Using a stove leg to dig a tunnel, he managed to escape after a year, and fled to Germany. Akcam is one of the first Turkish historians to treat the Armenian genocide as genocide—he now lives in exile in Minnesota—and in “A

Christians living in the heart of a Muslim empire, they were subject by law to special taxes and restrictions, and by tradition to extortion and harassment. As the century wore on, the so-called Sick Man of Europe kept shedding territory: first Greece, in the Greek War of Independence; and then, following the Russo-Turkish War, Serbia, Montene-

Armenian teachers in jail, prohibited the use of the word “Armenia” in newspapers and textbooks, and formed special Kurdish regiments, known as the Hamidiye, whose *raison d’être* appears to have been to harass Armenian farmers. Encouraged by American and European missionaries, the Armenians turned to the outside world for help.



For Turks, to acknowledge the massacres would be to admit that modern Turkey was founded by war criminals.

Shameful Act” he tries to grapple both with the enormity of the crime and with the logic of its repression.

Any writer who takes on genocide as his topic accepts obligations that, if not exactly contradictory, are clearly in tension. The first is to describe the event in a way that is adequate to its exceptionality. (The original U.N. resolution on the subject, approved in 1946, describes genocide as an act that “shocks the conscience of mankind.”) The second is to make sense of it, which is to say, to produce an account of the unspeakable that anyone can understand.

Akcam begins his history in the nineteenth century, when roughly two million Armenians were living in the Ottoman Empire, some in major cities like Istanbul and Izmir, and the rest in the provinces of central and eastern Anatolia. Already, the Armenians were in a peculiarly vulnerable position:

gro, Romania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. These humiliating defeats eroded the Ottomans’ confidence, which, in turn, Akcam argues, “resulted in the loss of their tolerance.” Muslim assaults on Christians increased throughout the empire, and the ancient prejudices against the Armenians hardened into something uglier.

In 1876, Sultan Abdülhamid II came to power. Abdülhamid, who ruled the empire for thirty-three of its last forty-six years, was a deeply anxious man, perhaps paranoid. He maintained a vast network of spies; turned Yildiz Palace, overlooking the Bosphorus, into a ramshackle fort; and demanded that each dish be tasted by his chief chamberlain before being served. Abdülhamid soon took anti-Armenianism to new heights. (It was rumored that the Sultan’s own mother, a former dancing girl, was Armenian, but he always denied this.) He shut down Armenian schools, threw

The English, the French, and the Russians repeatedly demanded that Istanbul institute “reforms” on the Armenians’ behalf. Officially, the Sultan acceded to these demands, only to turn around and repress the Armenians that much more vigorously. “By taking away Greece and Romania, Europe has cut off the feet of the Turkish state,” Abdülhamid complained. “Now, by means of this Armenian agitation, they want to get at our most vital places and tear out our very guts. This would be the beginning of totally annihilating us, and we must fight against it with all the strength we possess.”

In the mid-eighteen-nineties, tens of thousands of Armenians were murdered. The slaughter began in Sasun, in eastern Anatolia, where Armenians had refused to pay taxes on the ground that the government had failed to protect them from Kurdish extortion. The killings in Sasun provoked an international outcry, which

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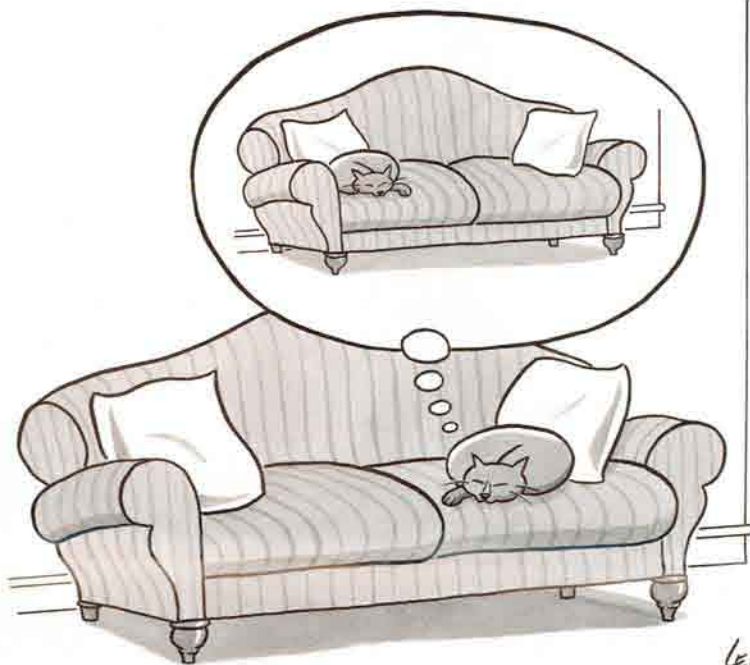
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was answered with the Sultan's usual promises of reform, and then with a string of even bloodier massacres in the provinces of Erzurum, Ankara, Sivas, Trabzon, and Harput. In the wake of the killings, William Gladstone, the former British Prime Minister, labelled Abdülhamid "the great assassin."

Finally, in 1909, Abdülhamid was pushed aside. The coup was engineered by a group composed, for the most part, of discontented Army officers—the original Young Turks. The Young Turks spoke loftily of progress and brotherhood—on the eve of the revolt, one of their leaders is said to have declared, "Under the blue sky we are all equal"—and the empire's remaining Christians celebrated their ascendancy. But the logic of slaughtering the Armenians had by this point been too well established.

When the First World War broke out, the Young Turks rushed to join the conflict. "That day of revenge, which has been awaited for centuries by the nation's young and old, by its martyrs and by its living, has finally arrived," the Ottoman Chamber of Deputies asserted in a letter to the armed forces. By 1914, the empire was being led by a troika—nicknamed the Three Pashas—composed of the Minister of the Interior, the Min-

ister of the Navy, and the Minister of War. In December, the War Minister, Ismail Enver, decided to lead the Third Army in an attack against the Russians on the Caucasian front. Enver planned to press all the way east to Baku, in present-day Azerbaijan, where he hoped to incite the local Muslims to join the Ottomans' cause, and, as a first step, he ordered his forces to divide up and follow different routes to Sarikamish, a Russian military outpost. The idea was for all the troops to arrive at the same time and surprise the enemy with their strength; instead, they straggled in over a period of several days, with devastating results. The Ottomans lost about seventy-five thousand men at Sarikamish, out of a total force of ninety thousand. A German officer attached to the Third Army described the defeat as "a disaster which for rapidity and completeness is without parallel in military history." The Russians had encouraged the Armenians to form volunteer regiments to fight against the Ottomans, and some (though not many) had heeded this call. The Armenians' role in the disaster became one of the pretexts for the genocide.

On April 24, 1915, some two hundred and fifty prominent Armenians—poets, doctors, bankers, and even a member of the Ottoman parliament—were arrested in Istanbul. They were split up

into groups, loaded onto trains, shipped off to remote prisons, and eventually killed. (The Armenian Day of Remembrance is marked each year on the anniversary of these arrests.) Around the same time, orders were issued to begin rounding up Armenians wholesale and deporting them. "Some regional variations notwithstanding," Akcam reports, the deportations "proceeded in the same manner everywhere." Armenians would be given a few days or, in some cases, just a few hours to leave their homes. The men were separated from the women and children, led beyond the town, and either tortured or murdered outright. Their families were then herded to concentration camps in the Syrian desert, often bound by ropes or chains. Along the way, they were frequently set upon by Kurdish tribesmen, who had been given license to loot and rape, or by the very gendarmes who were supposed to be guarding them. A Greek witness wrote of watching a column of deportees being led through the Kemakh Gorge, on the upper Euphrates. The guards "withdrew to the mountainside" and "began a hail of rifle fire," he wrote. "A few days later there was a mopping-up operation: since many little children were still alive and wandering about beside their dead parents." In areas where ammunition was in short supply, the killing squads relied on whatever weapons were at hand—axes, cleavers, even shovels. Adults were hacked to pieces, and infants dashed against the rocks. In the Black Sea region, Armenians were loaded onto boats and thrown overboard. In the area around Lake Hazar, they were tossed over cliffs.

At the time of the deportations, the U.S. had not yet entered the war. It maintained an extensive network of diplomats in the region, and many of these provided detailed chronicles of what they had seen, which Henry Morgenthau, the United States Ambassador in Istanbul, urgently forwarded to Washington. (Other eyewitness accounts came from German Army officers, Danish missionaries, and Armenian survivors.) In a dispatch sent to the State Department on November 1, 1915, the U.S. consul in Aleppo wrote:

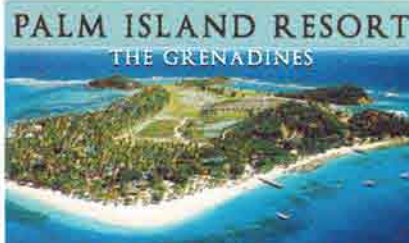
It is extremely rare to find a family intact that has come any considerable distance, invariably all having lost members from disease and fatigue, young girls and boys carried off by hostile tribesmen, and about all the men having been separated from the families and

suffered fates that had best be left unmentioned, many being done away with in atrocious manners before the eyes of their relatives and friends. So severe has been the treatment that careful estimates place the number of survivors at only 15 percent of those originally deported. On this basis the number surviving even this far being less than 150,000 . . . there seems to have been about 1,000,000 persons lost up to this date.

An American businessman who made a tour of the lower Euphrates the next year reported having encountered "all along the road from Meskene to Der-i-Zor graves containing the remains of unfortunate Armenians abandoned and dead in atrocious suffering. It is by the hundreds that these mounds are numbered where sleep anonymously in their last sleep these outcasts of existence, these victims of barbarity without qualification." Morgenthau repeatedly confronted the Ottoman Interior Minister, Mehmed Talât, with the contents of these dispatches, telling him that the Americans would "never forget these massacres." But the warnings made no impression. During one session, Morgenthau later recalled in a memoir, Talât turned to him and asked if he could obtain a list of Armenians who had purchased life-insurance policies with American firms. "They are practically all dead now, and have no heirs left to collect the money," the Interior Minister reasoned, and therefore the unclaimed benefits rightfully belonged to the government.

The official explanation for the Armenian deportations was that they were necessary for security reasons, and this is still the account provided by state-sanctioned histories today. "Facts on the Relocation of Armenians (1914-1918)," a volume produced by the Turkish Historical Society, was published in English in 2002. It begins with an epigram from John F. Kennedy ("For the great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie—deliberate, contrived, and dishonest—but the myth, persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic") and the reassurance that it is "not a propaganda document." The book argues that Russia and its allies had "sown the seeds of intrigue and mischief among the Armenians, who in turn had been doing everything in their power to make life difficult for Ottoman armies." Deciding that "fundamental precautions" were needed, the Ottoman authorities took steps to "relocate" the Armenians away

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from the front. They worked to insure that the transfer would be effected “as humanely as possible”; if this goal was not always realized, it was because of disease—so difficult to control during wartime—or rogue bands of “tribal people” who sometimes attacked Armenian convoys. “Whenever the government realized that some untoward incidents had taken place . . . the government acted very promptly and warned the local authorities.” In support of this “Arbeit Macht Frei” version of events, “Facts on the Relocation of Armenians” cites the very Ottoman officials who oversaw the slaughter. Turkish officials, in turn, now cite works like “Facts” to support their claim that the period’s history remains contested. In March, 2005, just before the commemoration of the ninetieth anniversary of the Day of Remembrance, the Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, called for an “impartial study” to look into what had really happened to the Armenians. The International Association of Genocide Scholars responded that such a call could only be regarded as still more propaganda. “The Armenian Genocide is abundantly documented by thousands of official records . . . by eyewitness accounts of missionaries and diplomats, by the testimony of survivors, and by decades of historical scholarship,” the association’s directors wrote in a letter explaining their refusal to participate. An academic conference on the massacres planned for later that spring in Istanbul was banned by a court order. (After much maneuvering, it was held at a private university amid raucous protests.)

The Ottomans formally surrendered to the Allies on October 30, 1918. The Paris Peace Conference opened the following year, and it took another year for the Allies to agree on how to dispose of the empire. The pact that finally emerged—the Treaty of Sèvres—awarded Palestine, Transjordan, and Mesopotamia to the English, Syria and Lebanon to the French, Rhodes and a chunk of southern Anatolia to the Italians, and Izmir and western Anatolia to the Greeks. Eastern Anatolia, with a prize stretch of Black Sea coast, was to go to the Armenians. The Bosphorus and the Dardanelles were to be demilitarized and placed under international control. From an imperial power the Turks were thus

transformed into something very close to a subject people. This was the final disgrace and, as it turned out, also the start of a revival.

As the rulers of the Ottoman Empire, the Turks had been fighting against history; they had spent more than a century trying—often unsuccessfully—to fend off nationalist movements in the regions they controlled. Now, in defeat, they adopted the cause as their own. In the spring of 1920, the Turkish Nationalists, led by Mustafa Kemal—later to be known as Atatürk—established a new government in Ankara. (The government’s founding is celebrated every April 23rd, one day before the Armenian Day of Remembrance.) During the next three years, the Nationalists fought a series of brutal battles, which eventually forced the Allies to abandon Sèvres. A new treaty was drawn up, the Treaty of Lausanne, and the Republic of Turkey was created. The big losers in this process were, once again, the Armenians: Lausanne returned all of Anatolia to Turkish control.

In Akcam’s view, what happened between 1920 and 1923 is the key to understanding the Turks’ refusal to discuss what happened in 1915. The Armenian genocide was what today would be called a campaign of ethnic cleansing, and as such it was highly effective. It changed the demographics of eastern Anatolia; then, on the basis of these changed demographics, the Turks used the logic of self-determination to deprive of a home the very people they had decimated. Although the genocide was not committed by the Nationalists, without it the nationalist project wouldn’t have made much sense. Meanwhile, the Nationalists made sure that the perpetrators were never punished. Immediately after the end of the war, the Three Pashas fled the country. (The Interior Minister, Talât, was assassinated in Berlin by an Armenian who had been left for dead in a pile of corpses.) In an attempt to mollify the Allies, the Ottomans arrested scores of lower-ranking officials and put some of them on trial, but, when the Nationalists came to power, they suspended these proceedings and freed the suspects. A separate prosecution effort by the British, who were keeping dozens of Ottoman officers locked up in Malta, similarly came to nothing, and eventually the

officers were sent home as part of a prisoner-of-war exchange. Several went on to become high-ranking members of Mustafa Kemal’s government. For the Turks to acknowledge the genocide would thus mean admitting that their country was founded by war criminals and that its existence depended on their crimes. This, in Akcam’s words, “would call into question the state’s very identity.” And so the Turks prefer to insist, as “Facts on the Relocation of Armenians” puts it, that the genocide is a “legend.”

It is, of course, possible to question Akcam’s highly psychologized account. Turkey has long sought to join the European Union, and, while a history of genocide is clearly no barrier to membership, denying it may be; several European governments have indicated that they will oppose the country’s bid unless it acknowledges the crimes committed against the Armenians. Are the Turks really willing to risk their country’s economic future merely in order to hide—or pretend to hide—an ugly fact about its origins? To believe this seems to require a view of Turkish ethnic pride that gets dangerously close to a national stereotype. In fact, many Turkish nationalists oppose E.U. membership; from their perspective, denying the Armenian genocide serves an eminently practical political purpose.

That being said, Akcam clearly has a point, and one that Americans, in particular, ought to be able to appreciate. Before the arrival of the first Europeans, there were, it is estimated, at least forty million indigenous people living in the Americas; by 1650, fewer than ten million were left. The decline was the result of casual cruelty on the one hand—diseases unwittingly spread—and systematic slaughter on the other. Every November, when American schoolchildren are taught about Thanksgiving, they are insistently told the story of how the Pilgrims, in their gratitude, entertained the kindly Wampanoag. We now know that the comity of that original Thanksgiving was entirely atypical, and that, by 1621, the Wampanoag were already a dying nation. While it was cowardly of Congress to pull H.R. 596, passing it would, in its own way, also have been problematic. We may side with the Armenians, but, historically speaking, we probably have more in common with the Turks. ♦