

WHY CONGRESS SHOULD NOT LEGISLATE HISTORY

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On March 4, 2010 the Foreign Affairs Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives approved by a 23-22 vote a controversial resolution (H. Res. 252) declaring that it “finds the . . . Armenian Genocide was conceived and carried out by the Ottoman Empire from 1915 to 1923, resulting in the deportation of nearly 2,000,000 Armenians, of whom 1,500,000 . . . were killed.” It was the latest chapter in the on-going Armenian attempt to legislate their version of history. Similar “genocide resolutions” passed the same committee in 2000, 2005, and 2007, but opposition by Presidents Clinton and Bush prevented them from reaching the full House for a vote let alone proceeding on to the Senate and then the president for his signature.

There are two main reasons why “genocide resolution” should again be stopped: (1) It would greatly harm U.S. foreign policy towards its valuable ally Turkey, and (2) It is a one-sided attempt to legislate somebody’s partisan version of history. Indeed, the entire history of these Armenian attempts to legislate history in the United States has been one of some in Congress being willing to support Armenian contentions due to their piecemeal view towards U.S. foreign policy, but the president’s refusal to go along due to his overall view towards furthering US foreign policy interests. In addition to the incalculable harm it might do to strategic US foreign policy interests, there are other most compelling reasons why politicians should not politicize history by trying to legislate it.

These reasons were listed succinctly in an Open Letter signed by 69 academics (including such eminent authorities as Bernard Lewis, J. C. Hurewitz, and Roderic Davison) and who, in addressing the US House of Representatives, were described as specialists “in Turkish, Ottoman, and Middle Eastern studies.” The occasion was an earlier Armenian attempt in 1975 to pass a “genocide resolution” (H. Res. 192). In part this Open Letter explained: “The history of the Ottoman-Armenians is much debated among scholars, many of whom do not agree with the historical assumptions embodied in the wording of H.J. Res. 192. By passing the resolution Congress will be attempting to determine by legislation which side of a historical question is correct. Such a resolution, based on historically questionable assumptions, can only damage the cause of honest historical enquiry, and damage the credibility of the American legislative process.”

The Armenian supporters of course simply denounced such questioning of their tactics to legislate history as the work of pseudo-scholars and genocide deniers. However, the scholars who signed the Open Letter included some of the most prestigious experts in the area of Ottoman and Turkish studies and thus cannot be dismissed simply as being irrelevant. What this episode illustrated, therefore, was that pontificating on what happened historically between the Turks and Armenians is not the business of the US Congress, but rather work best suited for scholars.

In 2007, the Armenians tried yet again to pass a genocide resolution (H. Res. 106) in the US Congress (H. Res. 106). For a while the Armenians and their friends actually seemed close to achieving their goal. Indeed, on October 10, 2007, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives by a vote of 27-21 actually

recommended the passage of a resolution similar to the one that was passed just last month. At this point, as had occurred before, the American president stepped in to block the resolution's passage, arguing: "We all deeply regret the tragic suffering of the Armenian people that began in 1915. But this resolution is not the right response to these historic mass killings and its passage would do great harm to relations with a key ally in NATO, and to the war on terror."

Zbigniew Brzezinski, the national security adviser in the Carter administration, declared sarcastically on CNN: "As far as a resolution is concerned, I never realized that the House of Representatives was some sort of an academy of learning that passes judgment on historical events. History's full of terrible crimes, and there is no doubt that many Armenians were massacred in World War I. But whether the House of Representatives should be passing resolutions whether that should be classified as genocide or a huge massacre is I don't think any of its business. It has nothing to do with passing laws, [and] how to run the United States. That's where the constitution created the House of Representatives for. Even former US president Jimmy Carter (who sometimes takes what some might characterize as overly idealistic or even naïve human-rights approaches to complicated political-historical issues) in this case stated that "I think if I was in Congress I would not vote for it [the resolution]." In addition, eight former US secretaries of state, both Republican and Democratic, signed a petition calling for the resolution to be blocked. It was!

Although there is no doubt that what happened to the Armenians might today be called war crimes, crimes against humanity, or even ethnic cleansing, genocide does not

accurately describe the much more complicated, unique series of events that H. Res. 252 is clearly unaware of or at least chooses to ignore in its rush to legislate history. The term “genocide” has been overused, misused, and therefore trivialized by many different groups seeking to demonize their antagonists and win sympathetic approbation for themselves. I include the Armenians in this category because, although maybe as many as 600,000 of them died during World War I, it was neither a premeditated policy perpetrated by the Ottoman Turkish government nor an event unilaterally implemented without cause. In so concluding I must stress and reiterate that hundreds of thousands of Armenians were massacred, and for these dastardly deeds the Turkish perpetrators and their associates should hang their heads in shame. However, there are also Armenians who should also hang their heads in shame for provoking this unjustified Turkish response.

In arguing thus, I note a recent study by the eminent French scholar Jacques Semelin, *Purify and Destroy: The Political Uses of Massacre and Genocide*, 2007, who explains “whether use of the word ‘genocide’ is justified or not, the term aims to strike our imagination, awaken our moral conscience and mobilise public opinion on behalf of the victims.” Semelin adds that “under these circumstances, anyone daring to suggest that what is going on is not ‘really’ genocide is immediately accused of weakness or sympathizing with the aggressors.” Thus, “given the powerful emotional charge the word genocide generates, it can be used and re-used in all sorts of hate talk to heap international opprobrium on whoever is accused of genocidal intent.”

The testimony of Hovhannes Katchaznoui, the first prime minister of Armenia after World War I and thus an authority well placed to judge what had just occurred,

constitutes a most important document illustrating what really happened: “We overestimated the ability of the Armenian people, its political and military power, and overestimated the extent and importance of the services our people rendered to the Russians.” Katchaznouni then stated that “the proof is, however—and this is essential—that the struggle began decades ago [which] against the Turkish government brought about the deportation or extermination of the Armenian people in Turkey and the desolation of Turkish Armenia.” The former Armenian prime minister was referring to decades of Armenian revolutionary actions against the Ottoman Empire, a history well documented by yet another Armenian, the scholar Louise Nalbandian, *The Armenian Revolutionary Movement: The Development of Armenian Political Parties through the Nineteenth Century*, 1963, among others.

In questioning the appropriateness of the term “genocide” to describe what occurred, one also should closely examine yet another Armenian author, K[apriel] S[erope] Papazian’s long ignored and even suppressed study *Patriotism Perverted* for what it reveals about the events of World War I, which the Armenians today argue constituted genocide. Papazian, however, wrote that “the fact remains . . . that the leaders of the Turkish-Armenian section of the Dashnagtzoutune [the leading Armenian revolutionary party founded in 1890] did not carry out their promise of loyalty to the Turkish cause when the Turks entered the war.” He also told how “thousands of Armenians from all over the world, flocked to the standards of such famous fighters as Antranik, Kery, Dro, etc.,” and that “the Armenian volunteer regiments rendered valuable services to the Russian Army in the years of 1914-15-16.”

One should also consult Guenter Lewy, *The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey: A Disputed Genocide*, 2005, a recent and very significant contribution to the long-standing debate over what happened to the Armenians during the last days of the Ottoman Empire. Lewy correctly declares that “the key issue in this quarrel . . . is not the extent of Armenian suffering, but rather the question of premeditation: that is, whether the Young Turk regime during the First World War intentionally organized the massacres that took place.” After debunking the validity of documents purporting to show Turkish premeditation, Lewy also questions the methods of arguably the current leading Armenian scholar-advocate for the premeditated genocide thesis, Vakhakn N. Dadrian. Lewy points out Dadrian’s “selective use of sources,” how when “checking the references provided by Dadrian . . . it becomes clear that these sources do not always say what Dadrian alleges,” Dadrian’s “manipulating the statements of contemporary observers,” how “only through shrewd juxtapositions of words and insertions (which he puts in square brackets) that Dadrian ends up with the desired result,” and how “it is Dadrian’s gloss and not the original text quoted that includes the incriminating words.” For questioning the Armenian mantra of genocide, however, Lewy has been unfairly vilified or worse by his Armenian detractors and their supporters.

In addition to the appropriateness of employing the term “genocide,” H. Res. 252 also repeats numerous historical errors in presenting its one-sided Armenian version of history. For example, by trying to extend the dates of the supposed genocide all the way to 1923, the resolution blatantly ignores the historical fact that at the end of World War I the Republic of Armenia actually attacked the prostrate Ottoman Empire in an ill-

conceived attempt to conquer eastern Anatolia. Thus, the Armenians conveniently add their losses in this war to the “genocide.”

H. Res. 252 also uses the highly controversial figure of 1,500,000 Armenians killed. Although there are no accurate statistics, this figure is probably greatly exaggerated. Ottoman statistics, for example, show that there were not even this many Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire on the eve of World War I. If the Armenian death claims are accurate, how would one explain the many Armenians who survived the war and were then still able to attack the Ottoman Empire? H. Res. 252 also ignores the much greater Turkish death totals suffered during this period.

Furthermore, H. Res. 252 declares that “the post-World War I Turkish government indicted the top leaders involved in . . . the Armenian Genocide. . . . The chief organizers . . . were all condemned to death.” True, but this point does not mention that the Turkish government was trying to appease the Allied victors by taking such action. As soon as Turkey had regained its independence by defeating the Armenian invasion in the east and the Greek invasion in the west, these indictments and convictions were laid aside.

H. Res. 252 also cites Henry Morgenthau, the U.S. ambassador to the Ottoman Empire from 1913-1916 as to the veracity of the Armenian genocide claims. Conveniently, however, the resolution makes no mention of Morgenthau’s successor, Admiral Mark Bristol, the U.S. high commissioner and then ambassador to Turkey from 1920-1926, who was not of the same opinion. Probably, the House committee members who sought to legislate history on these events never even heard of Bristol. In addition,

H. Res. 252 cites the supposed statement Hitler made to justify his genocide against the Jews: “Who remembers the Armenians”? Most reputable historians, however, have demonstrated that Hitler probably never even made such a statement. The Armenian attempt to piggy back on the Jewish Holocaust once again becomes problematic.

Finally, based on the historical ambiguity detailed above, one should also question the final finding of H. Res. 252 that: “The failure of the domestic and international authorities to punish those responsible for the Armenian Genocide is a reason why similar genocides have recurred and may recur in the future.” Although no one would argue against preventing future genocides, the way to do so is to accurately analyze what happened, and even more importantly how it happened. If the U.S. Congress and others really care about never again, they must understand the specific context of how the Armenian tragedy occurred and what specific events produced it. In its rush to legislate history, however, H. Res. 252 does not do this and thus forecloses the ability to really examine what happened and thus prevent it from occurring again.

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