

## **Norman Stone: 'There is No Armenian Genocide'**

### **Famous British Historian says he is ready to be imprisoned by France**

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“The Armenian ‘genocide’ is an imperialist plot.” So said Dogu Perincek, in Marxist mode, and he chose to say it in Switzerland. Switzerland passed a law threatening prison for anyone ‘denying’ that there had been a genocide of the Ottoman Armenians in 1915, and Mr. Perincek was interrogated by the police.

There have been similar events in other countries and now we have the French parliament passing a law that is harsher than the Swiss one – a year’s prison and a heavy fine. This is a ridiculous and contemptible business – bad history and worse politics. It is also financially very grubby indeed. We all know how the American legal system can work: lawyers will agree to work for nothing, in return for a share of the profits at the end of a court case. Court cases are very expensive and it can simply be easier for banks or firms or hospitals to agree to make a payment without any confession of liability, just because fighting the case would be absurdly expensive, and the outcome – given how the American jury system works – unpredictable. A burglar, crawling over a householder’s glass roof, fell through it, was badly wounded, and took the householder to court: result, a million dollars in damages. Class actions by Armenian Diaspora descendants in California shook down the Deutsche Bank over claims dating back to 1915 and collected 17,000,000 dollars; then they attempted the same with a French insurance company. We can be entirely certain that if Turkey ever ‘recognizes the genocide’ then the financial claims will follow.

But if Turkey refuses to admit it, she is in fact on perfectly good ground. The very first thing to be said is that the business of ‘genocide’ has never been proved. The evidence for it is at best indirect and when the British were in occupation of Istanbul they never found any direct evidence or proof at all. They kept some hundred or so prominent Turks in captivity on Malta, hoping to find some sort of evidence against them, and failed. They asked the Americans if they knew anything and were told, no. The result is that the alleged ‘genocide’ has never been subjected to a properly-constituted court of law. The British released their Turks (meanly refusing to pay for their journeys back home from Malta). There is a counter-claim to the effect that this happened because the Nationalist Turks were holding British officers hostage but the fact is that the Law Officers simply said that they did not have the evidence to try their captives.

Diaspora Armenians claim that ‘historians’ accept the genocide case. There is some preposterous organization called ‘association of genocide scholars’ which does indeed endorse the Diaspora line, but who are they and what qualifications do they have? Knowing about Rwanda or Bosnia or even Auschwitz does not qualify them to discuss Anatolia in 1915, and the Ottoman specialists are by no means convinced of the ‘genocide’. There is in fact an ‘A’ team of distinguished historians who do not accept the Diaspora line at all. In France, Gilles Veinstein, historian of Salonica and a formidable scholar, reviewed the evidence in a famous article of 1993 in *L’Histoire*. Back then the Armenian Diaspora were also jumping up and down about something or other, and Veinstein summed up the arguments for and against, in an admirably fair-minded way. The fact is that there is no proof of ‘genocide’, in the sense that no document ever appeared, indicating that the Armenians were to be exterminated. There is forged evidence. In 1920 some documents were handed to the British by a journalist called Andonian. She claimed that he had been given them by an Ottoman official called Naim. The documents have been published as a book (in English and French) and if you take them at face value they are devastating: here is Talaat Pasha as minister of the Interior telling the governors to exterminate the Armenians, not to

forget to exterminate the children in orphanages, but to keep it all secret. But the documents are very obviously a forgery – elementary mistakes as regards dates and signatures. At the time, in 1920, the new Armenian Republic was collapsing. Kazim Karabekir was advancing on Kars (which fell almost without resistance) and the Turkish Nationalists were co-operating with Moscow (in effect there was a bargain: Turkey would abandon Azerbaijan and Russia would abandon Anatolian Armenia). The Armenians were desperate to get the British to intervene and save them, by landing troops at Trabzon. However, the British (and still more the French) had had enough of the problems of Asia Minor and were in the main content to settle with the new Turkey. Andonian's documents belong in that context. The chief Armenian 'genocidist,' V.Dadrian, still passionately defends the authenticity of these documents but the attempt does not do much credit to his scholarship: for instance, to the claim that the paper on which these documents were written came from the French school in Aleppo, he answers that there was a paper shortage (leading the Ottoman governor to ask a French headmaster if he could use some of his school-paper? Not very likely). The Naim-Andonian documents have incidentally never been tested in a court. The British refused to use them and a German court subsequently waved them aside. They have since disappeared – not what you would have expected had they been at all that is the sum total of the evidence as to 'genocide'. Otherwise you are left with what English courts call 'circumstantial evidence' – i.e. a witness testifying that another witness said something to someone. Such evidence does not count. In the past three years Armenian historians have apparently been going round archives in two dozen countries to find out what they contain – the Danish archives for instance. What they contain is what we knew already – that an awful lot of Armenians were killed or died in the course of a wartime deportation from many parts of Anatolia. Did the Ottoman government intend to exterminate the race, or was it just a deportation that went horribly wrong?

As to this, the experts are divided. A deportation gone wrong is the verdict of many of the best qualified historians – Bernard Lewis, Heath Lowry, Justin McCarthy, Yusuf Halacoglu. Other historians who know the old script and the background believe that it was a premeditated campaign of extermination, and some of these historians are Turkish (Mete Tuncay and Selim Deringil, unless I am taking their names in vain). There is a Turkish historian, Taner Akcam, whose book, based on the war-crimes trials set up in the early period of the British occupation, is obviously scholarly and who accepts the genocide thesis (though he does stress that the process cannot be compared with what happened in Nazi Germany to the Jews). In view of these divisions among scholars it is simply scandalous that the French or any other parliament should decree what the answer is. But it is worse, because the Armenian Diaspora can be extremely vindictive. For instance, Gilles Veinstein, as a reward for his quite dispassionate article, faced a campaign of vilification. He had become a candidate for the College de France, which elects the very best scholars in the country to give seminars. The historians very much welcomed this: he is an extremely serious scholar. But the Armenian Diaspora organized a campaign against him, especially among the mathematicians for some reason. One of them, a Professor Thom, was told that, on the whole, the French historians supported Veinstein and did not like the genocide thesis. His answer: 'they are all Ottomanists,' as if that somehow disqualified them. The fact is that the Armenian Diaspora have never taken this affair to a proper court of law. Instead, they try to silence men such as Veinstein. There was an extraordinary episode in American publishing two years ago. A very well-known historian, Gunther Lewy, who was a professor at the University of Massachusetts and author of several books still in print on modern German history, wrote a book on the Armenian massacres on the basis of German documents. The book is valuable because it shows how Dadrian twisted the German evidence. He offered it to his usual publisher, Oxford University Press (New York branch). A report was commissioned from one Papazian – not exactly a celebrity – who identified what he claimed were tremendous inaccuracies: they turn out either not to be inaccuracies, or just little slips of the kind anyone might make. On that basis

Lewy's manuscript was refused on the grounds that he had taken up 'Turkish denialist discourse'. He found another publisher, the University of Utah Press. And lo and behold the senior Armenian historian in the USA, Richard Hovannisian (University of California) wrote in protest to the President of that University to complain about the publication. Be it said, incidentally, that the last two volumes of Hovannisian's History of Independent Armenia are a well-written and fair-minded account – in some ways, even a classic of historical writing (the earlier two volumes are not of the same class).

Now, there is something very wrong here. If you believe that you are right, and then you will let evidence speak for itself, and if you face opposition you will simply expect to win the argument one way or the other. Attempts to silence opposition, to boycott lectures by, say, Justin McCarthy, to bully or manipulate foreign politicians – all of that surely argues that the Armenians themselves know their case is very far from being overwhelming. In any case it does nothing whatsoever for Armenia. If you go to eastern Turkey and Kars, look across the border at Armenia. It is very poor, and will continue so if there is no commerce with Turkey. The only obvious industry is the issue of visas for Moscow or the USSR (or for that matter Turkey, where up to 100,000 ex-Soviet Armenians live). The place obviously lives off Diaspora money (and the spread of American fast-food places now means curiously enough that the inhabitants are becoming obese in the manner of some Americans). In Soviet times Armenia had a population approaching three million. Then came independence and the war over Karabagh. The population dwindles and declines every year and is now not much above 1,500,000 – of all absurdities, in other words, independence has caused the Armenians to lose twice as many as vanished in the supposed 'genocide' of 1915. There is in other words a sickness at the heart of this whole frankly preposterous affair.

What should Turkey do? If the French law does pass then Turks must be prepared to act, otherwise they risk being landed with enormous bills for compensation. It will take organization. I would volunteer, myself, to provoke some trouble in France: it would be very easy indeed for me to give a public lecture and just to point out what is wrong about the whole thesis of the 'Armenian genocide' – I might even just read out Veinstein's article (or another important one by the then leading German general, Bronsart von Schellendorf). The French government probably would be mad enough to put me in prison for a while (this was done to a well-respected French historian of slavery, whose crime had been to point out that many Africans were involved in the slave trade and that some slaves volunteered for transportation because it saved them from cannibalism). But someone has to make a stand against the ridiculous misuse of parliamentary power and the instructing of historians what they must say about an event nearly a century old in a country two thousand kilometers away with a language that very few people can now read.

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Norman Stone (1941-) is a British historian of modern Europe, especially Central and Eastern Europe. He is the author of "Europe Transformed, 1878-1919." Stone was born in Edinburgh, Scotland. Between 1984-1997, he served as professor of Modern History at the University of Oxford. Since 1997 Stone has worked at Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey. After 2005, he transferred to Koc University, Istanbul, Turkey and still continues to teach there.

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