

Bonner Querschnitte

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BQ 352 B – No. 16/2015

100 Years of Genocide: 10 Reasons Why the Turkish Government Is Mistaken

By Prof. Dr. Dr. Thomas Schirrmacher, President of the International Society for Human Rights and Director of the International Institute for Religious Freedom

Bonn/Berlin, 23 April, 2015, one day before the 100th Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day, which commemorates the beginning of the genocide on 24 April, 1915.

The Turkish government always gives new, different, and sometimes conflicting reasons why the genocide of the Armenians, the Syro-Arameans, and Pontic Greeks was not really genocide.

The four most important are (A. through D.):

A. There was a lack of intention and planning; most of the Armenians who died during the war died as a result of starvation and disease.

B. (and contrary to it!) The Armenians were insurgents and helped the enemy. The expulsion policies of the Young Turks [who came to power in 1908] against the Armenians was a necessary act of self-defense.

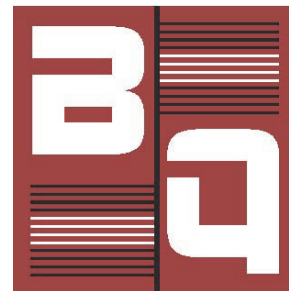
To A. and B. one must say:

1. The Turkish military court, in 1919-1920, directly after the First World War, sentenced some of the key planners of the murder of the Armenians to death, generals as well as politicians. Two of the main perpetrators fled to Germany, where they were murdered in 1922. Thus the Turkish state itself stated, on the basis of many testimonies and documents, that the mass killings were planned and did not serve the fight against armed insurgents. The denial of guilt started under Kemal Atatürk; though not much later, it does not change the previous recognition of guilt.

2. Legions of historians and genocide researchers have demonstrated through extensive source material that the two statements A. and B. are wrong. Not one well-argued refutation of this source work has taken place on the part of Turkey. And allegations of politicians cannot refute academic research; politicians can only ban researchers.

3. If the statements A. and B. are true, why does Turkey refuse to open the Turkish archives to independent historians? They should not be able to find anything incriminating.

4. If it was an act of self-defense, according to the Geneva Convention on the Rules of War, it should not have been directed against the civilian population, which made up the absolute mass of the victims. Did tens of thousands of children, even babies, those who died on hunger marches, also fight against Turkey?



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5. Moreover, it is undisputed that a genocide can also be present when two warring factions wage war against each other, and one side attempts to kill not only fighters of the other side but also to exterminate the civilian population, e.g., through famine. Otherwise one could not speak of genocide during World War II.

C. The Turkish government connects genocide with something comparable to Nazism, which assumes a racist ideological motivation. Since the Armenians were a religious group that supposedly allied themselves as Christians with Christian enemies of Turkey during the war, and in the nineteenth century Armenian converts to Islam were usually not killed or persecuted, Turkey rejects the claim that the death of the Armenians was genocide because their deaths were not motivated by racism.

6. This ignores the fact that the 1948 genocide definition of the United Nations does not ask for a specific ideology or motivation and does not care how a specific group is defined. It grounds genocide in the planned goal, to kill or deliver to possible death members of a particular group. However, it is just as criminal to kill people because they are Christians, as it is criminal to kill them because they speak a certain language or belong to a particular ethnic group.

Article II of The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, which was signed by Turkey in 1948, along with the other first signatories says: “In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”

All five points have been proven by historians researching the genocide of Armenians, Syro-Arameans, and Pontic Greeks, though point (d) was more seldom seen. Remember, for the last point, that 150,000-200,000 Armenian infants were given to Turkish or Kurdish parents – partly out of necessity, partly by force – and after 1919, the children were not returned to their parents or relatives.

D. The Turkish government says genocide was not coined and defined by the UN until 1951, so an event three and a half decades earlier could not be genocide. This logic is even followed by the German Foreign Ministry.

7. The relation between the fact of genocide and the definition of genocide only makes sense the other way around: Because there was genocide and the worst of it happened in World War II, the term genocide was coined and the UN Genocide Convention was ratified in 1948, going into force in 1951. Of course genocides are as old as mankind, and they are among the highlights of crime and immorality, whatever term may have been used before.

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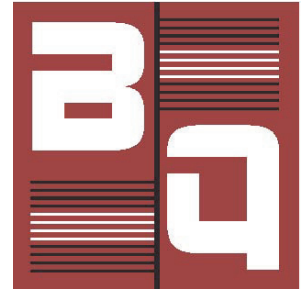
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8. If one follows the logic of the Turkish government, there were no pre-1948 violations of human rights, since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted only in 1948.

9. Moreover, one must distinguish: The juridical term "genocide" in international law would be of interest if someone wanted to sue Turkey. But here it's all about the term "genocide" as used by historians. And the Turkish government is facing a global phalanx of historians and genocide researchers who also use the term for the crimes of the Germans in the Hereros in German West Africa before the First World War, as well as for many other genocides.

10. The argument that before 1951 there could have been no genocide, also shows how self-contradictory the Turkish government arguments are. The argument would mean: If the world had adopted an international genocide convention in 1910, the mass murder of Armenians, and Syro-Arameans would have been genocide.

In conclusion, it must be added that Turkey continues to practice severe discrimination against Syrian and Armenian Christians, which we have documented in a German language report for the Hanns Seidel Foundation (see [BQ 278](#)). It would be easy for Turkey to end the discrimination against the few remaining Christians in the country. As long as this does not happen, it sheds a very negative light on the position of Turkey regarding genocide. The European Union was right to include in its progress reports regarding preconditions for Turkey to join the EU both the ending of discrimination against Christians and the recognition of genocide

A revised version of this earlier report was published in German as [IIRF-Bulletin 2015/4](#) and in English as [IIRF-Report 2015/2](#). It addresses the situation of the Armenians in Turkey and discusses the question of genocide in relation to Turkey.

Downloads and links:

- IIRF-Report 2015/2 ([pdf](#)) (English version)
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- Young Turks: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Young_Turks

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