

## The New York Times

### **A \$12 billion history lesson - Opinion**

**Timothy W. Ryback and Elazar Barkan** FEB. 25, 2008

Last week, a senior French official flew to Istanbul to discuss Turkey's exclusion of Gaz de France from an \$12 billion pipeline project - designed to bring Central Asian oil directly to European markets - because of recent French legislation making it a criminal offense to deny that the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Armenians in 1915 constituted genocide.

The Turkish government clearly takes history seriously. Just last October, when the United States Congress considered a bill similar to the French genocide legislation - without the punitive dimension - Turkey threatened to restrict airspace vital to the American military efforts in Iraq. Washington backed off.

Turkey objects to the term "genocide" to describe the historical tragedy it calls the "events of 1915." Ankara is resolute in defending this stance and has mirror legislation to that of France making it a criminal offense to use the term "genocide." Turkey does not deny that hundreds of thousands of men, women and children perished in a series of population transfers across a rugged mountain region, but it blames the deaths on the tragic combination of bureaucratic ineptness and particularly harsh climatic conditions.

For Armenians, as well as nearly two dozen other countries ranging from Australia to Venezuela, this was "genocide" plain and simple. This clash of historical narratives has become more than academic, as France and the United States have recently learned.

George Orwell warned us about mixing history and politics, but after nearly a century, it is perhaps time for governments and scholars to cooperate in resolving this dispute by establishing an international historical commission to explore these issues in a sustained, comprehensive and, most important, cooperative matter, as the Czechs and Germans did with their joint historical commission in the 1990s when similar tensions strained their relations.

Unlike the Nazi persecution of the Jews, which was determined to have constituted genocide by an international tribunal in Nuremburg, and subsequent tribunals that made similar determinations for Rwanda and for Srebrenica in the former Yugoslavia, the Armenian genocide, or "events of 1915," has never been subjected to similar international historical or legal scrutiny. There have been judgments rendered on the tragedy, including expert opinions by the International Center for Transitional Justice and the International Association of Genocide Scholars. But there has never been a formal independent historical commission that has had access to the complete historical record or involved

teams of scholars from Turkey and Armenia, like the Czech-German historical commission established to resolve historical disputes between those two countries or numerous similar commissions.

There have been several attempts in recent years by Turks and Armenians to address the issue collectively. In 2001, a Turkish-Armenian reconciliation commission was launched to great fanfare only to collapse a year later. In 2005, the late Hrant Dink joined 30 Turkish and Armenian scholars and journalists at the Salzburg Global Seminar to explore ways of advancing Turkish-Armenian dialogue. Last April, a group of Nobel laureates led by Elie Wiesel published an appeal for "understanding and reconciliation" that was publicly greeted by Turkish scholars in an open letter.

In a gesture toward dialogue, the Turkish government published full-page advertisements in major newspapers, including this one, calling for a joint Turkish-Armenian historical commission. And just this month, the Turkish prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, reiterated this position at an international security conference in Munich.

Perhaps the time has come to take Turkey up on its offer and establish an independent, international historical commission that can explore the historical facts and legal definitions in a neutral and sustained manner and render an independent and informed opinion.

Such a commission would need to have the historical authority and legal expertise to review the historical facts and deliberate on the legal implications. It would need the cooperation of Turkey and Armenia as well as Russia, France, Britain, the United States and other countries to provide access to pertinent archives. And it would benefit from access to private archives that contain relevant documents.

History is best when it is researched and debated before it is lobbied and legislated. It will be a costly undertaking, both in terms of time and resources - there is no question about that - but as France and the United States know, unresolved historic legacies often come with an even higher price tag.

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A version of this article appears in print on February 25, 2008, in The International Herald Tribune.

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