

The Genocide of the Armenians: A Taboo for Some, a Trauma for Others

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Glossing over history is anything but a new phenomenon. And it is something widely spread, unfortunately. Austrians are familiar with it. It took more than forty years until a Federal Chancellor admitted Austria's joint responsibility for the Nazi atrocities. That there are still – or once again – potential voters denying this joint responsibility or even the atrocities committed may have to do with the fact that Austria has presented itself as a victim throughout the years. It is not easy to correct a view of history that has been distorted for a long time.

Such whitewashing of history has been practiced in Turkey for ninety years now. The Armenians living in Turkey were almost exterminated at the beginning of the First World War. This genocide is a fact that has been documented by many historians, journalists, and people affected. However, history books in Turkey do not mention the genocide. Its acknowledgement contradicts Turkey's state doctrine. Turks who are of a different opinion will face the consequences. And when a nation acknowledges the genocide of the Armenians, diplomatic embroilments are guaranteed.

Turkish politicians who would admit to the genocide of the Armenians and not describe it as part of "a chain of unfortunate events" or with a similar euphemism, would certainly not be heard or even be accused of "treason" because of the distortion of historical events spanning so many decades.

The series *Armenia: Taboo and Trauma* is aimed at getting to the bottom of these issues. The first volume, *A Survey of the Facts*, published in April 2010 comprises texts by authors from various countries including Turkey. Its editor is Martin Bitschnau, who, as a human rights activist, has engaged in the subject for years. The book is made up of three parts and includes a comprehensive appendix, which also deals with the Armenians in Vienna.

The first part describes the genocide and its prehistory, from the first mention of Armenians to the foundation of the Turkish Republic. Part II deals with the concept of genocide. What does genocide mean, and why was the term coined? How did the adoption of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide come about? The editor conquers new territory mostly in the third part of the book. He documents how Turkey has dealt with its history and treated its minorities from 1920 to 2009. The consequences of not coming to terms with the past become evident. The victims are blamed, not the perpetrators. The Armenians who survived the genocide are a particularly hated minority. But they are not the only minority that is persecuted.

Yet, the distortion of history is not limited to Turkey alone. Political interventions and attempts to influence academic institutions in other countries are nothing unusual. Denying the genocide has been turned into an instrument of the Turkish government's foreign policy. Whoever is interested in relations with Turkey, should at least not acknowledge the genocide of the Armenians. The issue has priority even if Turkey's economic interests are at stake.

The accession to the European Union has long since been a goal of Turkey. The European Union as a community of states has acknowledged the genocide of the Armenians. On September 26, 2006,

Turkey, however, enforced its demand that the formal acknowledgment of the genocide on its part will not be a condition for its accession to the European Union – and this against the recommendation of the European Parliament’s Committee on Foreign Affairs.

The Austrian parliament, by the way, also refused to acknowledge the genocide of the Armenians under pressure from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, notwithstanding the fact that Austria was a chief witness of the horrible events. Austrian diplomats were clearly shocked at what was going on when they reported on the “extermination of the Armenian race” as early as 1915. Franz Werfel made the tragedy of the Armenians known all over the world with his book *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*. Nevertheless, Austrian top politicians react by asking “What’s it to us?” today.

And jurists plead that the term genocide has only been coined after the Second World War. The preamble of the genocide convention, however, explicitly states that genocides have been perpetrated since times immemorial.

The first volume of *Armenia: Taboo and Trauma* is a chronicle of horrors – and a book for everyone interested in human rights and international law. Interested in understanding what is behind nitpicking diplomatic statements. It is a book for the victims’ and the perpetrators’ descendants. For both have a right to an undistorted historiography, says the editor. Only the truth will grant an unburdened future. A genocide that remains unacknowledged will remain virulent for both the perpetrators and the community of states and will inevitably entail new injustice, violence, and death.

It is to be hoped that this series of books will be continued. For it could indeed help to come to terms with this ninety-five-year-old burden.

Martin Bitschnau (ed.), *Armenien: Tabu und Trauma, Band 1: Die Fakten im Überblick*, apyrenum press: Vienna, 2010, 322 pages, 38.90 €, ISBN 978-3-902772-01-5.