

THE GENOCIDE OF THE ARMENIANS – AND OUR SILENCE¹

GEORG MEGGLE

What do *we* have to do with the Armenians?² More precisely: What do we have to do with the genocide of the Armenians, more than 90 years after the historical fact? Especially – and this is the focus of this article: Why is it important that we call this ‘genocide’, like the Holocaust?

I. CLARIFICATIONS

Let us begin with two clarifications: (i) What does ‘genocide’ mean? and: (ii) Was the killing of 800,000 Armenians, or – depending on the point of view – of more than 1½ million members of this people *really* a genocide?

Acts which are qualified by the UN-definition of 1948 as ‘genocide’ are those “*acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.*”³

Do the acts in question against the Armenians really qualify as genocide? Three observations:

- (1) The acts in question destroyed this group more than just *in part*.
- (2) The acts in question were directed against this group as a group. Armenians were killed or driven to their death *because* they were Armenians.
- (3) The acts in question were not committed sporadically; they were systematically planned (with the goal to eliminate the Armenians *as* Armenians).

Ergo: The acts in question qualify as genocide. *La question arménienne n'existe plus.*⁴

People who want to see this differently are known to deny one of these premises – this would be illegal and punishable in the case of the holocaust in Germany -- or they argue as follows: To kill the Armenians *as* Armenians was not *the* primary goal of the perpetrators. The killings were, to only cite the version of this argument used most frequently, a necessary part of the preventive strategy of the Turkish people in light of the looming military attack by Russia. This preventive strategy itself aimed to fulfill a defensive goal; this or something similar is the pattern of the argument. The acts in question were not an end in themselves, but they were a means to a higher, if not holy (national) end.

These arguments are completely irrelevant for answering the central question – genocide or not? The definition of genocide does not require that the ‘intent to destroy’ has to be an end in itself, but can also be the consequence resulting from other, farther reaching intentions. The only question is whether or not this intention of genocide is there. The genesis of this intention, or its further justification, or any further reasons do not change whether the acts informed by

this intention are genocide or not. Genocide and (subjective) means-end-rationale are not contradictory terms; even genocide can be rational – from the point of view of those executing the genocide. From the point of view of the Nazis, the elimination of Jews, Sinti and Roma was ‘rational’; nevertheless: the holocaust *was* genocide, just as the Armenian Apocalypse was genocide.

For a deeper historical understanding of the intent which constituted genocide, the intention behind the acts of the young Turkish regime of the Ottoman Empire in the spring of 1915, one would undoubtedly need more reasons, explications and motives; but all these are simply insignificant for answering the central question – Genocide or not? If you do not doubt premises (1-3), all demands for delegating this question first and foremost to a commission of historians are therefore beside the point. The ‘genocide’ of the Armenians *was* genocide. And this historical fact remains for all times.

The usual justification heard from the side of all those committing war crimes and genocide is the appeal to self-defense: Not every killing, not every homicide need be considered a murder; self-defense, for example, constitutes an exception, at least in cases in which the threat posed justifies the act of self-defense, they say.

Can the homicide of a people ever be an act of justified self-defense? From the perspective of the perpetrators: Yes. But that does not matter; the terms are clear: Every act of homicide of a group – even in the perceived instance of self-defense – is, if it is directed against the victims *as* members of a certain (ethnic, religious etc.) group, already genocide.⁵

Purposeful homicide of a people = Genocide. If you consider this as given, you cannot hide behind the common sense distinction between homicide and murder just to avoid the latter term ‘genocide’. Was the Hekatomb-killing of Armenians the purposeful homicide of a people? Certainly. But if the homicide of a people is a given fact, the question: Genocide or not? ceases to be a question regarding facts.

II . THE TRUTH ABOUT CAIN AND ABEL

When is it appropriate to call murder ‘murder’, and when to call genocide ‘genocide’? The answer is more than a battle of wits, more than just talk of terms.

Here, if you want to have clarity, you need distance.⁶ Let us start over. Let us start – not with Adam and Eve, but with their sons – Cain and Abel.

No, not again the question of Pontius Pilatus: What is truth? But more relevant: When can we, should we, do we have to **tell the truth**? Some say: Always. That is wrong. Not everybody has the right to know what I know. I do not have to tell all to everybody; often I ought not to. Can I? Of course – but only if this does not result in harming someone for no reason.

Therefore: Who is harmed by calling a murderer ‘murderer’? Maybe the murderer. Would that be a good reason for us to therefore *not* call him a murderer? No. I *can* call the murderer ‘murderer’ – to his face and in public; and I *should*, I *ought to* do so, for example to prevent another murder. I *have to* do so according to the law, at least in a court of law.

All this is valid for the murder of a people – genocide.

Perpetrators have children; victims, too. Cain was the first human to ever commit a murder. Let us suppose for now that he has a daughter named Carolyn; the daughter of his brother Abel is called Anna. (The third son of Adam and Eve is, as you know, Seth.⁷)

The crime of the criminal not only concerns the victim – it also hurts the victim's children. In general, they suffer, too. The death of Abel by the hand of Cain hurts Anna. She suffers as an (indirect) victim. Cain sins not only against Abel, but also against Anna. He is guilty towards Anna. It seems to be clear to me: The children of victims have rights and can make claims against their perpetrators which result from the harm done to them.

Are the children of perpetrators themselves perpetrators? No – not automatically. Cain's daughter Carolyn is not a murderess just because her father was a murderer. Still...

Still – what? You all know: This is one of the biggest problems of human beings; for the identity of those Germans born after the Nazi regime maybe the biggest problem. This, it seems to me, is a problem still unresolved. And that is dangerous.

So far it has been overlooked that the children of perpetrators can themselves be (indirect) victims of their perpetrator-fathers. Ask yourself: Cain and Abel – if you could choose, whose child would you like to be? Would you like to be from the family of Cain? The family of Abel? Or, differently: Would you rather be Carolyn, or Anna? (All people whom I had the privilege to ask so far said: Anna. And I say the same. And you?)

Can children of victims, who are themselves thereby victims, understand that children of perpetrators are victims, as well? And that their suffering is, at times, greater?⁸

Children of perpetrators = perpetrator-children. Is it appropriate to call them so openly? Even if it hurts? If perpetrator-children suffer from their being perpetrator-children, is this a good reason to *not* call them so? For example to *not* tell them that their fathers were or are perpetrators (murderers, murderers of peoples)?

Yes, that could be. It could sometimes indeed be better for perpetrator-children not to know anything of their fathers, not to know anything of their crimes – or of their mothers' crimes. For example, this could be harmful if these children are still too young and weak, if this knowledge would destroy them; or if they would adopt the belief that their beloved parents were right, that is, if this knowledge would lead them to become perpetrators themselves; and so on.

But: the right to ignorance is perishable. It wanes proportionally to the degree to which the perpetrator-children can stand on their own – and want to be independent, in short, the more they themselves become *actors* of sound mind – and thereby themselves *potential* perpetrators – that is, once they become their own *person*. Persons want to be, and usually they should be taken seriously. Or, to phrase this more technically: The stronger their identity as a person becomes, the

greater becomes our duty to fulfill their expectation of being taken seriously accordingly; in consequence, our duty to *not* hold back the truth from them is stronger.

Carolyn and Anna are grown-ups. Is Anna allowed to call Carolyn's father the murderer of her father Abel in front of Carolyn? In principle, yes; that is, for example, if Carolyn did not know about her father's murder of her uncle but she *ought to know*. This is the case if her relationship with Anna is aimed at being (or becoming) a *true* relationship and a lasting one. If this true relationship is mutually desired, it is even the case that Anna *has to* tell Carolyn the truth; because Carolyn has a right to know – even if the truth will terribly hurt her. Moreover, it becomes Anna's duty to hurt Carolyn in this way and terribly so. What if Carolyn were to discover the truth about Cain and Abel without Anna's help? Would she not rightfully accuse Anna of not having taken her, Carolyn, seriously all this time? Would she not call their friendship into question?

Does anything change in this scenario if Carolyn herself, although grown-up, resists knowing the truth? Is this good for her in the long run? Should Anna perpetuate this self-denial by continuing – maybe forever – the silence?

And what does Carolyn's not-wanting-to-know mean for Anna? Would her pain as an orphan diminish or increase due to this repression? And would this pain not increase more the longer her cousin Carolyn kept denying the evil Cain-and-Abel-truth?

It does not follow that Anna has the right to force Carolyn against her will to acknowledge this truth. Acknowledgement counts as recognition only if it is voluntary and serious. To pay lip service to the pain of the victim and the victim's children is certainly not what is needed.

Importantly, one would also have to consider, as you know: that Cain and Able, for example, had other siblings – according to the bible (which lists after Eve for a long time only men) they have a brother: Seth. This brother was involved in Cain's murder of his brother Abel in a way similar to that in which Germany was involved in the genocide on the Armenians. And you would have to consider that none of us know which tribe we belong to, the tribe of Cain, Abel or Seth. Important, as well, are all those rituals with which we confirm publicly and publicly manifest how we as humans stand or would like to stand towards other humans; one can perform these rituals sincerely or insincerely and use them sincerely or insincerely for different kinds of ends.

All this holds, roughly speaking, not only for individuals and families, but also for collectives – or, as it is put today: for all 'collective identities'. (We can say of these identities that they are 'weak' or 'strong', 'changeable', 'built on sand', 'durable', 'fragile' etc.⁹)

III. DEALING WITH THE TRUTH – AND GENOCIDE

The genocide of the Armenians *was* genocide. But it is not recognized as such by Turkey. Even to call this genocide by its real name is forbidden by force of law there, and whoever of us would dare to speak of 'genocide' relating to this case

would have to expect threats and danger to life. The resolutions of foreign states today still cause bilateral crises instigated by Turkey.

And what should we think of that? How do we react? What is the best reaction? That depends:

We have known what is at stake since Cain and Abel:

- Can we – Armenians, Germans, Turks, Europeans, etc. – ‘already’ bear the hard truth (of the genocide of the Armenians)? Are we big enough, are we grown-up enough to bear it?
- Specifically: Do the perpetrator-children have a right to ignorance today?
- Do we want to be something like friends?
- Is this friendship worth enough for us to even exercise our duty towards our friends and where necessary hurt them – terribly?

If the answer to all of these questions is YES, then what would follow? Certainly this: That we have to be able to call the genocide of the Armenians fearlessly by its true name; and we are obliged to do so. Not secretly – openly. Not selectively, here and there, but rather in general, be it pleasant or not, no matter whether it hurts or not.

Does the truth of today fit this YES? I doubt it – even for the first two questions. Not all of the groups involved are equally far developed, they haven’t equally grown in respect to these truth-questions (concerning the genocide of the Armenians).

Let us consider the first group of our friends, the **Armenians**. As a group their role in this genocide was the role of Abel. That does not mean that there wasn’t more than one Cain in this group, as well. (The massacres of Armenians on Turks are not to be denied or called into question.¹⁰) Today, more than three generations later, this Abel-group contains mostly grandchildren of the victims. At least, this would be the case if everything that constituted the genocide on this group could be reduced to the homicide of a people in 1915/16. But this is not the case. Homicides committed against this group occurred later, as well. Moreover, the suffering of this Abel-Anna-group is not reduced to that which *was in the past*. The memory of Abel hurts Anna today. Furthermore, the suffering from this memory continues: Old churches, monasteries and cultural centers are falling into ruins. This destruction of culture is a destruction of the group to which this culture belongs, at least of this group *as* a group. In addition: The group of the victims’ grandchildren knows that all this suffering is ignored by the group of perpetrators’ grandchildren. They are made to feel it every day.

This makes it hard for the Armenians as a group not to regard the group of the grandchildren of their Cain themselves as Cain. Even if there are perpetrator children among the Turks as a group who suffer themselves out of shame for the disgrace of their fathers – there are so far only a few. And how could those who are regarded by their own perpetrator-group as traitors count in favor of this group in the eyes of their victim-group?

Consider the second group of our friends: the **Turks**. In this group there are – as is the case for all bigger groups – big differences depending on which part of the group you are considering. The two extremes are the state-elite on one side and a few intellectuals in opposition on the other; the majority of the remaining group stands in between these two positions.

The national **elite** are, to use the metaphor of coming-of-age, still very young. They are fixated on an almost total repression of the term ‘genocide’, internally and externally.

A few great intellectual **individuals** (writers, filmmakers) try more and more to break through this wall of silence. Their courage gives reason for hope that there will be a way out of the denial-ghetto. Yet, only recently the writer **Orhan Pamuk** received threats to his life because he took a critical position against the public stance concerning the genocide of the Armenians.¹¹ His colleagues could not succeed in getting enough people to sign a public ad. to be published in a daily paper, which was supposed to simply state: “We share your pain”. The people asked to give their names refused the request out of fear.¹²

In regard to the group of Turkey (itself not an ethnic group of Turks), there are also the **Kurds**. Among them the ‘genocide’ taboo is not as strong as in the rest of the group, and not surprisingly so. On the one hand, the Kurdish tribes were one of the bloodiest tools for the genocide; on the other hand, Turkish oppression was directed more and more towards this group, the Kurds, following the destruction of the Armenians. Therefore, I suppose that the extent of the Turkish denial of the genocide of the Armenians will decrease to the degree to which the situation of the Turkish Kurds ameliorates. And vice versa: The more the repression-policy of Turkey sees itself threatened by truth-demands from the outside and in need of defense, the more the oppression of the Kurds will again increase. (To remind you: The main argument for the destruction of the Turkish Armenians was allegedly that Turkey believed this was the only way to guard itself from further interference by the West, namely from England and France. Should history repeat itself here again?)

And how about **us**? How grown-up are we in regard to reminding ourselves and others of the genocide of the Armenians?

Our elder in this question is long dead: **Johannes Lepsius** (1858-1926).¹³ The great novel by **Franz Werfel** ‘*Die vierzig Tage des Musa Dagh*’ (The forty days of Musa Dagh) – a work that everyone interested in this topic will already have read – was first published in 1933, the same year in which this author’s books were burnt in Germany. Both, **Lepsius** and **Werfel** were lights in the seemingly endless night of silence; it darkened after the war crimes trial at the court of justice in Leipzig initiated under pressure from the Allied forces in 1921.

Someone whose name I cannot put next to those first names was so impressed by the German forgetfulness that his infamous phrase is remembered: “*Wer erinnert sich denn heute noch an die Armenier!*” (Who still remembers the Armenians today?) Some see this phrase to be the reason for the expectation of the

GRÖFAS (nazi-time abbreviation for “*größter Führer aller Zeiten*”: the greatest leader of all times) that future genocides would soon be forgotten in the same way. This would have been less likely if the Germans hadn’t forgotten the first genocide of the 20th century so quickly. Therefore, if we (like I do) say ‘Never again Auschwitz’ we should rather not forget other genocides.

In German history books the genocide of the Armenians has the same status as in Turkish history books; it is mentioned under ‘*tragic events*’. The death-marches in the desert of Syria are called in a popular volume simply ‘evacuations’.¹⁴ And how about school books? Nothing. In 2005, there was an attempt in Brandenburg to fill in this gap in the school books by adding to the brief section on ‘spreading of war over nation-boundaries; destruction and genocide’ the following phrase in brackets: “(for example, genocide of the Armenian population of Asia Minor)”. This attempt was stopped because Turkey raised objections.¹⁵

Not only *one* collective perpetrator is guilty of the genocide of the Armenians, but *two*: the young Turkish Ottoman Empire – and the German Empire. Germany, too, stands before the court of history in the case of the genocide of the Armenians. (There is no statute of limitations for genocide, and according to Article 3 of the ’48 convention, being an accessory to the murder on peoples is also punishable.¹⁶)

What Germany has to say in this matter counts more than the word of others – as always in the case of someone involved in the offense. Therefore, Germany’s silence counts more heavily. And Germany’s silence was and is perceived loudly.

The destruction of the Armenians *as genocide*, following the UN convention on genocide from 1948, was recognized by the following European countries: Belgium, France, Greece, Italy, Sweden, Switzerland and the Vatican – and by Poland; it has not been recognized by Germany – not yet.

The declaration unanimously accepted by the German *Bundestag* in July 2005, undoubtedly represents tremendous progress in this matter. But even this declaration is not an *explicit recognition* of the genocide *as genocide*. The keyword ‘genocide’ is not in the text. But still, it follows logically that the proposal equals an *implicit* recognition of the genocide. All conditions listed by the UN convention on genocide are mentioned in this case. Why, then, did the proposal not explicitly state what was implicitly meant (namely: the genocide *was genocide*)?

Was the reason the same as for the German Empire – diplomacy?

Certainly: Even the UN does not recognize all genocides ‘*as genocides*’. They call them this only once the UN Security Council has decided to *do something* against these acts. Is this the background for the usage of terms in the German parliament?

Armenians rightly do request from Germany a more decisive position, one that refers to the genocide of the Armenians explicitly as genocide. That’s what Abel, Anna and I request, as well. And, once she is mature enough, certainly our friend Carolyn, as well.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ This is a translation, done by Beatrice Kobow, of a German lecture given – in a variety of versions - several times on the Armenian Genocide Memorial Day, e.g., in the “Paulskirche” in Frankfurt on 22nd of April, 2005, in particular. Note that this contribution sticks to its original lecturing style.
- ² Cf. “What do I have to do with the Armenians?” in Franz Werfel, *Die vierzig Tage des Musa Dagh (The Forty Days of Musa Dagh)*, Frankfurt/M, (Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag), 2003 (First Edition 1933), p. 150.
- ³ The complete text of Article 2 of the *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Resolution 260 (III) A of the United Nations General Assembly on December 9th, 1948)*:
- “In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with the 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 birth within the group;*
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”*
- ⁴ Cf.: one of the best recent publications on this topic, Rolf Hosfeld, *Operation Nemesis*, (Kiepenheuer & Witsch) Köln, 2005, p. 275.
- ⁵ Because religious groups do not have to be ethnic groups, the term ‘murder of a collective’ would be *prima facie* the most accurate term. But in order to use this term, one would already have to know what makes a collective (and a collective deserving of preservation); the already rather vague application of the international law would thus be even more strained. Should it be?
- ⁶ It can be rather difficult; I mean psychologically difficult for people to gain such a critical distance. Since Socrates this thankless job has been reserved mostly for philosophers.
- ⁷ I am referring to the bible, especially to the first book of Moses, albeit not in strict exegesis; I know quite well that the bible does not mention Abel’s children nor a daughter of Cain.
- ⁸ Cf.: Dan Bar-On, *The Legacy of Silence. Encounters with Children of the Third Reich*, Cambridge/Mass. (Harvard University Press), 1989..
- ⁹ See: Georg Meggle (ed.), *Social Facts & Collective Intentionality*, Frankfurt a.M., 2002.
- ¹⁰ Would there be (as far as I know this is a contra factual consideration) an Armenian Cain who would commit a genocide, then everything that I have said about Cain and Abel so far would hold for him, too. Anything else would be anti-Turkish racism and *every* form of racism has to be condemned.
- ¹¹ *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, 21.04.05.
- ¹² *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 20.04.05, p.7.
- ¹³ See also the article on ‘telepolis’ by Hermann Goltz, 24.04.05.
- ¹⁴ “1915, ab Mitte Mai – Evakuierung der Armenier von Ostanatolien“, Josef Matuz, *Das Osmanische Reich. Grundlagen seiner Geschichte*, Darmstadt (Primus Verlag), 1996, p. 308.
- ¹⁵ *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 25.01.05, p.33.
- ¹⁶ “*The following acts shall be punishable; (a) Genocide; (b) Conspiracy to commit genocide; (c) Direct and public incitement to commit genocide; (d) Attempt to commit genocide; (e) Complicity in genocide.*” (Article 3 of the Convention on the Prevention

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(Ամփոփում)

ԿԷՈՐԿ ՄԵԿԼԷ

Յօդուածը երկու մասէ կը բաղկանայ: Առաջին մասին մէջ հեղինակը համառօտակի կը քննարկէ-կը բնութագրէ Հայոց Յեղասպանութիւնը՝ մեկնելով ՄԱԿի 1948ի ցեղասպանութեան սահմանումէն, հակաճառելով որ կարեւոր չէ թէ ինչու գործուած է ցեղասպանութիւնը, ինչ դրդապատճառներով, եւն: Այնքան ատեն որ ժողովուրդ մը կամ անոր մէկ հատուածը ոչնչացնելու միտում մը ունեցած է այդ արարքը, ապա ան կը համարուի Յեղասպանութիւն:

Յօդուածին երկրորդ մասով, Մեկլէ կը ջանայ արծարծել Հայկական Յեղասպանութեան ճանաչման խնդիրը՝ ոճիրը գործողներուն անոնց մեղսակիցներուն եւ գործակիցներուն յետնորդներուն կողմէ: Այս առումով, կը նշէ որ քիւրտերը ճանչցած են իրենց մեղսակցութիւնը Հայկական Յեղասպանութեան: Կայ նաեւ թուրք մտաւորականներու խումբ մը որ նման քայլերու դիմած է: Ասոնք սակայն, կը դիմադրաւեն վտանգներ, նոյնիսկ մահուան սպառնալիք, ինչպէս է պարագան Օրհան Փամուքի:

Հուսկ, հեղինակը կ'առանձնացնէ Գերմանիան, իբրեւ Յեղասպանութեան առնչակից: Ան կը մատնանշէ որ Գերմանիոյ դպրոցական դասագիրքերուն մէջ Հայոց Յեղասպանութիւնը կը ներկայացուի իբրեւ «ողբերգական դէպքեր»՝ ինչպէս է պարագան Թուրքիոյ կարգ մը դասագիրքերու: Հեղինակը կը շեշտէ որ Յեղասպանութեան յետնորդները իրաւունքն ունին գիտնալու Յեղասպանութեան մէջ իրենց նախնիքներուն դերակատարութեան մասին եւ այս առումով կը հաւաստէ որ Գերմանիոյ ճանաչումը հայկական Յեղասպանութեան՝ կրնայ նպաստել Թուրքիոյ մէջ կեցուածքի բարելւումին: