

Research Paper

The Danger Forgetting

When discussing the horrors of Genocide, the most important aspect is the remembrance. Today, the phrase “Never Again” is used after World War 2 in reference to the Holocaust, promising the world that such a barbaric act of genocide would occur again. But the antithesis to this came just before in a speech made by Hitler himself asking “Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?”. Hitler was of course referencing the Armenian Genocide from 2 decades prior, implying their actions shall face no backlash from the world. These words are a reminder that a society that collectively forgets the atrocities of its past is a society doomed to be haunted by them.

The Armenian Genocide:

The genocide was carried out by the Ottoman Empire during World War I, leading to the deaths of an estimated 1.5 million Armenians. At the time, the government was under the control of a military triumvirate known as the Young Turks, who were looking for an easy scapegoat for political instability and their own military failures. The Armenian Christians were an easy pick for the Young Turks, as not being Muslim and not being Turkish already separated them from the population. In 1915, orders were given by the government to conduct mass killings and forced deportations of Armenians on the basis that they were a threat to national security during the war. As a result, Armenians were systematically massacred, sent on death marches, and subjected to starvation in the Syrian Desert. The genocide was framed as a necessary wartime measure to protect the empire from disloyal elements, but these acts would not save the empire.¹

After the war, legal action was taken against many Ottoman officials who had participated in the Armenian Genocide. In the defeated Ottoman Empire, this was demanded by the Allies and endorsed by the leader of the Provisional Government, Mustafa Kemal. However, the court-martials set up by the Istanbul and Ankara governments were lackluster, designed in a way that allowed cabinet members to influence outcomes and sentencing. By the time Turkey declared itself an independent republic in 1923, it began engaging in an absolute denial of the extermination of the Armenians. One of Kemal's deputies stated, “*What was done was to ensure the future of our homeland, which is in our eyes more sacred than our very life.*”² To that end, the Turkish government contended that there were no mass killings of Armenians and that

¹ “Armenia.” College of Liberal Arts: Holocaust and Genocide Studies, 2025

² Akçam, Taner. A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility, 1999.

those who were killed were either a threat or mere casualties of war. Buried under a mountain of propaganda, the Armenian fight for justice was largely ignored or forgotten by the world.

Hitlers Inspiration

On the afternoon of August, 22nd 1939, Commanders of the Wehrmacht gathered for a speech at Adolf Hitler's Berghof in Obersalzberg. Here, the Dictator gave a 3 hour speech outlining his planned Invasion of Poland and concluded with the following:

*I have placed my death-head formation in readiness – for the present only in the East – with orders to them to send to death mercilessly and without compassion, men, women, and children of Polish derivation and language. Only thus shall we gain the living space which we need. Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?*³

Hitler wanted to prepare his generals for a brutal and decisive action against Poland, an aggression whose aim is not to draw a border but to kill off its inhabitants in order to settle ethnic Germans. Just like the Ottomans, the Nazis tried to disguise their plans under the cover of war and with the firm belief that they would go unpunished. These plans would eventually morph into what became known as the Holocaust, which ended up killing around 6 Million Jews and around Million Non-Jews. According to Historian Ihrig, *"There is no doubt that the Nazis had incorporated the Armenian genocide, its 'lessons,' its tactics, and its 'benefits' into their own worldview and their vision of the new racial order they were building."*⁴

Lessons Learnt and Forgotten

While the veracity of Hitler's Armenian quote is still a matter of academic debate, it nonetheless demonstrates how the international community failed to learn the lessons of the Armenian Genocide. It shows that the lack of punishment for Ottoman war criminals merely emboldened German war criminals to commit similar atrocities. This is why, after World War II, the Allies strove to set new standards for international law with the Nuremberg Trials. In contrast, after World War II, the Allies understood the danger of impunity and created the Nuremberg Trials. Notably, many of the legal principles the Allies originally intended for Ottoman War criminals would now take effect against German War criminals. They wanted to ensure that the crimes of the Third Reich would be exposed, their perpetrators prosecuted, and that such a barbaric event would never happen again.⁵

³ Bardakjian, p. 10

⁴ Ihrig, Stefan (2016). *Justifying Genocide: Germany and the Armenians from Bismarck to Hitler*. Harvard University Press.

⁵ Akçam, p. 221–223

This mission was especially important to Raphael Lemkin, the Polish-Jewish lawyer who coined the term *genocide* to describe the deliberate destruction of a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. While he used the word in reference to the Holocaust, he based it on his previous research on the Armenian massacres. His work was instrumental in the adoption of the 1948 Genocide Convention, which legally defined genocide and obligated states to prevent and punish it.⁶ However, these mechanisms are only effective if societies recognize the importance of historical memory and actively resist attempts to erase or distort the past.

Denial of genocide is not just a historical issue—it continues to shape political and diplomatic relationships today. One hundred years later, Turkey still refuses to acknowledge the Armenian Genocide, worsening its relations with Armenia and other countries advocating for recognition. The Turkish lobby in many countries has actively worked to prevent states from recognizing the genocide, with the U.S. not formally recognizing it until 2021.⁷

Beyond the Armenian case, forgetting genocide has contributed to countless atrocities justified as part of “national security.” The failure to hold perpetrators accountable for their actions has been echoed in Rwanda, Bosnia, Darfur, and Myanmar. More recently, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been marred by attempts to erase Ukrainian identity through ethnic cleansing, child abductions, and the murder of civilians. Yet despite Russia being one of the principal signatories of the Genocide Convention, it continues its campaign of destruction while denying responsibility.⁸ Paraphrasing George Santayana, memory must serve as a foundation for justice and prevention; otherwise, history will continue to repeat itself.

Remembrance is the most powerful weapon against genocide. It is not enough to acknowledge past atrocities; societies must actively remember and educate future generations about them. This is why we have Holocaust Remembrance Day—not only to mark the liberation of Auschwitz but also to remind us of the dangers of forgetting. Similarly, commemorating the Armenian Genocide and working internationally to prevent modern-day atrocities play a crucial role in countering denial and ensuring justice.

Conclusion

Looking back at Hitler’s infamous speech in 1939, the takeaway should be that humanity must never forget its atrocious past, lest we allow such evil to repeat itself. As a society, we like to think of the Holocaust as an exception in history due to its sheer scale and sadistic nature, believing we have moved past such barbarity. Yet the Nazis themselves based their blueprint for

⁶ Facing History & Ourselves, “Raphael Lemkin and the Genocide Convention”, last updated August 2, 2016.

⁷ Baillie, Lauren. “Why Biden’s Recognition of the Armenian Genocide Is Significant | United States Institute of Peace.” United States Institute for Peace, 2021.

⁸ Dickinson, Peter. “New Report Highlights Evidence of Escalating Russian Genocide in Ukraine.” Atlantic Council, August 10, 2023

the Holocaust on a genocide that occurred 25 years earlier, with the perpetrators never truly facing justice.

In the end, we, as humans, do not want to accept that we are capable of committing monstrous acts, so it is easier to deny or justify them. But without accountability or legal justice, we are simply criminals of our own ego. To stop these evil acts, it must be everyone's responsibility to remember the Armenians, remember the Jews, and remember all the victims of genocide.

Main Citation

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PS: I also made several gramatical and some contextual edits to the [*Hitler's reference to the Armenian genocide*](#) on Wikipedia under the username “MrBismark1871”. An example of one of those edits was changing one of the words from “*apocalyptic*” to “*apocryphal*”.