



Robert Fisk: The forgotten holocaust

The killing of 1.5 million Armenians by the Ottoman Turks during the First World War remains one of the bloodiest and most contentious episodes of the 20th century. Robert Fisk visits Yerevan, and unearths hitherto unpublished images of the first modern genocide

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The photographs, never before published, capture the horrors of the first Holocaust of the 20th century. They show a frightened people on the move – men, women and children, some with animals, others on foot, walking over open ground outside the city of Erzerum in 1915, at the beginning of their death march. We know that none of the Armenians sent from Erzerum – in what is today north-eastern Turkey – survived. Most of the men were shot, the children – including, no doubt, the young boy or girl with a headscarf in the close-up photograph – died of starvation or disease. The young women were almost all raped, the older women beaten to death, the sick and babies left by the road to die.

The unique photographs are a stunning witness to one of the most terrible events of our times. Their poor quality – the failure of the camera to cope with the swirl and movement of the Armenian deportees in the close-up picture, the fingerprint on the top of the second – lend them an undeniable authenticity. They come from the archives of the German Deutsche Bank, which was in 1915 providing finance for the maintenance and extension of the Turkish railway system. One incredible photograph – so far published in only two specialist magazines, in Germany and in modern-day Armenia – actually shows dozens of doomed Armenians, including children, crammed into cattle trucks for their deportation. The Turks stuffed 90 Armenians into each of these wagons – the same average the Nazis achieved in their transports to the death camps of Eastern Europe during the Jewish Holocaust.

Hayk Demoyan, director of the grey-stone Museum of the Armenian Genocide in the foothills just outside Yerevan, the capital of present-day Armenia, stares at the photographs on his computer screen in bleak silence. A university lecturer in modern Turkish history, he is one of the most dynamic Armenian genocide researchers inside the remains of Armenia, which is all that was left after the Turkish slaughter; it suffered a further 70 years of terror as part of the Soviet Union. "Yes, you can have these pictures, he says. "We are still discovering more. The Germans took photographs and these pictures even survived the Second World War. Today, we want our museum to be a place of collective memory, a memorisation of trauma. Our museum is for Turks as well as Armenians. This is also [the Turks'] history."

The story of the last century's first Holocaust – Winston Churchill used this very word about the Armenian genocide years before the Nazi murder of six million Jews – is well known, despite the refusal of modern-day Turkey to acknowledge the facts. Nor are the parallels with Nazi Germany's persecution of the Jews idle ones. Turkey's reign of terror against the Armenian people was an attempt to destroy the Armenian race. While the Turks spoke publicly of the need to "resettle" their Armenian population – as the Germans were to speak later of the Jews of Europe – the true intentions of Enver Pasha's Committee of Union and Progress in Constantinople were quite

clear. On 15 September 1915, for example (and a carbon of this document exists) Talaat Pasha, the Turkish Interior minister, cabled an instruction to his prefect in Aleppo about what he should do with the tens of thousands of Armenians in his city. "You have already been informed that the government... has decided to destroy completely all the indicated persons

living in Turkey... Their existence must be terminated, however tragic the measures taken may be, and no regard must be paid to either age or sex, or to any scruples of conscience." These words are almost identical to those used by Himmler to his SS killers in 1941.

Taner Akcam, a prominent – and extremely brave – Turkish scholar who has visited the Yerevan museum, has used original Ottoman Turkish documents to authenticate the act of genocide. Now under fierce attack for doing so from his own government, he discovered in Turkish archives that individual Turkish officers often wrote "doubles" of their mass death-sentence orders, telegrams sent at precisely the same time that asked their subordinates to ensure there was sufficient protection and food for the Armenians during their "resettlement". This weirdly parallels the bureaucracy of Nazi Germany, where officials were dispatching hundreds of thousands of Jews to the gas chambers while assuring International Red Cross officials in Geneva that they were being well cared for and well fed.

Ottoman Turkey's attempt to exterminate an entire Christian race in the Middle East – the Armenians, descended from the residents of ancient Urartu, became the first Christian nation when their king Dardanes converted from paganism in AD301 – is a history of almost unrelieved horror at the hands of Turkish policemen and soldiers, and Kurdish tribesmen.

In 1915, Turkey claimed that its Armenian population was supporting Turkey's Christian enemies in Britain, France and Russia. Several historians – including Churchill, who was responsible for the doomed venture at Gallipoli – have asked whether the Turkish victory there did not give them the excuse to turn against the Christian Armenians of Asia Minor, a people of mixed Persian, Roman and Byzantine blood, with what Churchill called "merciless fury". Armenian scholars have compiled a map of their people's persecution and deportation, a document that is as detailed as the maps of Europe that show the railway lines to Auschwitz and Treblinka; the Armenians of Erzerum, for example, were sent on their death march to Terjan and then to Erzinjan and on to Sivas province. The men would be executed by firing squad or hacked to death with axes outside villages, the women and children then driven on into the desert to die of thirst or disease or exhaustion or gang-rape. In one mass grave I myself discovered on a hillside at Hurgada in present-day Syria, there were thousands of skeletons, mostly of young people – their teeth were perfect. I even found a 100-year-old Armenian woman who had escaped the slaughter there and identified the hillside for me.

Hayk Demoyan sits in his air-conditioned museum office, his computer purring softly on the desk, and talks of the need to memorialise this huge suffering. "You can see it in the writing of each survivor," he says. "When visitors come here from the diaspora – from America and Europe, Lebanon and Syria, people whose parents or grandparents died in our genocide – our staff feel with these people. They see these people become very upset, there are tears and some get a bit crazy after seeing the exhibition. This can be very difficult for us, psychologically. The stance of the current Turkish government [in denying the genocide] is proving they are proud of what their ancestors did. They are saying they are pleased with what the Ottomans did. Yet today, we are hearing that a lot of places in the world are like goldmines of archive materials to continue our work – even here in Yerevan. Every day, we are coming across new photographs or documents."

The pictures Demoyan gives to The Independent were taken by employees of Deutsche Bank in 1915 to send to their head office in Berlin as proof of their claims that the Turks were massacring their Armenian population. They can be found in the Deutsche Bank Historical Institute – Oriental Section (the photograph of the Armenian deportees across the desert published in The Independent today, for example, is registered photo number 1704 and the 1915 caption reads: "Deportation Camp near Erzerum.")

A German engineer in Kharput sent back a now-famous photograph of Armenian men being led to their execution by armed Turkish police officers. The banking officials were appalled that the Ottoman Turks were using – in effect – German money to send Armenians to their death by rail. The new transportation system was supposed to be used for military purposes, not for genocide.

German soldiers sent to Turkey to reorganise the Ottoman army also witnessed these atrocities. Armin Wegner, an especially courageous German second lieutenant in the retinue of Field Marshal von der Goltz, took a series of photographs of dead and dying Armenian women

and children. Other German officers regarded the genocide with more sinister interest. Some of these men, as Armenian scholar Vahakn Dadrian discovered, turn up 26 years later as more senior officers conducting the mass killing of Jews in German-occupied Russia.

Computers have transformed the research of institutions like the Yerevan museum. Poorly funded scholarship has been replaced by a treasure-house of information that Demoyan is going to publish in scholarly magazines. "We have information that some Germans who were in Armenia in 1915 started selling genocide pictures for personal collections when they returned home... In Russia, a man from St Petersburg also informed us that he had seen handwritten memoirs from 1940 in which the writer spoke of Russian photographs of Armenian bodies in Van and Marash in 1915 and 1916." Russian Tsarist troops marched into the eastern Turkish city of Van and briefly liberated its doomed Armenian inhabitants. Then the Russians retreated after apparently taking these pictures of dead Armenians in outlying villages.

Stalin also did his bit to erase the memory of the massacres. The Armenian Tashnag party, so prominent in Armenian politics in the Ottoman empire, was banned by the Soviets. "In the 1930s," Demoyan says, "everyone destroyed handwritten memoirs of the genocide, photographs, land deeds – otherwise they could have been associated by the Soviet secret police with Tashnag material." He shakes his head at this immeasurable loss. "But now we are finding new material in France and new pictures taken by humanitarian workers of the time. We know there were two or three documentary films from 1915, one shot approvingly by a Kurdish leader to show how the Turks "dealt" with Armenians. There is huge new material in Norway of the deportations in Mush from a Norwegian missionary who was there in 1915."

There is, too, a need to archive memoirs and books that were published in the aftermath of the genocide but discarded or forgotten in the decades that followed. In 1929, for example, a small-circulation book was published in Boston entitled *From Dardanelles to Palestine* by Captain Sarkis Torossian. The author was a highly decorated officer in the Turkish army who fought with distinction and was wounded at Gallipoli. He went on to fight the Allies in Palestine but was appalled to find thousands of dying Armenian refugees in the deserts of northern Syria. In passages of great pain, he discovers his sister living in rags and tells how his fiancée Jemileh died in his arms. "I raised Jemileh in my arms, the pain and terror in her eyes melted until they were bright as stars again, stars in an oriental night... and so she died, as a dream passing." Torossian changed sides, fought with the Arabs, and even briefly met Lawrence of Arabia – who did not impress him.

"The day following my entry into Damascus, the remainder of the Arab army entered along with their loads and behind them on a camel came one they called... the paymaster. This camel rider I learned was Captain Lawrence... Captain Lawrence to my knowledge did nothing to foment the Arab revolution, nor did he play any part in the Arab military tactics. When first I heard of him he was a paymaster, nothing more. And so he was to Prince Emir Abdulah (sic), brother of King Feisal, whom I knew. I do not write in disparagement. I write as a fighting man. Some must fight and others pay." Bitterness, it seems, runs deep. Torossian eventually re-entered Ottoman Turkey as an Armenian officer with the French army of occupation in the Cilicia region. But Kemalist guerrillas attacked the French, who then, Torossian suspects, gave weapons and ammunition to the Turks to allow the French army safe passage out of Cilicia. Betrayed, Torossian fled to relatives in America.

There is debate in Yerevan today as to why the diaspora Armenians appear to care more about the genocide than the citizens of modern-day Armenia. Indeed, the Foreign minister of Armenia, Vardan Oskanian, actually told me that "days, weeks, even months go by" when he does not think of the genocide. One powerful argument put to me by an Armenian friend is that 70 years of Stalinism and official Soviet silence on the genocide deleted the historical memory in eastern Armenia – the present-day state of Armenia. Another argument suggests that the survivors of western Armenia – in what is now Turkey – lost their families and lands and still seek acknowledgement and maybe even restitution, while eastern Armenians did not lose their lands. Demoyan disputes all this.

"The fundamental problem, I think, is that in the diaspora many don't want to recognise our statehood," he says. "We are surrounded by two countries – Turkey and Azerbaijan – and we have to take our security into account; but not to the extent of damaging memory. Here we must be accurate. I have changed things in this museum. There were inappropriate things,

comments about 'hot-bloodied' people, all the old clichés about Turks – they have now gone. The diaspora want to be the holders of our memories – but 60 per cent of the citizens of the Armenian state are "repatriates" – Armenians originally from the diaspora, people whose grandparents originally came from western Armenia. And remember that Turkish forces swept through part of Armenia after the 1915 genocide – right through Yerevan on their way to Baku. According to Soviet documentation in 1920, 200,000 Armenians died in this part of Armenia, 180,000 of them between 1918 and 1920." Indeed, there were further mass executions by the Turks in what is now the Armenian state. At Ghumri – near the centre of the devastating earthquake that preceded final liberation from the Soviet Union – there is a place known as the "Gorge of Slaughter", where in 1918 a whole village was massacred.

But I sensed some political problems up at the Yerevan museum – international as well as internal. While many Armenians acknowledge that their countrymen did commit individual revenge atrocities – around Van, for example – at the time of the genocide, a heavy burden of more modern responsibility lies with those who fought for Armenia against the Azeris in Nagorno-Karabakh in the early 1990s. This mountainous region east of the Armenian state saw fierce and sometimes cruel fighting in which Armenians massacred Turkish Azeri villagers. The Independent was one of the newspapers that exposed this.

Yet when I arrive at the massive genocide memorial next to the museum, I find the graves of five "heroes" of the Karabakh war. Here lies, for instance, Musher "Vosht" Mikhoyan, who was killed in 1991, and the remains of Samuel "Samo" Kevorkian, who died in action in 1992. However upright these warriors may have been, should those involved in the ghastly war in Karabakh be associated with the integrity and truth of 1915? Do they not demean the history of Armenia's greatest suffering? Or were they – as I suspect – intended to suggest that the Karabakh war, which Armenia won, was revenge for the 1915 genocide? It's as if the Israelis placed the graves of the 1948 Irgun fighters – responsible for the massacres of Palestinians at Deir Yassin and other Arab villages – outside the Jewish Holocaust memorial at Yad Vashem near Jerusalem.

Officials later explain to me that these Karabakh grave-sites were established at a moment of great emotion after the war and that today – while they might be inappropriate – it is difficult to ask the families of "Vosht" and "Samo" and the others to remove them to a more suitable location. Once buried, it is difficult to dig up the dead. Similarly, among the memorials left in a small park by visiting statesmen and politicians, there is a distinct difference in tone. Arab leaders have placed plaques in memory of the "genocide". Less courageous American congressman – who do not want to offend their Turkish allies – have placed plaques stating merely that they "planted this tree". The pro-American Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri left his own memorial less than a year before he was assassinated in 2005. "Tree of Peace," it says. Which rather misses the point.

And yet it is the work of archivists that will continue to establish the truth. In Yerevan you can now buy excellent witness testimonies of the genocide by Westerners who were present during the Armenian Holocaust. One of them is by Tacy Atkinson, an American missionary who witnessed the deportation of her Armenian friends from the town of Kharput. On 16 July 1915, she recorded in her secret diary how "a boy has arrived in Mezreh in a bad state nervously. As I understand it he was with a crowd of women and children from some village... who joined our prisoners who went out June 23... The boy says that in the gorge this side of Bakir Maden the men and women were all shot and the leading men had their heads cut off afterwards... He escaped... and came here. His own mother was stripped and robbed and then shot... He says the valley smells so awful that one can hardly pass by now."

For fear the Turkish authorities might discover her diaries, Atkinson sometimes omitted events. In 1924 – when her diary, enclosed in a sealed trunk, at last returned to the United States, she wrote about a trip made to Kharput by her fellow missionaries. "The story of this trip I did not dare write," she scribbled in the margin. "They saw about 10,000 bodies."

Anatomy of a massacre: How the genocide unfolded

By Simon Osborne

An estimated 1.5 million Armenians died between 1915 and 1917, either at the hands of

Turkish forces or of starvation. Exact figures are unknown, but each larger blob – at the site of a concentration camp or massacre – potentially represents the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people.

The trail of extermination, and dispute about exactly what happened, stretches back more than 90 years to the opening months of the First World War, when some of the Armenian minority in the east of the beleaguered Ottoman Empire enraged the ruling Young Turks coalition by siding with Russia.

On 24 April 1915, Turkish troops rounded up and killed hundreds of Armenian intellectuals. Weeks later, three million Armenians were marched from their homes – the majority towards Syria and modern-day Iraq – via an estimated 25 concentration camps.

In 1915, The New York Times reported that "the roads and the Euphrates are strewn with corpses of exiles... It is a plan to exterminate the whole Armenian people." Winston Churchill would later call the forced exodus an "administrative holocaust".

Yet Turkey, while acknowledging that many Armenians died, disputes the 1.5 million toll and insists that the acts of 1915-17 did not constitute what is now termed genocide – defined by the UN as a state-sponsored attempt to "destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group". Instead, Ankara claims the deaths were part of the wider war, and that massacres were committed by both sides.

Several countries have formally recognised genocide against the Armenians (and, in the case of France, outlawed its denial), but it remains illegal in Turkey to call for recognition. As recently as last year, the Turkish foreign ministry dismissed genocide allegations as "unfounded".

One authority on extermination who did recognise the Armenian genocide was Adolf Hitler. In a 1939 speech, in which he ordered the killing, "mercilessly and without compassion", of Polish men, women and children, he concluded: "Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?"