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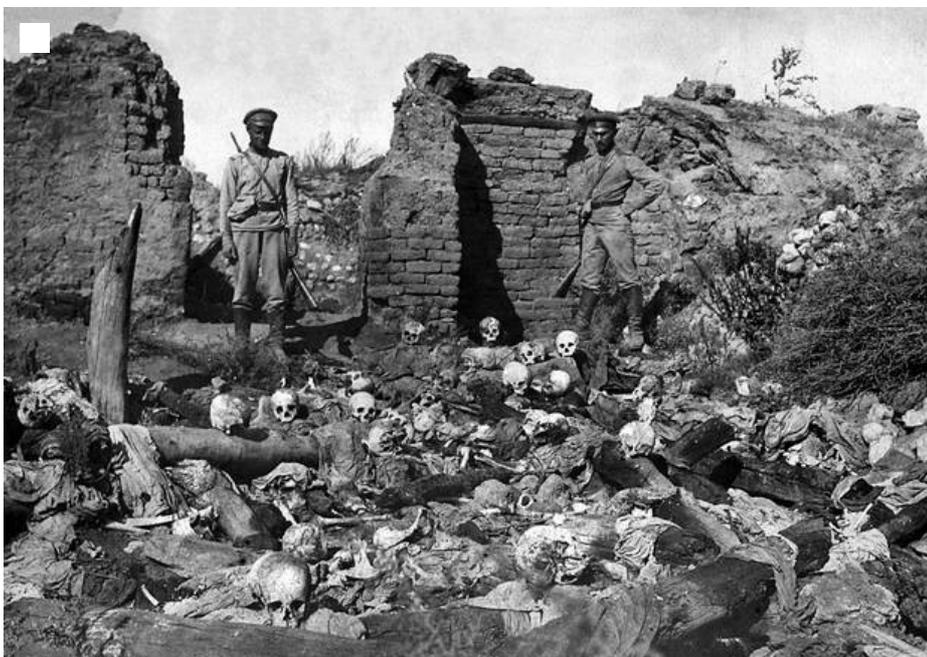
ROBERT FISK

Monday 19 January 2015

# The Gallipoli centenary is a shameful attempt to hide the Armenian Holocaust

As world leaders plan to commemorate the First World War battle for Gallipoli, another horrific anniversary risks being overlooked

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When world leaders, including Prince Charles and the Australian and New Zealand prime ministers, gather at Gallipoli to commemorate the First World War battle at the invitation of the Turkish government in April, the ghosts of one and half million slaughtered Christian Armenians will march with them.

For in an unprecedented act of diplomatic folly, Turkey is planning to use the 100th anniversary of the Allied attempt to invade Turkey in 1915 to smother memory of its own mass killing of the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire, the 20th century's first semi-industrial holocaust. The Turks have already sent invitations to 102 nations to attend the Gallipoli anniversary on 24th April — on the very day when Armenia always honours its own genocide victims at the hands of Ottoman Turkey.

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In an initiative which he must have known would be rejected, Turkish President Recep Erdogan even invited the Armenian President, Serge Sarkissian, to attend the Gallipoli anniversary after himself receiving an earlier request from President Sarkissian to



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attend ceremonies marking the Armenian genocide on the same day.

This is not just diplomatic mischief. The Turks are well aware that the Allied landings at Gallipoli began on 25th April – the day after Armenians mark the start of their genocide, which was ordered by the Turkish government of the time – and that Australia and New Zealand mark Anzac Day on the 25th. Only two years ago, then-president Abdullah Gul of Turkey marked the 98th anniversary of the Great War battle on 18th March 2013 – the day on which the British naval bombardment of the Dardanelles Peninsular began on the instructions of British First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill. At the time, no-one in Turkey suggested that Gallipoli – Canakkale in Turkish – should be remembered on 24th April.

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1 of 50



The Turks, of course, are fearful that 1915 should be remembered as the anniversary of their country's frightful crimes against humanity committed during the Armenian extermination, in which tens of thousands of men were executed with guns and knives, their womenfolk raped and then starved with their children on death marches into what was then Mesopotamia. The irony of history has now bequeathed these very same killing fields to the victorious forces of the 'genocidal' Islamist ISIS army, which has even destroyed the Armenian church commemorating the genocide in the Syrian city of Deir ez-Zour. Armenians chose 24th April to remember their genocide victims because this was the day on which Turkish police rounded up the first Armenian academics, lawyers, doctors, teachers and journalists in Constantinople.

Like Germany's right wing and revisionist historians who deny the Jewish Holocaust, Turkey has always refused to accept the Ottoman Turkish Empire's responsibility for the greatest crime against humanity of the 1914-18 war, a bloodletting which at the time upset even Turkey's German allies. Armenia's own 1915 Holocaust – which lasted into 1917 – has been acknowledged by hundreds of international scholars, including many Jewish and Israeli historians, and has since been recognized by many European states. Only Tony Blair's government tried to diminish the suffering of the Armenians

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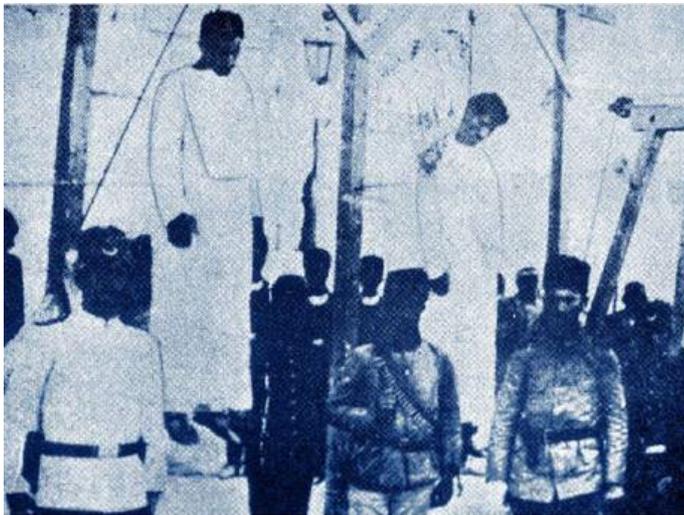
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when it refused to regard the outrages as an act of genocide and tried to exclude survivors from commemorating their dead during Holocaust ceremonies in London. Turkey's claim – that the Armenians were unfortunate victims of the social upheavals of the war – has long been discredited.

Several brave Turkish scholars – denounced for their honesty by their fellow countrymen – have researched Ottoman documents and proved that instructions were sent out from Constantinople (now Istanbul) to regional officials to destroy their Armenian communities. Professor Ayhan Aktar of Istanbul Bilgi University, for example, has written extensively about the courage of Armenians who themselves fought in uniform for Turkey at Gallipoli, and has publicised the life of Captain Sarkis Torossian, an Armenian officer who was decorated by the Ottoman state for his bravery but whose parents and sister were done to death in the genocide. Professor Aktar was condemned by Turkish army officers and some academics who claimed that Armenians did not even fight on the Turkish side. Turkish generals officially denied – against every proof to the contrary, including Torossian's photograph in Ottoman uniform – that the Armenian soldier existed.



Ottoman soldiers posing in front of Armenians they had hanged in public in Alep in 1915

But now Turkey has changed its story. Turkish foreign minister Mevlut Cavusoglu recently acknowledged that other ethnic groups – including many Arabs as well as Armenians – also fought at Gallipoli. “We [Turks and Armenians] fought together at Gallipoli,” he said. “That’s why we have extended the invitation to President Sarkissian as well.” The Armenian president’s reply to Erdogan’s invitation even mentioned Captain Torossian – although he sadly claimed that the soldier was also killed in the genocide when he in fact died in New York in 1954 after writing his memoirs – and reminded the Turkish president that “peace and friendship must first be hinged on the courage to confront one’s own past, historical justice and universal memory... Each of us has a duty to transmit the real story to future generations and prevent the repetition of crimes... and prepare the ground for rapprochement and future cooperation between peoples, especially neighbouring peoples.”

Armenians hold their commemorations on April 24th – when nothing happened at Gallipoli – because this was the day on which the Armenian intellectuals were rounded up and jailed in the basement of Constantinople’s police headquarters prior to their deportation and – in some cases – execution. These were the first ‘martyrs’ of the Armenian genocide. By another cruel twist of history, the place of their incarceration is now the Museum of

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Islamic Arts – a tourist location to which Prince Charles and other dignitaries will presumably not be taken on 24th April. These killings marked the start of the Armenian people’s persecution and exile to the four corners of the earth.

Professor Aktar’s contribution – along with that of historian Taner Akcam in the US – to the truth of Turkish-Armenian history is almost unique. They alone, through their academic research and under enormous political pressure to remain silent, forced thousands of Turks to debate the terrible events of 1915. Many Turks have since discovered Armenian grandmothers who were ‘Islamised’ or seized by Turkish militiamen or soldiers when they were young women. Aktar also points out that other Armenian soldiers – a First Lieutenant Surmenian, whose own memoirs were published in Beirut 13 years after Torossian’s death – fought in the Turkish army.



An image from 1915. Turkey deported two thirds of the Armenian population; many were either killed or died of starvation during the journey

He has little time, however, for either the Turkish government or Armenian president Sarkissian. “If you want to honour the Armenian officers and soldiers who... died for the fatherland (Turkey) in 1915, then you should invite the Armenian patriarch of Istanbul,” Aktar told me. “Why do (they) invite President Sarkissian? His ancestors were probably fighting in the Russian Imperial Army in 1915. He is from Karabagh [Armenian-held territory that is part of Turkish Azerbaijan] as far as I know! This is a show of an ‘indecent proposal’ towards President Sarkissian... it is rather insulting!”

Many Armenians might share the same view. For several months, Sarkissian was prepared to sign a treaty with Turkey to open the Armenian-Turkish frontier in return for a mere formal investigation by scholars of the genocide. Then-US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton supported him, along with sundry politicians and some Western journalists based in Turkey. But the Armenian diaspora responded in fury, asking how Jews would feel if friendship with Germany was contingent upon an enquiry to discover if the Jewish Holocaust had ever occurred. In the First World War, American and European newspapers gave massive publicity to the savagery visited upon the Armenians, and the British Foreign Office published a ‘black book’ on the crimes against Armenians of the Turkish army. The very word ‘genocide’ was coined about the Armenian holocaust by Raphael Lemkin, an American lawyer of Polish-Jewish descent. Israelis use the word ‘Shoah’ – ‘Holocaust’ – when they refer to the suffering of the Armenians.

The Turkish hero of Gallipoli, of course, was Lieutenant Colonel



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Mustapha Kemal – later Ataturk, founder of the modern Turkish state – and his own 19th Division at Gallipoli was known as the ‘Aleppo Division’ because of the number of Arabs serving in it. Ataturk did not participate in the mass killings of Armenians in 1915, but some of his associates were implicated – which still casts a shadow over the history of the Turkish state. The bloody Allied defeat at Gallipoli was to cast a shadow over the rest of Winston Churchill’s career, a fact well known to the tens of thousands of Australians and New Zealanders who plan to come to the old battlefield this April. How much they will know about an even more horrific anniversary on April 24th is another matter.

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