



To Recognize or Not? The Politics of the Pontian and Armenian Genocides

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As 2015 marked the hundredth anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, the international community has recently been revisiting the atrocity, and reflecting on its implications as one of the most significant examples in history of a genocide that has fundamentally shaped a nation, state, people, and its diaspora. Its peculiarity as a genocide that has received substantial recognition, but also remains highly contested, has given rise to questions of recognition and the implications of denial. Furthermore, as the Armenian genocide regains traction in the political sphere, spaces have emerged to point out that there are less-known genocides, such as that of the Pontian Greeks, which deserve attention and recognition. Whether genocides are recognized or not, they represent the brutal measures countries and nations are willing to take to protect their interests and preserve their identity, even if it means violating fundamental human rights and killing a people because they are Others.

From 1915 to 1923, the Ottoman government systemically exterminated and forcefully deported 1.5 million Armenians. This mass murder gave rise to the term *genocide* that is now internationally recognized and codified by the UN. The legacy and framing of the Armenian genocide, however, have also given rise to one of the most intractable political disputes in modern history, as the modern Turkish state continues to deny the account. This has locked Turkey and Armenia in a century of toxic standoff.¹

In recent decades, the international community has made significant advancements in commemorating the genocide through memorials, reparations, and legal recognitions. To date, 24 countries officially recognize the assault on the Armenians as genocide². Looking specifically at the past two years, noteworthy individuals and states have taken a stance on the issue. Although France officially recognized the killings as genocide in 1998, controversy was re-ignited in 2012 when the country's highest court was asked to overturn a law that threatened to jail anyone in France who denied the massacres to be a genocide. The law, which was ruled to be unconstitutional and a threat to freedom of expression, had been condemned by the Turkish Foreign Ministry and French parliamentarians.³ In 2015, when the Austrian parliament signed a declaration calling the slaughter a genocide, Turkey responded by recalling its ambassador from Vienna.

During 2016, the impact of the hundredth anniversary of the genocide, has led many prominent figures and states to officially recognize the genocide. During a visit to Yerevan, Armenia, in June, Pope Francis denounced the massacres as “an act of the ideologically twisted and planned ‘genocide’ of Armenians by Ottoman-era Turks.”⁴ That same month, Israel’s Knesset acted on its moral obligation to recognize the “Holocaust of the Armenian” nation by announcing it would recognize the atrocities as genocide⁵. This is particularly noteworthy as Israel has simultaneously been making efforts to normalize its ties with Turkey. Continuing the trend, Egyptian MPs have submitted a resolution to their parliament calling for the genocide to be recognized.⁶

The move towards recognition that deserves particular attention is that of Germany. On June 2, 2016, the German Bundestag, officially recognized the Armenian genocide in an almost unanimous vote. While a step in the right direction towards pushing Turkey to reckon with its troubled past, the timing was notably counterproductive. *Foreign Policy’s* Nick Danforth explains, “In delaying a vote on the resolution, originally scheduled for April, in deference to Turkey, Merkel actually made its timing appear more suspect. Yet as with the appearance of partiality in the law, the strong suggestion of an ulterior motive here is enough to undermine the whole enterprise.”⁷ In other words, the resolution was received as an act of hostility towards Turkey. While admitting there were certainly those who were purely voting substantively, Turkish critics held that the bill regarding 1915 was just an excuse for many motivated by political calculations to put pressure on Turkey. The timing was indeed unfortunate. Since the signing of the refugee deal in March, Germany has been under particular pressure to collaborate with Turkey to manage the crisis. Damaging relations with Turkey jeopardized chancellor Merkel’s political standing, and presented high costs for much of Europe. At the same time, Merkel has also needed to delicately navigate her image to not be seen as compromising on Western values to please the powers in Ankara, especially after an incident in March where she was portrayed as having advocated for restrictions on freedom of expression after criticizing the verses of a German comic’s poem that ridiculed Turkish President Erdogan.⁸ Furthermore, just the week prior to the recognition, Merkel had been in Istanbul, where Erdogan had warned her to not move forward on the resolution. This tension has given significant leverage to Turks, extreme Islamists, and nationalists, who argue that such genocide-related resolutions are attacks by the West. In all, what this means for the large Turkish population in Germany, German-Turkish trade relations, and the refugee deal remain to be seen, but millions of people could potentially be at risk.

Germany has a particularly brittle position as it too has a horrific past that it has carried for decades. Not only has accepting responsibility for the atrocities of World War II become an established part of the nation’s culture, but at the time of the Armenian genocide, Germany, under Kaiser Wilhelm II, was allied with the Ottomans. This gives rise to the question: to what extent was the passing of the resolution motivated by German guilt?⁹

A more subtle implication of Germany’s recognition is that now the focus is turned towards the U.S. As a presidential candidate in 2008, Obama pledged to recognize the genocide, a pledge he did not fulfill. The closest he came was in a statement made on April 24 to mark Armenian Remembrance Day when he called the massacre the first mass atrocity of the twentieth

century and a tragedy that must not be repeated. Yet he stopped short of using the word genocide, a term he applied to the killings before he became president in 2009.”¹⁰ Late in December, U.S. Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power took a step to officially describe the event as genocide. Unfortunately, however, Kurtis Cooper, Power's spokesman, said “the genocide reference came in the context of honoring [Elie] Wiesel's life and were meant to "convince others to stand up, rather than stand by, in the face of systemic injustice, mass atrocities and genocide like the one he was forced to endure." He said her words did not reflect a change in administration policy.”¹¹

The United States remains an odd man out on this human rights issue. Over the years, most critics have pointed to the pressure Obama has felt to not offend Turkey as a reason for his inaction to recognize the atrocity. The effort to have the genocide recognized on a federal level has failed despite the fact that forty-three states have independently done so. In 1984, a resolution put forth under Reagan did not pass. In 2000, the Clinton administration opposed a resolution for its potentially negative impacts on U.S. relations in the Balkans and Middle East. In 2007, the Bush administration similarly shut down a resolution, arguing it could obstruct the war on terror. In short, the United States has struggled to balance its place as a pioneering advocate for human rights with its relationship with NATO Ally Turkey. Writing for the *Los Angeles Times*, Chad Garland pointed to the significant Turkish lobbying efforts that have gone on to reroute recognition efforts, “According to filings with the Department of Justice, Turkey has spent millions of dollars lobbying U.S. officials over the past several years, including specific efforts “to convey the seriousness of the genocide issue and the potential threat it poses to U.S.-Turkish relations.”¹²

Turkey acknowledges that atrocities were committed, but says they happened in wartime, when plenty of other people were dying. Officials stoutly deny there was ever any plan to systematically wipe out the Armenian population — the commonly accepted definition of genocide.¹³ This stout denialism has had deep implications for Turkish politics with Western recognizers, and has been the driver behind the regional tensions, namely between Armenia and Turkey. If Turkey were to change its narrative, it could set a global example that would help “end the cycle of genocide.”¹⁴ Due to how identity-shaping the genocide was for the Armenians, the last century of their history has been one of pain and remembering. The stakes for recognition are high for Turkey, as it struggles to maintain its perception of being a democracy. Its relationship with minority groups such as the Kurds remain fraught.

In all of this, a less-discussed implication of genocide recognition on behalf of Turkey is what it would mean for the Pontian genocide. Occurring at the same time (1914-1923), the Ottoman Empire also engaged in the forced deportation and mass killing of the Ottoman Greek population that was living in Asia Minor. It is estimated that at least 400,000 Greeks were killed. That legacy presents a similar story to that of the Armenian genocide, but most of the world is unaware of its occurrence. Denial runs so deep, to the extent that even Greece's Education Minister Nikos Filis has refused to recognize the slaughter as genocide.¹⁵ That said, in 2013, Australia recognized the genocide, which Turkey unsurprisingly reacted to by saying such actions would strain their relations.¹⁶ Recognition is important as the genocide has had severe

implications for the Greek people of Pontos and their identity, and still remains to be brought to the attention of many states.

This issue of genocide recognition brings to light the extent to which rhetoric can be politicized. As genocides represent how far states are willing to go to protect their interests and their concept of nationhood and united people, the legacies they carry are important. In speculating on the weight of the term *genocide*, it becomes evident that recognition is important for those who were affected as a form of reconciliation, retribution, closure, accountability, and justice. Its political implications, however, are minimal. On the other hand, a state's lack of recognition reveals just how powerful words and rhetoric are when they become politicized. Notable parallels can be drawn to today's refugee crisis in terms of the implications of naming in the sense that legally, being identified as an economic migrant versus having refugee status determines the rights and support individuals have even when they might be under the same threat and seeking to flee the same atrocities. The occurrences of genocides force us to consider the extent to which human rights can be violated on the basis of idealizations of what and who the "nation-state" should include. In essence, "Othering" has justified ethnic cleansing and severe human rights violations. The legacies of genocides, rooted in politicized rhetoric, reveal the extent to which the responsibility to uphold human rights norms can be manipulated and neglected by states on the basis of economic alliances, security and sovereignty protections, and other national interests. It thus becomes important to remember that the issues of war and genocide are not confined to the twentieth century but have implications for our current era of universalism and globalization, particularly in how Western democracies choose to engage and respond.

¹Paul Salopek. "A Century Later, Slaughter Still Haunts Turkey and Armenia." *National Geographic* Apr. 2016. <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2016/04/armenia-massacre-turkey-kurds-history/>

²States Which Recognized the Armenian Genocide." *Armenian Genocide* 100. <http://armeniangenocide100.org/en/states/>

³CNN Wire Staff. "French Court Overturns Armenian Genocide Denial Law," CNN Feb. 28, 2012. <http://www.cnn.com/2012/02/28/world/europe/france-armenia-genocide/index.html>

⁴*Guardian* Staff Writer, "Pope Francis Denounces Armenian 'Genocide' during Visit to Yerevan." <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/24/pope-francis-denounces-armenian-genocide-during-visit-to-yerevan>

⁵Lidar Grave-Laze and Herb Keinon. "Knesset Committee Recognizes Armenian Genocide. *The Jerusalem Post*. (August 2016). <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/Knesset-committee-recognizes-Armenian-genocide-463081>

⁶*Massis* Staff Writer. "Armenian Genocide Recognition Resolution Submitted to Egypt's Parliament." *Massis Post* (July 2016). <https://massispost.com/2016/07/armenian-genocide-recognition-resolution-submitted-to-egypts-parliament/>

⁷Nick Danforth. "The Impeccably Bad Timing of Germany's Armenian Genocide Vote." *Foreign Policy* (June 5, 2016). <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/06/05/the-difference-between-germany-and-turkey-is-admitting-to-genocide-erdogan-merkel/>

⁸Alison Smale and Melissa Eddy. "German Parliament Recognizes Armenian Genocide, Angering Turkey." *New York Times* (June 3, 2016). <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/03/world/europe/armenian-genocide-germany-turkey.html>

⁹RT Staff Writer. "German Parliament Acknowledges Armenian Genocide Amid Intense Turkish Pressure." RT "TV-Novosti" (June 2016). <https://www.rt.com/news/345159-germany-armenia-genocide-vote/>

¹⁰The Associated Press. "Despite Campaign Vow, Obama Declines to Call Massacre of Armenians 'Genocide.'" *New York Times* (April 4, 2016). <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/23/world/europe/despite-campaign-vow-obama-declines-to-call-massacre-of-armenians-genocide.html>

¹¹Staff Writer. "U.S. Ambassador to UN Spoke About 'Genocide Denial Against the Armenians.'" *Masiss Post*. <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/wireStory/obamas-envoy-refers-armenian-genocide-44001012>

¹²Chad Garland. "Why Armenian Genocide Recognition Remains a Tough Sell." *Los Angeles Times* (April 2015). <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-why-armenia-genocide-recognition-remains-a-tough-sell-20150426-story.html>

¹³Tim Aragon. "A Century After Armenian Genocide Turkey's Denial Only Deepens." *New York Times* (April 17, 2015). <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/17/world/europe/turkeys-century-of-denial-about-an-armenian-genocide.html>

¹⁴"Why Germany's Recognition of Armenian Genocide Is Such a Big Deal." Public radio International (June 2016). <http://www.pri.org/stories/2016-06-05/why-germanys-recognition-armenian-genocide-such-big-deal>

¹⁵Philip Chrysopoulos. "Greek Education Minister Rejects Pontic Genocide: causes Uproar." *The Greek Reporter News* (November 3, 2015). <http://greece.greekreporter.com/2015/11/03/greek-education-minister-rejects-pontic-genocide-causes-uproar/>

¹⁶Maria Arkouli. "Turkey Disturbed by Recognition of Pontian Genocide." *The Greek Reporter* (May 20, 2013). <http://au.greekreporter.com/2013/05/20/turkey-disturbed-by-recognition-of-pontian-genocide/>

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