Lost in commemoration: the Armenian genocide in memory and identity

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ABSTRACT It is a commonplace in Genocide Studies to say that ‘Turkey denies the Armenian genocide’. The Turkish state’s official policy towards the Armenian genocide was and is indeed characterized by misrepresentation, mystification and manipulation. But when one gauges what place the Armenian genocide occupies in the social memory of Turkish society, even after nearly a century, a different picture emerges. Even though most direct eyewitnesses to the crime have passed away, oral history interviews yield important insights. Elderly Turks and Kurds in Eastern Turkey often hold vivid memories from family members or fellow villagers who witnessed or participated in the genocide. This article is based on interviews conducted with (grand)children of eyewitnesses to the Armenian genocide. The research suggests there is a clash between official state memory and popular social memory: the Turkish government is denying a genocide that its own population remembers.

KEYWORDS Armenians, denial, genocide, Kurds, memory, oral history, Turks

If the Party could thrust its hand into the past and say of this or that event, it never happened—that, surely, was more terrifying than mere torture and death.1

Mass violence and memory: an introductory note

The decade from 1912 to 1922 saw unprecedented levels of mass violence in the Ottoman Empire. War, genocide, forced migration, famine, flight and displacement had deeply affected the fabric of society and scarred the memory of all participants and witnesses. After so much violence in the Ottoman territories, it was only logical that hundreds of thousands of people were physically wounded and psychologically traumatized. Demobilized soldiers came home with frightening stories of mass death, entire neighborhoods had been emptied, families had lost their male members, widows were begging by the roadside, miserable orphans were roaming the streets naked. Despite the recuperative powers of families and communities, the violence caused severe lasting damage to the social, economic and cultural development of the region.

and society at large. However, in comparison to Nazism (1933–45) and Stalinism (1924–53), the study of the Young Turk (1913–18) and Kemalist dictatorships (1923–50) has lagged behind in empirical research, theoretical analysis and normative assessment. Studies of Turkish memorial practices are no exception to the rule.²

Over the last decades, there has been an upsurge in the study of memory. Scholars have studied how memory, especially historical narrative, is produced, consumed, transformed and transmitted by social groups. This burgeoning field of research has yielded a large body of knowledge about the nature of memory and mass violence.³ In the context of mass violence, memory bears special significance as perpetrating regimes always seek to control, destroy and prohibit a range of memorial practices related to the violence. One commentator on the relationship between memory and mass violence is Tzvetan Todorov, who identified at least two strategies that totalitarian dictatorships have used to manage and control memory: the erasure of the traces of the crimes and the intimidation of the population. Both include control over knowledge, including a prohibition on collecting and spreading information.⁴ Paul Connerton’s analysis of how totalitarian regimes have used memory as a tool of power is noteworthy:

The attempt to break definitively with an older social order encounters a kind of historical deposit and threatens to founder upon it. The more total the aspirations of the new regime, the more imperiously will it seek to introduce an era of forced forgetting … A particularly extreme case of such interaction occurs when a state apparatus is used in a systematic way to deprive its citizens of their memory. All totalitarianisms behave in this way; the mental enslavement of the subjects of a totalitarian regime begins when their memories are taken away.⁵

In totalitarian dictatorships, undoubtedly the most violent regimes in the twentieth century, the democratic dissemination of narratives and the free exercise of memorial practices are prohibited. Instead, the population is

² A recent volume dealing with this subject, although a notable exception, does not deal with the treatment of memory by the Young Turk regime itself: Esra Özyürek (ed.), The Politics of Public Memory in Turkey (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press 2006).
enveloped in a cognitive system of official propaganda including denial and cover-up of the regime’s atrocities. The famous works by Vasiliĭ Grossman (Life and Fate), Primo Levi (The Drowned and the Saved) and Milan Kundera (The Book of Laughter and Forgetting) are but three examples that attest to memory control under Nazism and Communism.6

Any discussion of collective memory needs to disaggregate several cognate phenomena. Aleida Assmann distinguishes three categories of collective memory: social, cultural and political memory.7 She defines social memory as ‘the past as experienced and communicated (or repressed) within a given society’. The capacity of social memory to survive is bound up with the lifespan of the individual and the generation, the result of an embodied bottom-up memory.8 In contrast to social memory, cultural and political memory is intergenerational and not self-referential, but rather the result of a top-down imposition. Assmann defines cultural memory as the forms and techniques that enable a certain group to preserve information that is fundamental for the continuation and constitution of that group’s identity. Typically, these forms are supported by symbols and signs, writ large, that enable the community to remember its canonical memories. Moreover, political memory is ‘founded on durable carriers of symbols and material representations’.9 These types of memory inevitably clash, between societies and within societies.10 How these clashes develop after an episode of mass violence depends on a myriad of factors, such as the levels of literacy in the affected communities, and other material and immaterial forms of transitional justice, among other things.

This article explores the Turkish memoryscape of the Armenian genocide by examining both the destruction and the construction of memory. It draws on recently declassified Turkish archival materials and the results of oral history research conducted in the past decade. I argue that the Turkish handling of the memory of the Armenian genocide is characterized by a successful silencing of high-culture and written texts, but a failure of silencing the social and cultural memory of the perpetrator, bystander and victim communities. In Assmann’s terms, the Turkish attempt to establish a unitary political memory has failed, not only in the face of Armenian social memory,

7 Aleida Assmann, ‘Re-framing memory: between individual and collective forms of constructing the past’, in Karin Tilmans, Frank van Vree and Jay Winter (eds), Performing the Past: Memory, History and Identity in Modern Europe (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2010), 35–50 (41–2).
8 Ibid., 37–8.
9 Ibid., 42.
10 Aleida Assmann, ‘To remember or to forget: which way out of a shared history of violence?’, in Aleida Assmann and Linda Shortt (eds), Memory and Political Change (Basingstoke: Falgrave 2012), 53–71.
but also Turkish cultural memory. Still, Turkish official historiography consists of a veritable ‘denial syndrome’, which has powerful mechanisms of prejudice against ethnic Others. Moreover, it runs the risk of what Sabrina Ramet calls ‘dysphoric rumination, in which the past is remembered darkly and in which brooding displaces any ability to come to terms with the past’. This article will examine the clash between the Turkish government’s official narrative and the cultural memory of ordinary Turkish citizens. It will offer explanations as to why Turkey denies the genocide and discuss how the denial is related to identity.

**Destruction of memory**

How have successive Turkish governments dealt with their legacy of violence? First of all, it needs to be understood that their policies regarding memory have not been static but have fluctuated. A poignant illustration of the vicissitudes of Turkish memory politics was the representation of the Graeco-Turkish war. In March 1922 Mustafa Kemal denounced the ‘atrocities’ of the ‘Greek princes and generals, who take particular pleasure in having women raped’. The General continued to decry these acts of ‘destruction and aggression’ that he considered ‘irreconcilable with humanity’ and, most of all, ‘impossible to cover up and deny’. But after the establishment of the Republic the tide turned and the accusatory tone of moral indignation was dropped. The 1930s saw a diplomatic rapprochement between Turkey and Greece as relations improved with the signature of several agreements and conventions. By the time the Greek Premier Panagis Tsaldaris (1868–1936) visited Turkey in September 1933, the same Mustafa Kemal now spoke of the Greeks as ‘esteemed guests’ with whom contact was ‘amicable and cordial’.

Throughout the interbellum period, the Turkish and Greek nations were portrayed as having coexisted perennially in mutual respect and eternal peace. Friendly interstate relations in the service of Turkey’s acceptance of and stabilization into the nation-state system had gained precedence over old grievances, without any intervening serious process of closure or reconciliation.

Lacking statehood, the Armenians and Syriacs who had survived the ravages of the First World War were not accorded the same treatment as Greece. They were either deeply traumatized survivors living in wretched

14 For a study of Turkish-Greek rapprochement after 1923, see Damla Demirözü, *Savaştan Barışa Giden Yol: Atatürk-Venizelos Dönemi Türkiye-Yunanistan İlişkileri* (İstanbul: İletişim 2007).
refugee camps or terrified individuals keeping a low profile in ruined
villages. (In Istanbul there were tens of thousands of intimidated urbanites
who had survived the genocide with comparatively little loss of life and
property.)\textsuperscript{15} The Kemalist regime continued on all fronts the Committee of
Union and Progress (CUP) policy of effacing physical traces of Armenian
existence: architecture was defaced, destroyed and rid of engravings.\textsuperscript{16}
Although the Armenians were gone, in a sense they were still deemed to
be too visible. An important stage of the erasure of memory was the razing of
Armenian cemeteries. For example, one of the main persons responsible for
the destruction of Diyarbekir’s Armenians, Müftüzâde Abdurrahman Şeref
Uluğ (1892–1976), ordered the erasure of one of the city’s last surviving
Armenian landmarks after he became mayor in 1923.\textsuperscript{17} That this was not
merely a function of ‘urban modernization’ but a wilful obliteration of the
Other’s memory is evident from the fact that it occurred not only on the west
side (where ‘modernization’ was carried out) but also on the east side of
Diyarbekir. Armenian cemeteries were either wilfully neglected into oblivion
or outright flattened, their stones used to pave floors or roads.\textsuperscript{18} No relative
ever had a say in this process, since most deportees and survivors were
peasants living undercover or in Syria. From the 1920s to the 1960s, local
administrative structures in Turkey were characterized by significant con-
tinuities in terms of minority policies and personnel. Throughout the 1930s
and 1940s, Armenian communities in Eastern Turkey were expelled, concen-
trated and repressed.\textsuperscript{19} Another critical event that marked the erasure of
memory was the collapse of Diyarbakir’s huge Armenian church Surp Giragos.
In the 1960s the roof gave way into the deserted building and, in subsequent
decades, the structure languished, was stripped of its assets and neglected.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{15} See Lerna Ekmekçioglu, \textit{Surviving the New Turkey: Armenians in Post-Ottoman Istanbul}

\textsuperscript{16} Anush Hovannisian, ‘Turkey: a cultural genocide’, in Levon Chorbajian and George
Shirinian (eds), \textit{Studies in Comparative Genocide} (New York: St Martin’s Press 1998),
147–56.

\textsuperscript{17} Bedri Günkut, \textit{Diyarbekir Tarihi} (Diyarbakir: Diyarbekir Halkevi 1937), 150–1.

\textsuperscript{18} Uğur Ümit Üngör, ‘Creative destruction: shaping a high-modernist city in interwar

\textsuperscript{19} Vahé Tachjian, ‘Expulsion of the Armenian survivors of Diyarbekir and Urfa,
1923–1930’, in Richard G. Hovannisian (ed.), \textit{Armenian Tigranakert/Diarbekir and
Edessa/Urfa} (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda 2006), 519–38; Kerem Öktem, ‘Incorporating the
time and space of the ethnic “Other”: nationalism and space in Southeast Turkey in the
nineteenth and twentieth centuries’, \textit{Nations and Nationalism}, vol. 10, no. 4, 2004,
559–78.

\textsuperscript{20} Surp Giragos, one of the largest churches in the Middle East, became an object of
Armenian diaspora lobbying in the late 2000s. In negotiations with the Kurdish mayor
of Diyarbakir (Osman Baydemir), the municipal authorities renovated the church in
2010–11 and reopened it for use on 23 October 2011. For a website commemorating
Surp Giragos, see ‘Diyarbakır Ermeni Surp Giragos Kilisesi’, \textit{Facebook}, 26 October 2011,
available at \url{www.facebook.com/SurpGiragosKilisesi} (viewed 5 March 2014).
Well before groups of Armenian survivors could formulate a coherent account about what had happened in 1915, a master narrative was being constructed by the perpetrators. In one of his speeches in parliament Interior Minister Şükrü Kaya (1883–1959) asserted that

it has been the livelihood of certain politicians to foster the notion that there is an eternal enmity between Turks and Armenians ... Turks and Armenians, forced to pursue their true and natural interests, again instinctively felt friendliness towards each other. This is the truth of the matter ... From our perspective the cordiality expressed by the Armenian nation towards us has not diminished.21

Such an assessment of Turkish-Armenian relations in the wake of the genocide (by, of all people, one of its arch organizers) was to be expected only from a political elite pursuing a distinct memorial agenda. Ever since its rise to power, the Kemalist dictatorship continued the CUP policy of suppressing all information on the 1915 genocide. When the regime caught wind of the memoirs of Garabed Kapikian, entitled *Eghernapatum Pokun Hayots ev norin metsi mayarakakhaki Sebastioy*,22 the book was prohibited from entering Turkey for ‘containing very harmful writings’.23 Marie Sarrafian Banker, a graduate of the İzmir American College, had written her memoirs in 1936.24 Her book too was barred entry into the country. All existing copies were ordered confiscated and destroyed for containing ‘harmful texts’.25 When Armen Anoosh, an Armenian survivor living in Aleppo, wrote a memoir entitled ‘The History of a Ruined City: Urfa’, the volume was banned and any copies that found their way into the country were ordered to be confiscated and destroyed.26

At times this policy extended beyond the prohibition of genocide memoirs and included ‘normal’ history books. When Turkish customs intercepted Arshak Alboyajian’s classic two-volume *Badmootiun Hye Gesaria* (1937), sent from Syria to Istanbul by surface mail, it was ordered to be confiscated, destroyed and prohibited.27 An Armenian-language book published in Cairo

23 Prime Ministerial decree, 10 June 1934: Başbakanlık Cumhuriyet Arşivi (Republican Archives), Ankara (hereafter BCA), 030.18.01.02/46.49.5.
25 Prime Ministerial decree, 28 September 1937: BCA, 030.18.01.02/79.82.14.
26 Prime Ministerial decree, 10 February 1949: BCA, 030.18.01.02/118.98.20.
in 1938 on the small town of Bardizag/Bahçecek was prohibited simply for the fact that it produced a history of a region that fell under Turkish national jurisdiction. What is striking about these prohibitions is that they generally limited themselves to the Turkish Republic. For the regime it did not matter much that Armenians wrote and circulated memoirs among themselves—as long as memory was produced and consumed within an Armenian milieu and did not trickle back into Turkey. One of the exceptions to this rule was the September 1935 incident between the United States and Turkey over plans by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer to film Franz Werfel’s novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*. After strong diplomatic pressure from the Turkish embassy the idea was abandoned. The Kemalist regime had already officially prohibited the book itself in January 1935, a year after the Nazis had done so. The same fate befell Paul du Véou’s less fictional book on the Musa Dagh Armenians on the eve of the Turkish annexation of Hatay province. That book, too, was blacklisted and barred from entry to the country. The regime did not want these narratives to enter local history and memory, on which they claimed a strict monopoly.

All in all, the mass violence of the first decades of the twentieth century was repressed and eliminated from public memory through silence, amnesia and repression, rather than reflection, discussion, assimilation and memorialization. What is striking about this process is the fact that the violence that was repressed was not only that in which the Turks had been perpetrators, but also that in which they had been victims. A whole century of Ottoman-Muslim victimization in the Balkans, in particular during the severely traumatizing 1912–13 Balkan wars, was dismissed and forgotten in favour of ‘looking towards the future’ and amicable interstate relations with neighbouring countries. Popular anti-Greek, anti-Serb and anti-Bulgarian revanchist propaganda was kept under strict official surveillance. The Kemalist regime assumed that society, and humans themselves, were a malleable *tabula rasa*, that no remnants of memories remained after shock and trauma, and that people could and would forget. After all, they themselves had tried to bury the unpleasant memories that would come to haunt Turkey decades later. The minorities they had victimized, such as Armenians, Kurds...

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28 Krikor Mkhalian, *Bardizagn ou Bardizagtsin* (Bardizag and Its People) (Cairo: Sahag-Mesrob Press 1938). Prime Ministerial decree, 10 July 1941: BCA, 030.18.01.02/95.60.3.


31 Prime Ministerial decree, 13 January 1935: BCA, 030.18.01.02/51.3.2.


34 Prime Ministerial decree, 25 January 1940: BCA, 030.18.01.02/90.12.7.
and Syriacs, did not have a chance to mourn, heal or to be memorialized within Turkey. The new memory of the nation did not permit cracks, nuances, shades, subtleties or any difference for that matter. Much like the new identity, it strived to be unitary.35

Construction of memory

The Turkish nation-state that was constructed after 1923 needed, as all nation-states do, national myths.36 According to Ana Maria Alonso, ‘power and memory are most intimately embraced in the representations of official histories which are central to the production and reproduction of hegemony’.37 These official histories are prepared for ‘creating a usable past, which is a hallmark for collective memory’.38 Nationalist political elites in particular have used official histories to craft the nation-state’s memory in their desired shape and historians have often been appointed by the regime to this end.39 The function of these new histories is to construct a logic of the ‘national narrative’, of which Victor Roudometof defines four characteristics: first, the narrative is a ‘quest for origins’, according to which the researcher’s task is to trace the beginnings of a people as far back in history as possible; second, it aims to construct continuity between the different historical periods, thereby showing the preservation of the culture, tradition and mentality of the nation; third, it seeks to identify periods of glory and decline, including moral judgements regarding the actions of other collectivities vis-à-vis the nation; and, finally, narratives are always a quest for meaning and purpose, the identification of the nation’s destiny revealed in the progression of history.40 While silencing certain memories and narratives, the regime produces other memories and narratives. During this process of defining and fine-tuning national memory, again, the violent past is muted.

36 Anthony D. Smith, Myths and Memories of the Nation (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999).
One of the exemplary history books commissioned by the Kemalist regime was prepared by the regime propagandist Bedri Günkut. It was unimaginatively titled *Diyarbekir Tarihi* (The History of Diyarbekir) and was published by the Diyarbekir Halkevi (People’s House). In his study Günkut ascribes a universal Turkishness to all of the regions of Diyarbekir province, harking back to the Assyrian era. But, unlike previous books, Günkut’s study went to far greater lengths to identify ‘Turkishness’ and erase all non-Turkish cultures from Diyarbekir’s history. His book is worth examining in some detail. The second chapter was entitled ‘History’, and ‘began’ with the Sumerian era: ‘The Turkish nation, which was living the world’s most civilized life even in Prehistory, fled westwards 9 to 10,000 years ago due to natural and inescapable reasons and undoubtedly also passed through Mesopotamia and the vicinity of Diyarbekir …’

Günkut went on to state that ‘the nation that was first to have eked out a civilized existence in the Diyarbekir area was the Turkish nation’. He did not deviate from the party line when portraying the myths of origin: ‘Despite temporary invasions and destructions by the Assyrian, Persian, Greek and Roman regimes, the great Turkish race has always lived in this country.’ Through the lens of this particular foundational myth, the origin of Turkish culture was located so early in history that it was lost in the mists of not real but mythic time, which symbolized the timelessness of the nation. Under the title ‘Stories about the Foundation of This City’, Günkut reviewed nine historical narratives about the ‘origins’ of Diyarbekir: the Akkadian, Persian, Assyrian, Arab, Parthian, Greek, Armenian, Hittite and Turkish versions. The author evaluated all the myths and dismissed, with increasing severity, disapproval and contempt, one by one, the first eight theories. Out of disdain, the names of non-Turkish ethnic groups were consciously and consistently written not with capitals but in lower case: the text spoke not of Kurds, Arabs and Armenians, but of kurds, arabs and armenians. For example, according to Günkut, ‘the claim that amid was founded by arabs can be nothing but a lie, a ludicrous fabrication by arabs and arabophiles’.

Then, ignoring six centuries of Ottoman history, Günkut leapt straight to the first decades of the twentieth century. His historical portrayal of the Young Turk era of violence is most striking. With regard to a region in which more than 100,000 Armenians were destroyed, Günkut was a pioneer in the denial of the genocide: ‘In the Great War, this region was saved from Russian invasions and armenian massacres and arson.’ Concerning the massacres of the 1925 Kurdish conflict only a decade earlier, Günkut’s narrative on that episode of mass violence was more elaborate. The Kurdish resistance to the regime was almost exclusively attributed to conspiracies from outside: its leader Shaikh Said (1865–1925) was portrayed not as a member of the Kurdish

42 Ibid., 27.
43 Ibid., 144–5.
intelligentsia or elite but as ‘an extremely ignorant fanatic. … who became the tool of foreigners. … with several other uncultured vagabonds’. The narrative then took a turn towards misinformation as Günkut argued that the Kurds had ‘committed bloodcurdling and atrocious acts in Lice and Silvan’, where they had purportedly ‘monstrously dismembered young Turkish patriots’. In this remarkable reversal of the historical account, all the violence had been committed by Armenians and Kurds against Turks. Such a misrepresentation could only be so called if there was a body of knowledge to counteract it. Whatever counter-narratives were being produced abroad in any language, the Kemalists did not allow them to be available for consumption by the population. Especially when it came to violence, the dictatorship had hegemony over memory politics and debates about the past.

Such official textbooks, nationalist canons and city histories not only were silent on critical historical issues, they also banished all ethnic minorities from history. However, memory is obdurate, and the narratives that locals kept in their minds diverged considerably from those they were fed by official books. Anybody in 1950 who wanted to learn about the history of the country had at least two separate literatures at his or her disposal: the libraries constructed by the regime, and the oral tradition that was preserved in extended families in the city and the countryside. These two bodies of knowledge coexisted for years and decades but, from the 1960s onwards, the latter came under pressure from urbanization and increasing levels of education among the uneducated strata of eastern peasants. Nowadays, the social memory remains alive and, at times, openly clashes with political memory.

**Oral history and cultural memory in Turkey**

As ‘common knowledge’ has it: ‘Turkey denies the Armenian genocide.’ Yes, the Turkish state’s official policy towards the Armenian genocide was and is indeed characterized by misrepresentation, mystification and manipulation.

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44 Ibid.

But when one gauges what place the Armenian genocide occupies in the social memory of Turkish society, even after nearly a century, a different picture emerges. Even though most direct eyewitnesses to the crime have passed away, oral history interviews yield important insights. Elderly Turks and Kurds in Eastern Turkey often hold vivid memories passed on by family members or fellow villagers who witnessed or participated in the genocide. This section is based on interviews conducted with Turkish and Kurdish (grand)children of eyewitnesses to the Armenian genocide. The research results suggest there is a clash, not only between Turkish political memory and Armenian cultural memory, but also between Turkish political memory (the official state narrative) and Turkish/Kurdish social memory. In a nutshell: to some extent, the Turkish government is denying a genocide that its own population remembers.

Oral history is an indispensable tool for scholars interested in mass violence. A considerable collection of Armenian and Syriac oral history material has been studied by colleagues outside of Turkey. The existing body of oral history research within Turkey, though gradually developing, has hardly addressed the genocide. This potential research field was politicized by successive governments and the Turkish Historical Society (Türk Tarih Kurumu). Several documentaries about the victimization of Ottoman Muslims in the eastern border regions have included interviews with elderly Muslims speaking about their suffering at the hands of Armenians (and presumably Cossacks) in 1918. It seems undeniable that the Turkish nationalist camp fears that the local population of Anatolian towns and villages might ‘confess’ the truth of the genocide and disclose relevant details about it. For example, the 2006 PBS documentary The Armenian Genocide by Andrew Goldberg includes remarkable footage of elderly Turks speaking candidly about the genocide. One of the men remembers his father told him that the génocidaires had mobilized religious leaders to convince the population that killing Armenians would secure them a place in heaven. Another middle-aged man recounts a memory of his grandfather’s that neighbouring Armenian villagers were locked in a barn and burnt alive.

In the past decade, I have searched (and found) respondents willing to talk about their personal experiences or their family narratives related to the war

and the genocide. In the summers of 2002 and 2004–7, I conducted up to 200 interviews with the (grand)children of contemporaries of those events in Eastern Turkey, all semi-structured and taped. Needless to say, oral history has its methodological pitfalls, especially in a society in which the memory of modern history is overlaid with myth and ideology. Many are unwilling to reflect on their family histories, because they have grown accustomed to ignoring inquisitive and critical questions, not least on their own moral choices in the face of their neighbours’ destruction. Others are reluctant to admit to acts considered shameful. But, while some were from the outset unwilling to speak once I broached the taboo subject, others agreed to speak but wished to remain anonymous, and many others were happy to speak openly, with some even providing me with access to their private documents. Even though direct eyewitnesses to the crime have most probably passed away, these interviews proved fruitful. Elderly Turks and Kurds often remembered vivid stories from family members or villagers who had witnessed or participated in the massacres.

The examples clearly demonstrate that the Turkish and Kurdish populations were aware that the government was organizing the murder of the Armenians. A. D., a Kurdish writer from Varto (Muş) recalled a childhood memory when, in 1966, an earthquake laid bare a mass grave near his village. The villagers knew the victims were Armenians from a neighbouring village. According to A. D., when the village elder requested advice from the local authorities as to what to do, within a day military commanders had assigned a group of soldiers to re-bury the corpses. The villagers were admonished never to speak about the affair again. Interviews with elderly locals can yield considerable useful data about the genocide itself as well. For example, a Kurdish man (born 1942) from Diyarbakır’s northern Piran district related that his father told him how their fellow villagers would raid Armenian villages and dispatch their victims by slashing their throats wide open. As they operated with daggers and axes, this often led to decapitations. After the killing was done, the perpetrators could see how the insides of the victims’ windpipes were black because of tobacco use. Morbid details such as these are also recorded in the following account by a Kurdish man from the Kharzan region, east of Diyarbakır:

49 My subject position as a ‘local outsider’ (being born in the region but raised abroad) facilitated the research as it gave me the communicative channels at once to delve deeply and draw back at the appropriate moments. It also provided me with a sense of immunity from the dense moral and political field in which most of this research is embedded.


52 Interview conducted with A. D. (from Varto district), Heidelberg, 24 November 2009.

53 Interview conducted with M. Ş. (from Piran district), Diyarbakır, 15 July 2004.
My grandfather was the village elder (muhtar) during the war. He told us when we were children about the Armenian massacre. There was a man in our village, he used to hunt pheasants. Now the dishonourable man (bêşerefo) hunted Armenians. Grandpa saw how he hurled a throwing axe right through a child a mother was carrying on her back. Grandpa yelled at him: ‘Hey, do you have no honour? God will punish you for this.’ But the man threatened my grandfather that if he did not shut up, he would be next. The man was later expelled from the village.54

Here is another account by a Turkish woman (born 1928) from Erzincan:

Q: You said there were Armenians in your village too. What happened to them?
A: They were all killed in the first year of the war, you didn’t know? My mother was standing on the hill in front of our village. She saw how at Kemah they threw (döktüler) all the Armenians into the river. Into the Euphrates. Alas, screams and cries (bağır çağırın). Everyone, children and all (çoluk çocuk), brides, old people, everyone, everyone. They robbed them of their golden bracelets, their shawls and silk belts, and threw them into the river.
Q: Who threw them into the river?
A: The government of course.
Q: What do you mean by ‘the government’?
A: Gendarmes.55

These examples suggest that there might still be something meaningful to be gained from interviews with elderly Turks and Kurds. Needless to say, had a systematic oral history project been carried out in Turkey much earlier, such as in the 1960s or 1970s, a wealth of crucial information could have undoubtedly been salvaged. Besides the research conducted in Turkey by colleagues such as Leyla Neyzi, Ayşe Gül Altıay and others, interviews by individual researchers are at best a drop in the ocean. A measured research project resulting in a substantial study would be a major achievement for the centenary of the genocide.

The salience of identity

The Turkish denial of the Armenian genocide can be interpreted through at least six prisms: politics, sociology, psychology, economics, gender and mnemonics. Politically, it seems rather obvious that the Turkish government, through cold Machiavellian calculation, has reached the conclusion that acknowledging the genocide would generate a net power loss. Nationalist

54 Interview conducted with Erdal Rénas (from the Kharzan area), Istanbul, 18 August 2002.
and populist opposition politicians would capitalize on any expressions of acknowledgement or apology. Sociologically, the denial of the genocide is reinforced through peer pressure in Turkish academic culture. Disagreeing with denialist arguments in the public sphere or denouncing anti-Armenian publications requires a strong, independent will. Psychologically, acknowledgement of the genocide would have to overcome the barrier of ordinary Turks’ guilt; it would involve a moral restructuring so fundamental that the mind would resist it out of self-preservation.\(^{56}\) The logical extension of the political argument is economic self-interest. Acknowledgement would most certainly entail restitution, reparation and compensation to the few survivors and their descendants. The Turkish government most likely perceives this as a dangerous Pandora’s box. A further point might seem surprising but, at many conferences and public events on the Armenian genocide, I have noticed that the most vociferous denialist arguments are often voiced by Turkish women, academics or low-ranking diplomats. According to annual reports on the global gender gap, Turkey ranks 124 out of 135 countries as the political sphere, business and academia are still strongly male-dominated.\(^{57}\) Might these women be trying to bridge the gender gap by propping up their nationalist credentials and gaining credit in the eyes of the male establishment?

In addition to the above interpretations, for the purpose of this special issue, is the importance of collective identity and memory. Memory is closely linked to identity as every identity requires a memory. Memories and narratives are repositories and repertoires for all forms of collective identity: family, village, region, class, nation and so on. Jürgen Habermas argued that people ‘can develop social identities only if they recognize that they maintain their membership in social groups by way of participating in interactions, and thus that they are caught up in the narratively presentable histories of collectivities’.\(^{58}\) By mass educating several generations of citizens, the political memory that the regime instilled in official Turkish identity became relatively

\(^{56}\) Humans are deeply influenced by several cognitive biases. One of these is the myth or fallacy of the ‘just world’, the belief that injustices happen for a good reason, despite glaring evidence that people suffer without cause. This bias leads people to believe that genocides occur not because perpetrator regimes unilaterally decide to annihilate a group, but because the victims must have done something to deserve it. The just-world myth induces perpetrators to adopt a mindset in which they blame their victims to reduce their own feelings of guilt. For them this is crucially important in order to perpetrate the killings and maintain their own sense of well-being; otherwise the realization of the victims’ humanity and the enormity of the injustice would produce a guilt that would be unbearable. Instead, for self-preservation, they lapse into the irrational cognitive bias of denial and a reinterpretation of the event. James Waller, *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002), 249–56.


solid. Transitional justice or a ‘recivilizing process’ of unlearning Young Turk culture and memory (such as in Germany superficially after 1945 and profoundly after 1968) never took place after the Kemalist one-party dictatorship lost power in 1950. Therefore, the Armenian-Turkish conflict is very much a conflict of memory: Armenians wish to remember a history that Turks would like to forget. In other words, to use Aleida Assmann’s conceptualization, one could argue that the Armenian-Turkish conflict is a clash between Armenian cultural memory and Turkish political memory. This would not have been a problem if political memory were not a core component of collective identity. A ‘loss’ of political memory entails a loss of collective identity, a prospect fundamentally problematic for many people. This goes a long way in explaining why both Armenians and Turks experience any deviation from that memory as a direct attack on their very identity. Asking Turks to acknowledge the genocide amounts to asking them to relinquish their Turkish identity. Consequently, Turks who express a sincere, agnostic interest in the history of the genocide are accused of having a dubious identity, that is, a non-Turkish (read: Armenian) ethnic background. This deviation in its turn disturbs social closure in the group. A conflict between absolutely exclusive memories has become a conflict of absolutely exclusive identities.

For the victims, too, the legacy of the Armenian genocide has played an important role over generations. The Young Turk assault on the Armenians deepened grievances and accentuated conflicts across generations. Ottoman Armenian communities, initially divided by regional, religious and political identities, were now constructed, treated and deported as Armenians and, as such, were made into Armenians. For the deported elites, the galvanizing impact of the government’s policies brought frustration, vindictiveness and calls for justice. The experiences of loss and exile were remembered and transmitted across time and space to new generations in the Middle East, Europe and North America. These new generations assimilated these narratives and constructed paradigms based on their nation’s suffering and a longing to return to their homeland. The genocide is therefore still an identity issue. The memory of the massacres and deportations played an important role in the Armenian nationalist movement, if only for mythmaking.

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The genocide has had a profound effect on the political elite and the general public: most of all it sensitized Armenians to their identities.63

Whereas this seems obvious for most Armenians who grew up as Armenians, it also holds true for those descendants of the genocide who were brought up Turkish or Kurdish. The case of Fethiye Çetin, a lawyer from a Muslim family in Eastern Turkey, is instructive. The memoir she wrote disclosed her Armenian grandmother’s roots and offered a textbook example of conversion, rescue and survival during the genocide. Çetin notes that her grandmother was saved because she accepted conversion. Muslim villagers were only interested in sheltering Armenian children who either had already converted or were willing to convert.64 In a later interview Çetin said she lived in the twilight zone between Turkishness, Kurdishness and Armenian-ness, in the margins of ethnicity and nationality. She also remembered that, after having found out about her roots, she now understood why her grandmother used to bake a special sweet bread during the spring with other women outside the family: they were female genocide survivors, celebrating Easter.65 The converts were often supported in their solidarity: after the 1915 genocide it was common for Kurdish chieftains to invest time and effort to locate Armenian converts, in the hope they could find spouses among them and continue their custom of endogamy. For Kurds and Armenians alike, this represented the established tradition and the security of the ancien régime.

Those Armenians who survived the genocide gradually became Muslims, but kept a sense of Armenian self-awareness under the surface of their public Sunni-Turkish identity: they were called ‘crypto-Armenians’, in Turkish and Armenian known as ‘hidden Armenians’ (gizli Ermeniler/թաքուն հայեր). After the publication of Çetin’s book in 2004, the fate of these crypto-Armenians in Turkey became politicized even further. Both Armenian and Turkish nationalists competed for the loyalty of this group, which found itself besieged by identity politics.66 Whereas the former wished to ‘wake them up’ from Islam and urge them to reclaim their dormant Armenian identity, the latter intransigently declared that, if they wished to return to their Armenian roots, they were no longer welcome in Turkey.67 There are an unknown

64 Fethiye Çetin, Annaennem (Istanbul: Metis 2004).
67 Crypto-Armenians have even been openly threatened by the Turkish Historical Society, the Kemalist official producer of nationalist historical narratives. Its director, Yusuf Halaçoğlu, went as far as stating that he had in his possession a ‘list’ of names, ‘house by house’, of crypto-Armenians living in Turkey, claiming he would not hesitate to
number of crypto-Armenians currently living in Turkey. The numbers range from Hrant Dink’s estimate of 300,000 to the Turkish Historical Society’s 500,000, to the Armenian Revolutionary Federation-Dashnaktsutuyn’s figure of two million.68 Whereas they possess varying degrees of awareness of and interest in their past, what is certain is that most of them are concerned that exposure would make them vulnerable to nationalist pressures and threats.69

The Internet has provided a convenient, anonymous platform for assembling information and reaching out to family members abroad. On the website www.hyetert.com, for example, aimed at the Armenian community of Istanbul, one can frequently observe messages like the following:

I have a request for you. Nigar Metin, born 1894, mother’s name Hilito, father’s name Casper, registered to Hizan district in Bitlis province is my grandmother. I just found these records. With your help I would like to reach my family members.—Haydar Y., 1 November 2005

I live in Mut district in Mersin province. My grandmother is also here. Her mother is an Armenian from Kayseri. Her name is Sofia and it is known she moved to Istanbul. Where can I find information about her?—Ulaş Ş., 3 October 2005

I am descended from our fellow Armenian citizens who used to live in the Niksar Cedid neighborhood (Madur Sokak) in Tokat between 1900 and 1915 and have migrated elsewhere. My grandmother’s name was Oski (Altun), her father’s Mevzik, and her mother’s Anna. My grandmother had 4 siblings. We don’t know her sister’s name. Her brothers were named Karapet and Murat. Unfortunately we don’t know their last name. We know they were involved in trade and they owned a store with a depot below. I would like to request anyone who is related to the above persons, or knows them, or has information to please write me an e-mail and contact me.—Nihat S. E., 15 February 200570

Although generations have passed since the genocide, traumatic family memories seem to persist and, apparently, many feel the need to fill in the gaps in their self-narrative.71

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70 Quoted in Erhan Başyurt, Ermeni Evlatlıklar: Saklı Kalmış Hayatlar (İstanbul: KaraKutu 2006), 30–1.

71 For a collection of life stories, see Altnay and Çetin, Torunlar.
Symbols of silence

This article has discussed how two successive Turkish nationalist regimes erased the violence of the past by means of the politics of memory that they pursued during their dictatorships. By assigning a new identity for the country, the Young Turks and Kemalists also needed to construct a new memory for it. During the 1920s and especially 1930s, their treatment of the past ranged from the organization of forgetting with regard to traumatic events to the construction of an official narrative that included heroic and timeless images of the nation. Throughout the country, but particularly in the eastern provinces, orders were given to write new local histories. These official textbooks, nationalist canons and city histories did not only impose a broad silence on critical historical issues, they also banished all ethnic minorities from (regional) histories. The significance of Kemalist hegemony in memory politics cannot be overestimated. In a peasant society in which illiteracy figures were as high as 80 per cent, official texts were not only the first ones the population would read, they were also the only ones widely available to the population. The organization of a hegemonic canon through exclusion and inclusion aimed at the formation of a closed circuit of knowledge. This precluded the possibilities of a participatory memory or identity formation, especially in the eastern provinces. The regime warded off both external penetration and internal criticism of its belief system by banning and destroying texts on a scale perhaps only matched by the Soviet dictatorship. ‘Turkishness’ was measured by the level of exposure to that body of knowledge: subsequent studies of cities and regions were to quote the ‘classics’ of Young Turk and Kemalist historiography in order to be considered ‘scientific’ enough to be allowed publication.

Much like the genocide itself, the denial of a traumatic past was part of a larger campaign, namely to exorcise all violence from the memory of society. This imposition of collective amnesia on Turkish society was a double-edged sword. The Young Turks never commemorated or memorialized the massive tragedy of their expulsion from the Balkans but chose to move on and look towards the future. Here, too, silences were imposed on society: no sane Turk in the 1930s would have dared to call Mustafa Kemal a refugee, which he nonetheless became when the Ottoman Empire lost his home town Salonica to Greece in November 1912. Moreover, interwar Turks were not allowed to perceive the inhabitants of Macedonia or Epirus as their contemporaries the way Germans viewed East Prussia or the Sudetenland. There still is relatively little nostalgic tourism and official Turkish nationalism in principle excludes

claims on territories beyond the borders of the Republic. It remains a challenge to describe this process of amnesia and explain why it was the case.

The most powerful symbol of the silences imposed during the Young Turk era must be the strongly fortified citadel in the northeastern corner of Diyarbakır city. Many urbanites and neighbouring peasants revere this ancient redoubt as one of the most important historical monuments of their nation. The stronghold stands on a small elevation overlooking a meander in the Tigris river. It is impressive if only because of its position: both the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic built their state apparatus in the compound to instil a sense of enduring deference. Anyone who comes here, enticed by one or another historical narrative, is at least vaguely familiar with Diyarbakır’s record of violence and assumes that that history is asleep within these dark, crumbling walls. The compound shelters the governorship, the provincial court and most notably the infamous Diyarbakır prison.

The latter building might be considered the single most significant landmark of mass violence in Diyarbakır: in it, Bulgarian revolutionaries were incarcerated in the late nineteenth century, many dozens of Armenian elites were tortured and murdered in 1915, Shaikh Said and his men were sentenced and executed in 1925, various left-wing activists and Kurdish nationalists were kept and subjected to torture during the junta regime following the 1980 military coup, and PKK members were tortured and frequently killed in the 1990s. Up to the year 2000 it housed the security forces of the Turkish war machine including paramilitary intelligence operatives and special counter-guerrilla militias. In the summer of 2007, the area had been cleared of security forces in order to convert it into an open-air ‘Atatürk museum’. However, during the excavations, in January 2012, the archaeological team stumbled on large pits of human bones. Kurdish rights groups immediately claimed the dead were missing Kurdish activists of the 1980s, but forensic research unequivocally demonstrated that the bones were approximately a century old. On a balance of probabilities, the bones belong to Armenian elites murdered in the spring of 1915.74 The pro-Kurdish municipal authorities then decided to build a ‘citadel museum’ on the site, including mention of the violence that was committed there.

This was not the first scandal of mass graves in Turkey. The memory of the genocide exists physically in the many mass graves that dot the region. In 2006 a mass grave was discovered by Kurdish villagers in the southeast of Mardin province. When diaspora Armenians called for forensic research, the grave was promptly destroyed by the Turkish army and gendarme forces.75 Another example is Istanbul’s former central prison, the Ibrahim Paşa Sarayı in the centre of the city. Armenian elites who had been arrested on 24 April 1915 were incarcerated and tortured here, and deported to Anatolia to be

murdered. Survivor memoirs even describe the tree that still stands in its courtyard. The prison was later turned into the Türk ve İslam Eserleri Müzesi (Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts). These accounts of Turkey’s ‘lieux de silence’ reflect the country’s century of violence. In countless sites like these, the violence is not mentioned in any way. Most of all, nothing reminds us of the victims who were killed there, which makes it impossible for the descendants to mourn them. The future of the Turkish past remains silent.

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76 For the official website of the museum, see www.tiem.gov.tr (viewed 20 February 2014).
77 For the situation in Russia, see Nanci Adler, ‘The future of the Soviet past remains unpredictable: the resurrection of Stalinist symbols amidst the exhumation of mass graves’, Europe-Asia Studies, vol. 57, no. 8, 2005, 1093–119.