

## Reading 8 — REMEMBRANCE AND DENIAL

Even at the very beginning of the Armenian Genocide, plans were already under way to distort the facts about the massacres.<sup>143</sup> The posthumous release of Talaat's memoirs set a pattern of rationalization and deflection of responsibility that has continued into the twenty-first century. After the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 effectively ended all talk of the "Armenian Question," Turkey concentrated on building a modern state and used all means to suppress any memory or mention of the genocide. Mustafa Kemal Pasha, who took the name Atatürk—father of the Turks, was the leader of the new Turkish Republic and insisted that there had been no systematic mass murder of the Armenians. The Allied Powers remained silent in the face of the historical revisionism. United in their anti-Communism, they viewed Atatürk's Turkey as a strategic ally against the newly formed Soviet Union, which had come to include what was left of historic Armenia. At the same time, all efforts of the immediate postwar Turkish government to prosecute war criminals for brutalities against Armenians were forgotten; records were buried in the archives and closed off to scholars unsympathetic to the new Turkish policy of denial.

Deniers and revisionists have used many different strategies and many different arguments while attempting to turn what was everyday knowledge into myth. By the 1960s, deniers hoped to take advantage of a climate of openness. They argued that teachers, journalists, and public officials should "tell the other side of the story." At the same time, deniers worked to censor United Nations reports by blocking mention of the genocide and by countering resolutions in the United States that would have recognized April 24 as a national day of remembrance of the Armenian Genocide.<sup>144</sup>

In the 1980s, deniers expanded their work to universities and other academic institutions. In 1982, a grant from the Turkish government helped to create the Institute of Turkish Studies in Washington, D.C. At the time of its inception through 1994, the Institute's executive director was Dr. Heath Lowry. Through his work at the institute, Lowry advised the Turkish ambassador to the United States about the work being done by scholars of the Armenian Genocide. The ambassador, in turn, used his position to intimidate authors who dared write about the genocide. It is possible that nobody would have found out if Lowry's notes to the ambassador hadn't ended up in a letter mailed to Robert Jay Lifton, author of *The Nazi Doctors*.<sup>145</sup>

Lifton, a prominent psychiatrist and historian whose work often investigates the roots of violence, wrote about the Armenian Genocide in his book about doctors who participated in the Holocaust. Lowry's letter tried to refute Lifton's scholarship on the Armenian Genocide by concentrating on his footnotes. Lowry wrote to the ambassador, "our problem is less with Lifton than it is with the works upon which he relies. Lifton is simply the end of the chain."<sup>146</sup> Lowry drafted a letter to Lifton for the ambassador to sign, declaring: "I was shocked by references in your work . . . to the so-called 'Armenian Genocide,' allegedly perpetrated by the Ottoman Turks during the First World War."<sup>147</sup> By accident, Lifton received both the memo and the draft letter, and a letter from the ambassador that was almost a word for word copy of Lowry's draft.

Lifton and his colleagues questioned why. Why do deniers deny a history that is overwhelmingly supported by historical evidence, including primary sources, eyewitness accounts, testimony of the perpetrators, survivor recollections, convictions in post-war Turkish courts, and physical evidence? Lifton wondered if it is possible that the deniers believe their own distortions and considered what it means if they do not. Were they denying the genocide simply to advance their careers? In an article examining the ethics of denial, Lifton and his colleagues wrote:

*“Careerism” is a complicated phenomenon, but for our purposes we would identify two forms ... that it may take: one that is oriented toward material goals, and one that involves the satisfactions that go with power. Both share the “thoughtlessness” that Hannah Arendt saw as the essence of the “banality of evil”: an imaginative blindness that prevents one from reflecting upon the consequences from one’s actions. . . . Arendt also speaks of a “willed evil,” and the second type of careerism is not far removed from this: not simply the obliviousness to hurt, but the calculated infliction of hurt.<sup>148</sup>*

In 1998, Lifton was one of more than a hundred prominent scholars who signed a petition circulated by Peter Balakian as an effort to counter denial efforts by commemorating the genocide and deploring the Turkish government’s denial of this “crime against humanity.”

*Denial of genocide strives to reshape history in order to demonize the victims and rehabilitate the perpetrators. Denial of genocide is the final stage of genocide. It is what Elie Wiesel has called a “double killing.” Denial murders the dignity of the survivors and seeks to destroy remembrance of the crime. In a century plagued by genocide, we affirm the moral necessity of remembering.<sup>149</sup>*

## CONNECTIONS

❖ Why do you think the Turkish government has invested so much money and energy in denying the reality of the Armenian Genocide? What does it require of a nation to face the truth of its past errors? What actions can nations take to face their own histories of collective violence and genocide?

**A petition signed by prominent scholars commemorating the Genocide.**



Courtesy of the Armenian National Institute

- What are the ways in which individuals can respond to denial? What options does a prominent scholar like Lifton have that aren't available to the average citizen?
- In the past, denial efforts have prevented some public recognition of the Armenian Genocide, but at the same time scholars have continued to study the history and write about it. Are there ways to measure the impact of denial? What would they be?
- Lifton and his colleagues, Smith and Markusen, suggest reasons why people might deny the Armenian Genocide. Can you think of others?
- Lifton and his colleagues write that behind some denial there is “the ‘thoughtlessness’ that Hannah Arendt saw as the essence of the ‘banality of evil’: an imaginative blindness that prevents one from reflecting upon the consequences of one’s actions.” What do they mean? Do you agree?
- What is the difference between the “thoughtlessness” of banal evil and “willed evil”? Do the differences alter the action or simply the motivation behind them? Who do you find more responsible, someone who is thoughtless or someone who acts intentionally? Who is more dangerous?
- The authors of the petition wrote that “in a century plagued by genocide” there is a “moral necessity of remembering.” What makes something a moral necessity?
- The scholars and writers who signed the statement believe that “denial is the final stage of genocide.” What does denial accomplish? For whom?
- Why is it important to acknowledge past atrocities? How can acknowledgement of injustice influence victims, perpetrators, bystanders, and their descendents?
- The Turkish government attempts to resist official recognition of the Armenian Genocide. Despite that pressure, a growing number of countries now formally recognize the history. The United States is not one of them. In the fall of 2000, the House Foreign Relations Committee approved a resolution acknowledging the Armenian Genocide and sent it to the full House for a vote. The State Department and the Clinton Administration prevented the resolution from coming to a vote in the face of threatened military and economic retaliation from the Turkish government, and this was repeated in the administration of George W. Bush. What would acknowledging the genocide accomplish? Is the decision to formally recognize the genocide a moral or a political decision?



Refer to *Facing History and Ourselves Holocaust and Human Behavior* for a story about U.S. Senator Robert Dole's efforts to bring attention to the Armenian Genocide.

## Reading ? ↪ DENIAL, FREE SPEECH, AND HATE SPEECH

Scholar and philosophy professor Henry Theriault believes that denial of the Armenian Genocide is tantamount to hate speech. Theriault explains:

*In recent decades, the international denial campaign has intensified in reaction to growing calls for acknowledgement of and restitution for the genocide. Beyond activities by diplomatic leaders and staff, the Turkish government since the 1960s has spent millions of dollars in the United States on denialist public relations and political lobbying. The Turkish government and its supporters have also funded chairs at prestigious United States universities awarded to prominent deniers. Typical denial arguments contend that documentation of the genocide is inconclusive, biased, or falsified, that the genocide was actually a civil war or mutual conflict in which the Turks were also killed and for which Armenians likewise bear responsibility; or that Armenian deaths in 1915 and after were not the result of a deliberate, centrally-orchestrated extermination program.*

*In the United States and elsewhere, Armenian organizations and activists as well as comparative genocide, Holocaust, and Armenian Studies scholars have done much to teach the public about this tragedy. Yet, active denial backed by political blackmail has blocked general recognition and restitution.<sup>150</sup>*

Theriault believes that academic and historical openness have created a climate of relativism, in which all versions of the past are treated as equally valid. This, he argues, has contributed to a failure to recognize the serious consequences of denial on Armenian individuals and on the Armenian community and has played into the hands of those that willfully deny the historical facts. “Academic relativism,” as Theriault understands it, “is the belief that any viewpoint held by a scholar declaring expertise is automatically a credible perspective.”<sup>151</sup> Deniers, then, are able to claim expertise and despite the overwhelming documentation of the genocide, relativists “retreat into a neutrality that accepts all parties to the ‘debate’ as equally worthy simply by their status as academics. As a consequence, they avoid the Armenian Question in teaching and writing because they believe the history uncertain, or they promote in their classrooms and other forums a two-sided approach that validates denial.”<sup>152</sup> Furthermore, their attitude influences other researchers and educators.

Theriault notes: “At its most extreme, academic relativism takes the form of historical relativism. Historical relativists believe that, where there are competing versions of historical periods or events, there is no ultimate fact of the matter. Each perspective or side is as accurate as the other.” This is a problem because people often fail to consider the overwhelming evidence. As Theriault reminds us: “There is a wealth of it [evidence] showing unequivocally that the Turkish government carried out a premeditated, centrally-planned, systematic program to exterminate its Armenian subjects. A properly critical attitude would distinguish between the failure to be aware of compelling evidence because one has not investigated the issue adequately and a genuine shortfall of evidence.”<sup>153</sup>

In the meantime, denial has consequences. Theriault reasons that “deniers are ‘accessories after the fact of genocide,’ who have so far prevented an international political and legal process affirming the genocide, requiring appropriate restitution, and curbing further Turkish mistreatment of Armenians.”<sup>154</sup> One outgrowth of the failure is that people in Turkey are able to reap benefit from the land and money claimed from victims of the Armenian Genocide. There is also psychological harm that the genocide and its subsequent denial caused the victims, their descendents, and the larger Armenian community, as well as the impact on individual identity that is caused by preventing people from being able to properly mourn the dead. Professor Theriault writes: “Deniers operate as agents of the original perpetrators [of the genocide], pursuing and hounding victims through time. Through these agents, the perpetrators reach once again into the lives of the victims long after their escape from the perpetrators’ physical grasp.”<sup>155</sup>

Deniers have disrupted efforts to commemorate the Armenian Genocide and hounded those that tried to speak about the genocide publicly. Theriault notes that often these deniers hide behind the First Amendment.

*Deniers often complain that their free speech rights are suppressed when their views do not appear alongside published statements about the genocide or if in public forums these statements are given more attention than denialist claims. Such protests distort the meaning of freedom of speech. The right does not guarantee access to the podium during a discussion of the genocide, publication of a response to a newspaper or scholarly article on the genocide, or automatic inclusion of denial sources next to information on the genocide in school curricula.*



Project SAVE Armenian Photograph Archives, Inc., Courtesy of James Tashjian

**New York City, Fifth Avenue at 42nd Street, April 24, 1975. Armenian Martyrs’ Day; Armenians march in front of the New York Public Library.**

Professor Theriault argues that until the harm done by denial is stopped, there should be regulation of denial based on current regulations that restrict hate speech. Theriault proposes:

*Legal restriction of public dissemination of denial of the Armenian Genocide would entail a law barring denial and setting penalties for it or authorizing civil suits against deniers. The law need not determine particular statements to be counted as denial but rather offer general guidelines for determining this. Because universities, colleges, scholarly associations, and sometimes school systems have greater latitude in setting limits in hate speech than Congress or a lower-level legislature, they could ban denial in the absence of laws doing so. . . . Crucial for anyone found guilty of denial would be an order to cease and desist. A just remedy would in addition require a statement affirming the genocide as a historical fact.*<sup>156</sup>

## CONNECTIONS

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- Theriault writes: “At its most extreme, academic relativism takes the form of historical relativism.” What is relativism? How is relativism different than being open to other possibilities?
- According to Theriault, what are the consequences of denial?
- Create a working definition for the term “hate speech.” How is hate speech different from a matter of opinion? How does Theriault compare hate speech and genocide denial?
- Theriault and others believe that “academic relativists” become bystanders while denial does real harm to individuals and the larger society. Revisit your definition of bystander. What arguments could be made to support Theriault’s claim that academic relativists are bystanders?
- What is the purpose of a debate? What ground rules are useful to ensure that a debate leads to understanding? Do deniers follow those rules?
- How can educators validate multiple points of view without creating an atmosphere in which every comment is understood as equally true?
- What arguments does Theriault use to make the case for prohibiting denial? What other arguments would you add? Does his proposal raise concerns for you? What are they? Create a structured debate of Professor Theriault’s proposal in your class. First agree on some ground rules. Divide the class into three groups. One group should brainstorm arguments in support of Theriault’s proposal. Another should brainstorm arguments against the proposal. The third group, the judges, should try to work on a rubric to score the debate.