Brown’s Slavery and Justice Report chooses knee-jerk condemnation over objective analysis.

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Guest Columnists

For centuries - longer than the lifetime of modern United States - the Christian and the Muslim population of the Ottoman Empire had lived peacefully in Anatolia. However, with the decline of Ottoman rule, nationalistic movements began to tear the Empire apart. In the 19th and early 20th century, the Balkan nations gained independence, and with considerable help from European and Russian interventions, relations between Muslims and Christian Armenians in modern-day eastern Turkey began to degenerate. Many aspects of this history still need to be enlightened through objective studies; however, many historians agree that, during World War I, the Armenian population in Eastern Anatolia rose in an armed revolt in alliance with Russia, the enemy of the Ottomans in the War. This revolt was viewed as a security threat and the Empire ordered a forced relocation of Armenians from the region. During the relocation process, hundreds of thousands of Armenians were killed by famine, epidemics or by attacks from Muslim gangs and some corrupted policemen out for booty. The Turkish Government, together with many international historians, refuses the contention that these unfortunate events represented an organized, one-sided "genocide" such as what took place recently in Rwanda. The debate surrounding this issue – whether or not the word “genocide” should be used to describe the killings – is very sensitive for both ethnic Turks and Armenians.

An observant mind can realize an interesting connection between the debate surrounding these killings, the recent Nobel Prize recipient Orhan Pamuk’s visit to Brown and the recent Slavery and Justice Report. The middle section of the Report proposes the killings of Armenians during World War I as an undeniable example of genocide, while Pamuk had recently talked about these killings in an interview, and, as emphasized many times by the press, he “faced potential jail time” in Turkey as a result.

This contributed to his image as a repressed writer, making him seem like a perfect participant of the Freedom-to-Write Literary Festival at Brown. However, unlike the other participants of the Festival, none of Pamuk’s books have been banned, nor has he ever been imprisoned. On the contrary, he has been one of the best-selling authors in Turkey. As for the “potential jail time”, Pamuk was indeed charged under the controversial Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code, but his trial never started; the court dropped it under a technicality (undoubtedly a result of immense popular opposition).

Turkey’s Article 301, which is also mentioned in the Slavery and Justice Report, is often misrepresented or misunderstood. The Article does not specifically forbid
talking about the Armenian killings or terming them genocide. It forbids “public
denigration of Turkishness,” and since it is vaguely worded, it becomes subject to be
misused by zealous prosecutors in cases such as Pamuk’s. Criticisms of such misuses
and the anti-democratic nature of the article have followed deservedly from both
Turkish and international society.

However, it should be clarified that no one in Turkey has been put into prison for
terminng Armenian killings as “genocide” based on Article 301. On the contrary,
despite Pamuk’s claims that no one except him talks about the killings, the genocide
claim is being debated among Turkish scholars just like it is in other countries.

Ironically, some exemplary democracies such as Switzerland and France are
passing legislation to specifically ban the freedom to say that the Armenian killings
were not genocide. Other countries, like Canada and Belgium, have passed resolutions
to officially recognize the events as “genocide”.

This political campaign is absurd given the fact that there is no consensus among
historians regarding the issue. Distinguished scholars of Ottoman history like Roderic
Davison, J.C. Hurewitz, Bernard Lewis, and Guenter Lewy, among many others, have
rejected the genocide label for the atrocities committed in Eastern Anatolia during
World War I. Moreover, in the United States, historical scholars mobilized in 1985
against a similar Armenian Genocide Resolution proposed by politicians in the House
of Representatives. Over 60 American academicians who specialize in Turkish,
Ottoman and Middle Eastern studies from prominent universities such as Princeton,
Columbia and UCLA wrote a letter to the House, which was simultaneously published
in New York Times:

“As for the charge of ‘genocide’ no signatory of this statement wishes to minimize
the scope of Armenian suffering… throughout the years in question, the [Eastern
Anatolian] region was the scene of more or less continuous warfare, not unlike the
tragedy which has gone on in Lebanon for the past decade. The resulting death toll
among both Muslim and Christian communities of the region was immense. But much
more remains to be discovered before historians will be able to sort out precisely…the
[nature of] the events which resulted in the death or removal of large numbers of the
eastern Anatolian population, Christian and Muslim alike.”.

One of the authors of this letter, Stanford Shaw, was threatened by a bomb attack
to his house in 1977 by an Armenian terrorist group. Armenian fanatics did not hesitate
to use terror during the 1970s and 1980s in an attempt to force Turkey to accept the
term “genocide” and agree to land reparations. Unfortunately, a total of 41 people lost
their lives in over 200 terrorist attacks in 20 countries as a direct result of this
campaign.

It is naive to think that proponents of the genocide theory are engaged in a mere
quest for truth, given the fact that historical debate is being stifled and Turkey’s
attempts to engage in this debate are being turned down. As recently as March, 2005,
Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan invited the Armenian Government to establish a joint commission of Turkish, Armenian and international historians to investigate archives of all related countries and sort out the true nature of the events that took place. The offer was rejected – by Armenia.

Ironically, the Slavery and Justice Report dedicates a good portion of its volume to such “Truth Commissions” and counts them as a rubric of reparative justice. However, for some reason the Report never mentions Turkey’s invitations but claims she’s in constant denial.

It is rather disappointing that in a report prepared by academics of Brown University in the name of truth and justice, the debate surrounding this issue – and Turkey’s attempts to investigate it objectively – has been ignored completely.

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