

## [The Armenian Genocide: Eighty Years Later](#)

Author : Jacob Thomas on Oct 22, 2006 - 01:33 PM

Two events recently brought back to the news headlines the subject of the Armenian Genocide during WWI, which Turkey with its negationist stand, seeks to dismiss the role of the Ottoman Empire in perpetrating that horrific crime. First, the projected law being discussed in the French National Assembly that would make it a crime to deny the Armenian Genocide. The second event was the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk's receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature. He had broken with Turkish tradition, and dared to discuss the Armenian Genocide in his writings.

I would like to quote from some Arab and Western media that dealt with this topic. Some severe criticisms have been levelled at the Turkish Government in articles on the online daily Arabic newspaper, *Elaph*. Here are excerpts from one article dated 12 October, 2006:

*"When Erdogan, the Turkish Prime Minister declared as 'unwise' the proposal of the French Parliament to make the denial of the Armenian Genocide punishable as a crime, both he and his government bore the moral responsibility of justifying that great crime. What wisdom is there, when an heir of the Ottoman Caliphate, continues in his denial of a horrific and well-known truth, which has been covered-up in Turkey's modern history?"*

*"It was around these days, eighty years ago exactly, that the Ottoman Army was bragging about the one and only victory it achieved during WWI, namely the elimination of the Armenian subjects within their great state! That army, that was facing one defeat after another on all fronts, resorted to the wholesale murder of the Armenian people: infants, women, old and unarmed men, they were all massacred. Furthermore, the **Firman**\* that launched the Armenian Genocide was extended to include other Christian subjects of the Ottoman Empire: Assyrians, Syrians, Greeks, and others.*

*"It may sound strange that successive Turkish governments have insisted on denying the crime of the Armenian Genocide. However, the chauvinistic Turkish temperament is responsible for this attitude. Neither the secular Kemalists\*\*, nor the Westernized liberals, nor the conservative Islamists, tend to differ on this national question, namely their refusal to confess that great crime. For such a confession would force them to acknowledge the 'artificial' nature of the Turkish 'identity' or 'essence' which has been based on the historic denial of the legitimate rights of all other nationalities: Greeks, Armenians, Kurds, Assyrians, Luz, and Arabs. It would be impossible for Turkish politicians to follow the example of their German friends who boldly acknowledged and confessed the Jewish Holocaust. I say 'impossible,' due to the racist nature of Turkish politics vis-à-vis the just claims of the various nationalities that seek to be recognized; especially, the Kurds. It should be remembered that the Turkish Republic, which is formally a secular state, and is ready to join the EU, that lofty bastion of civilization, continues its war against the Kurds. It uses such a flimsy pretext, namely that it is*

*fighting terrorism and secession.”*

Then, on Sunday 15 October, the same writer returned to the subject of Turkey’s negationism, and wrote an article with the title, “**Orhan Pamuk and the Turkish Ambiguity**” He deplored the “*attempt of many circles in the Arab world who claimed that the Nobel Prize in Literature that was given this year to the Turkish novelist, Orhan Pamuk, was motivated by certain political considerations. After all, he has been critical of his government and nation for their unwillingness to seriously face their past.*

*“In the past, Arabs lamented the fact that they had been ignored or by-passed by the Nobel Committee; yet when it granted Naguib Mahfoudh, in the late 1980s, the Prize in Literature, many did not welcome that decision. Mahfoudh was charged with selling out the ‘Arab Cause.’*

*“Regardless of the uproar that Pamuk’s book has caused, we may consider his literary work as having incarnated what may be described as the ‘**Turkish Ambiguity.**’ He has sought to bring to the foreground the variety of cultures, customs, and traditions, which exist in his country. However, this variety is denied and is considered unacceptable by the Kemalist\*\* ideological mentality that guides Turkish society, which presupposes its unitary nationality, and its exclusive and unique [Turkish] culture.*

*“But here is a country with its many ethnic and cultural groups, geographically Asian, Islamic in identity; and yet, it is doing its utmost to flatter and impress Europe, in order to gain primarily economic and political advantages. What chance for such a country to enter the Promised Heaven (the European Union) while its political system, its culture, and its mentality, are vacillating between an Atatürkian, \*\*\* semi-fascistic ideology, and a semi-Ottoman ideology whose authority would rest on an assumed Divine source?!”*

For those readers who read Classical Arabic, please consult:

[Arabic Article 1](#)

[Arabic Article 2](#)

Turning now to the Western media, The Wall Street Journal carried on 13 October, two items on Orhan Pamuk. One was in its REVIEW & OUTLOOK section, and the other dealt with the text of an interview with the Turkish novelist. First, here are excerpts from the article on the editorial page, entitled **Pamuk the Provocative:**

*“The Swedish Academy has shown it’s once again plugged into the Zeitgeist by awarding the Nobel Prize for Literature to Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk. The award might be better named the Nobel Prize for Most Provocative Public Intellectual.*

*“In an interview with the Journal last December, Mr. Pamuk said he believed in a “liberal outlook” in which democracy, Western freedoms and Islam are compatible. But as his life and work bear out, clashes are inevitable. ‘Snow’ (2002), which he called ‘my first and last political novel,’ explored the violent assault of political Islam on Turkey’s rigid secular order. Three years later, ultra-nationalists persecuted Mr. Pamuk for*

*speaking out against Turkey's historical amnesia about the 1915 massacre of Armenians; the charges of 'insulting Turkishness' were later dropped.*

*"In Mr. Pamuk's vision of a free Muslim society, space exists for religious conservatives, nationalists and Westernized people like himself. He rejects attempts by Islamists and Kemalists alike to impose their order by force, and sees in Turkey's attempts to join the European Union protection against both camps. Still, the overriding tone of his work is melancholy and betrays doubts about whether his open Muslim state can ever be."*

URL for the full text is: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB116068910850391171.html>

## **Analysis**

Much as Turkey has tried to make the world forget about the Armenian Genocide, events out of its control conspire to bring the topic back into world public opinion. Thanks to the Nobel Prize Committee's choice of Orhan Pamuk to be the recipient of the Prize in Literature, and the French Parliamentary committee working on a proposal to make denial of the Armenian Genocide a crime, the subject is being widely discussed, both in Islamic and Western countries.

The article in the Elaph mentioned above, dealt with more than a historical tragedy; it drew attention to what it termed as the "*chauvinistic Turkish temperament*" that makes it impossible for any Turkish government to admit the direct involvement of Ottoman Turkey in that genocide. It also pointed to the fact that such admission would inevitably "*force them to acknowledge the 'artificial' nature of the Turkish 'identity' or 'essence' which has been based on the historic denial of the legitimate rights of all other nationalities: Greeks, Armenians, Kurds, Assyrians, Luz, and Arabs*"

This is a very important point to stress: The Turkish Republic, since its establishment after WWI, has in fact included many non-Turkish nationalities; but it has persisted to deny their existence, and worked hard on their Turkification. This explains why Turkey denies the existence of the Kurds in the eastern parts of the country, labeling them as "**Eastern Turks.**"

## **Comments**

Nowadays, Armenians live scattered around the world. They are found in independent Armenia, in the Middle East, in Greece and France, and in the United States. Their existence in these areas allows them to keep the memory of the murder of their ancestors alive. They are not asking for reparations; they simply want Turkey to acknowledge the reality and historicity of the planned massacre of a million and a half Armenians. But Turkey persists in its denial, and there is no chance that it will accede to the demands of justice, as the country moves steadily from its semi-democratic position, to being a pro-Islamist country.

I would like to take this occasion, when the world is pondering Turkey's stubborn refusal to face its past, to open an older and perhaps forgotten dossier: the treatment of the

**Christians of the Balkans by the Ottomans.** Most Westerners, even those who consider themselves well-educated in world history, may not be familiar with such an evil institution as the *Devshirme*. For almost three hundred years, the Ottoman Turks levelled a heavy tax on the people of the Balkans. It was not to be paid for by gold or silver; but by young boys who were taken away from their parents, Islamized, and enrolled in the infamous corps of the **Janissaries**. Can you imagine the unending and unbearable sufferings of their parents as they remembered their “flesh and blood” being carted away by heartless Turkish soldiers, never to be seen again?

Not only the **Armenian Genocide** must be confessed, but equally the **Devshirme Tax**, must be acknowledged as having left deep wounds in the lives of Serbs, Croats, Greeks, and other nationalities that lived in Eastern and Central Europe under Ottoman rule.

But why should I stop at asking Turkey to recognize what its parent, Ottoman Turkey, did to the Armenians, and other Christians that came within the orbit of its vast Empire? Why don't I go on and remind Muslims to acknowledge as well, that their ancestors engaged in the most drastic form of colonialism and imperialism? After all, European colonialism, flawed and brutal as it was in many instances, came to an end. Europe's colonies, as one writer put it, were all “**over-seas.**” So, when the British ended their colonial rule in India, they packed and went home. But Islamic colonialism, with some exceptions, has been final, and irreversible. And yet, I am intrigued, even offended to no end, when I read unending denunciations of “*imberialiyya*” and “*salibiyya*” (crusader) in the Arab Press. As if their ancestors never engaged in this expansionist game; or more likely, as if only Islam possessed a divine right to expand by force!

I am not optimistic about the near future. As a descendent of a people who suffered 400 years of Ottoman imperialism, I have also experienced in my young days, what it was to lose my home to an expansionist Kemalist Turkey. In “**Pamuk the Provocative,**” the author mused: “*In Mr. Pamuk's vision of a free Muslim society, space exists for religious conservatives, nationalists and Westernized people like himself.*” I am sorry that the winner of the Nobel Prize failed to realize that the space for liberals and non-Turks is fast disappearing.

I would like to end with excerpts from an excellent article by Michael Rubin, published in The Wall Street Journal on 19 October, 2006, “**Mr. Erdogan's Turkey.**”

*“The future of Turkey as a secular, Western-oriented state is at risk. Just as in Gaza and Lebanon, the threat comes from parties using the rhetoric of democracy to advance distinctly undemocratic agendas. Turkey has overcome past challenges from terrorism and radical Islam; always its system has persevered. But now, as Turkish politicians and officials work to defend the Turkish constitution, U.S. diplomats interfere to dismiss Turkish concerns and downplay the Islamist threat.*”

*“When Mr. Erdogan began his political career, he did not hide his agenda. In September 1994, while mayor of Istanbul, he promised, ‘We will turn all our schools into Imam Hatips. \*\*\*\*’ Two months later he said, ‘Thank God Almighty, I am a servant of the*

*Shariah.* In May 1996, he called for a ban on alcohol. In the months before his dismissal from the mayoralty, his cynicism was clear. 'Democracy is like a streetcar,' he quipped. 'You ride it until you arrive at your destination and then you step off.'

*"Diplomacy should not just accentuate the positive and ignore the negative. When a country faces an Islamist challenge, PC platitudes do far more harm than good. At the very least, U.S. diplomats should never intercede to preserve the status quo at the expense of liberalism. Nor should they even appear to endorse a political party as an established democracy enters an election season. It is not good relations with Ankara that should be the U.S. goal, but rather the triumph of the democratic and liberal ideas for which Turkey traditionally stands."*

I suggest that you read the entire article; its URL is:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB116121690776497100.html>

**\*Firman:** An edict published by the Sultan (Caliph) of Ottoman Turkey. It served as an imperial law that must be enforced by the representatives of the Sultan throughout the provinces of the empire.

**\*\*Kemalist:** An adjective derived from Kemal; it signifies following in the footsteps of the founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustapha Kemal.

**\*\*\*Ataturkian:** An adjective derived from *Ataturk (Father of the Turks)*; this honorary title was given to *Mustapha Kemal*.

**\*\*\*\*Hatip:** A Turkish word derived from the Arabic, *Khatib*, a Muslim preacher, an *Imam* of a Sunni mosque.