



By Maria Koinova

The centennial of the 1915 Armenian genocide has gained global attention during the past month. One hundred years ago on April 24, the Young Turk regime of the collapsing Ottoman Empire started to round up and either eventually massacre or expose to an imminent death in the Syrian desert an estimated 800,000 to 1.5 million Armenians. One hundred years later, the Armenian genocide is recognized as such by the European Parliament, the parliaments or governments of 23 countries, among numerous key institutions and political figures, such as Pope Francis of the Catholic Church. But it is still officially denied as “genocide” by the successor state of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey, despite a growing movement for genocide recognition within its own civil society.

The centennial commemorations raise questions beyond much discussed concerns as to whether demands for genocide recognition will help Armenia and Turkey to improve their politically stalled relationship, and whether genocide recognition needs to be a pre-condition for Turkey’s accession towards European integration. Why is memory so politically relevant after an entire century? How does history prevent closure in current politics, within and even beyond Turkey? How does public opinion shape genocide recognition? While such questions merit deep exploration, in the current blog post I offer thoughts inspired by my recent research on the Armenian diaspora in Germany.

Global media coverage predominantly mentions the Armenian diaspora as part of the commemorations, but overlooks its role in maintaining that memory over the century and also its current role in the centennial. Dispersed in numerous lands after the genocide, survivors and their descendants organized in three parties functioning extraterritorially in relation to the areas from which they were dispersed. Despite schisms between these parties, which continue among Armenian diaspora groups

until today, the Armenian genocide has played a unifying role, and has been the central tenet around which diaspora life has been organized and identity maintained. Leadership of Armenian diaspora organizations in the US and Europe has been dominated by descendants of the Armenian genocide. Armenians from Armenia proper or Nagorno-Karabakh, who did not experience the genocide, have been less engaged in such diaspora institutions, and much more focused on their own survival in Russia and Western countries to which they immigrated after the end of the Cold War.

Some consider the Armenian diaspora's staunch position on the genocide recognition as having created negative consequences in the 1991-1994 war in Nagorno-Karabakh, and as problematic to contemporary reconciliation between Armenia and Turkey. Nevertheless, by seeking genocide recognition, the Armenian diaspora has played an important role in lobbying foreign governments and discussing historical events in light of international legislation and powerful current frames about gross human rights violations and the need for their acknowledgment. Thus, it helped the genocide message reach wider audiences. Without political mobilization, whether inside or outside a country, gross human rights violations remain known to co-nationals and the well-informed, but never reach global audiences. Without mobilization, it does not matter whether such violations occurred in the disintegrating Ottoman Empire – such as massacres of Bulgarians – or beyond – such as the first genocide of the 20th century in Namibia.

Armenian diaspora activists face different contexts, some of which are more problematic to the goal of genocide recognition than others. Host-states' bi-lateral and multi-lateral relations with Turkey – a major power in the Middle East and a NATO member – have been a strong deterrent against genocide recognition. But other factors matter as well. In Germany, for example, the Federal President Joachim Gauck, followed by the President of the Bundestag Norbert Lammert and other MPs publicly used the word “genocide” only on 23-24 April, 2015, before and during a motion in the Bundestag. Politicians have previously shied away from speaking about “genocide,” not least because of a presence of a numerous Turkish minority, important as a voter base for their parties.

The need for Germany to face its own history related to the Armenian genocide is also a problematic issue. Debates exist about the degree to which Germany was involved. During World War I Germany was allied with the Ottoman government, which considered the Armenian population an internal threat because of its pro-Russia sympathies and alleged planning of revolts. There are allegations that German troops helped in facilitating some of the deportations. The predominant historiographical line posits that German officials were informed about the mass killings but remained complicit. While some German diplomats protested against the deportations, some high military personnel quietly endorsed them, being fully aware of the faith awaiting the Armenians. Official censorship was imposed and the “Report of the Situation of the Armenian People in Turkey” by the evangelical theologian Johannes Lepsius was forbidden. Lepsius personally documented many of these events, and managed to quietly distribute 20,000 copies of the report, before it was censored. For his courage at a time when war politics reigned, Lepsius is currently celebrated as a hero of civil society. His house has been restored, and is currently hosting his archives and functioning as a forum for civic dialogue.



However, despite such positive signs, a parliamentary resolution of 2005 did not declare the 1915 events as genocide. In the past days, Federal President Gauck, Bundestag President Lammert and other MPs made new inroads by speaking of genocide, but the heated Bundestag debates on April 24, 2015 did not produce a unified vote. They left the discussion at a stage of a draft resolution: "[Their \[the Armenians'\] fate stands as an example of the history of the mass exterminations, the ethnic cleansings, the expulsions, and, yes, the genocides with which the 20th century is marked in so terrible a way](#)".

While satisfaction among some diaspora activists is still visible, given the quick and unexpected acceleration of events especially after Pope Francis made his pronouncement of genocide, others remain skeptical as to when and whether such a resolution will be eventually achieved. The centennial was a critical moment for passing of such resolutions, but in its aftermath, events could continue as before. I could see the logic in such an argument, given that the centennial was a special occasion to think of the Armenian genocide, in the absence of ongoing concrete pressures, which unfortunately prompt politicians to act, when they seek to abstain from making principled decisions.

But I would still disagree with such a view. The most important thing that the centennial commemorations achieved, and in Germany as well, is that they deepened the outreach to civil society. Discussions went much beyond self-commemorations among Armenians, their sympathizers and other groups such as the Pontus Greeks and Arameans, who were also affected by the Ottoman violence at the time. The production of knowledge and books related to the Armenian genocide has grown exponentially and globally. In Germany alone, every respectable newspaper or media outlet has had something to say about the Armenian genocide. Only in the past couple of years, numerous books have been published, whether history or fiction, and most of them by German authors, not by Armenians. For a whole month in April 2015, the

Maxim Gorki Theater in Berlin ran series of cultural events related to the Armenian genocide. I visited some of them, and can witness how full the salons were, with people from all walks of life and all generations. A public debate in the Urania forum on April 23, 2015 showed how much disagreement still exists between representatives of the Armenian and Turkish diasporas. But a debate between them still takes place, and will be inevitably reframed after the statements of Gauck, Lammert and other German MPs. Most notably, the global commemorations gave power to the growing number of intellectuals and civic activists in Turkey, who publicly commemorated on the day of the genocide commencement. With a clear voice from global civil society, current authoritarian politicians of Turkey and non-authoritarian politicians of Germany can be both pressured to face their countries' history and to decouple history from political realities of the present.



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During the Festival of Social Sciences at Warwick University on 16 May, 2015 (Saturday) the Film “Grandma’s Tatoos” will be screened. Swedish director of Armenian descent Suzanne Khardalian presents a documentary of a rarely told story, about the faith of women and their difficult survival during the Armenian genocide. A link to the event can be found [here](#).