

# Turkey's War on the Truth

By Richard Cohen  
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It goes without saying that the House resolution condemning [Turkey](#) for the "genocide" of Armenians from 1915 to 1923 will serve no earthly purpose and that it will, to say the least, complicate if not severely strain U.S.-Turkey relations. It goes without saying, also, that the Turks are extremely sensitive on the topic and, since they are helpful in the war in [Iraq](#) and are a friend to [Israel](#), that their feelings ought to be taken into account. All of this is true, but I would feel a lot better about condemning this resolution if the argument wasn't so much about how we need Turkey and not at all about the truthfulness of the matter.

Of even that, I have some doubt. The congressional resolution repeatedly employs the word "genocide," a term used by many scholars. But Raphael Lemkin, the Polish-Jewish emigre who coined the term in 1943, clearly had in mind what the Nazis were doing to the Jews. If that is the standard -- and it need not be -- then what happened in the collapsing Ottoman Empire was something short of genocide. It was plenty bad -- maybe as many as 1.5 million Armenians perished, many of them outright murdered -- but not all Armenians everywhere in what was then Turkey were as calamitously affected. The substantial Armenian communities in [Constantinople](#), [Smyrna](#) and Aleppo were largely spared. No German city could make that statement about its Jews.

Still, by any name, what was begun in 1915 is unforgivable and, one hopes, unforgettable. Yet it was done by a government that no longer exists -- the so-called Sublime Porte of the Ottomans, with its sultan, concubines, eunuchs and the rest. Even in 1915, it was an anachronism, no longer able to administer its vast territory -- much of the [Middle East](#) and the [Balkans](#). The empire was crumbling. The so-called Sick Man of [Europe](#) was breathing its last. Its troops were starving, and, both in Europe and the Middle East, indigenous peoples were declaring their independence and rising in rebellion. Among them were the Armenians, an ancient people who had been among the first to adopt Christianity. By the end of the 19th century, they were engaged in guerrilla activity. By World War I, they were aiding Turkey's enemy, [Russia](#). Within Turkey, Armenians were feared as a fifth column.

So contemporary Turkey is entitled to insist that things are not so simple. If you use the word genocide, it suggests the Holocaust -- and that is not what happened in the Ottoman Empire. But Turkey has gone beyond mere quibbling with a word. It has taken issue with the facts and in ways that cannot be condoned. Its most famous writer, the Nobel Prize-winning novelist [Orhan Pamuk](#), was arrested in 2005 for acknowledging the mass killing of Armenians. The charges were subsequently dropped, and although Turkish law has been modified in some ways, it nevertheless remains dangerous business for a Turk to talk openly and candidly about what happened in 1915.

It just so happens that I am an admirer of Turkey. Its modern leaders, beginning with the truly remarkable [Mustafa Kemal Atatürk](#), have done a Herculean job of bringing the country from medievalism to modernity without, it should be noted, the usual bloodbath. (The Russians, for instance, did not manage that feat.) Furthermore, I can appreciate Turkey's palpable desire to embrace both modernity and Islam and to show that such a combination is not oxymoronic. (Ironically, having a dose of genocide in your past -- the United States and the Indians, [Germany](#) and the Jews, etc. -- is hardly "not Western.") And I think, furthermore, that House Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](#) should have spiked the House resolution in deference to Turkey's immense strategic importance to the United States. She's the speaker now, for crying out loud, not just another House member.

But for too long the Turks have been accustomed to muscling the truth, insisting either through threats or punishment that they and they alone will write the history of what happened in 1915. They are continuing along this path now, with much of official [Ankara](#) threatening this or that -- crossing into Iraqi [Kurdistan](#), for instance -- if the House resolution is not killed. But it may yet occur to someone in the government that Turkey's tantrums have turned an obscure -- nonbinding! -- congressional resolution into yet another round of tutorials on the Armenian tragedy of 1915. Call it genocide or call it something else, but there is only one thing to call Turkey's insistence that it and its power will determine the truth: unacceptable.

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