

Preface

It is with mixed feelings that I am working again through this text in front of me, the one I submitted in early 2012 as my doctoral thesis in political science. I devoted a considerable amount of time and energy, by my standards at least, to this work over the last few years, yet it is still easy to identify a number of elements which are in bad need of further efforts. I “happened” to run into this topic, the ongoing debate between the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Turkey about the events of 1915, the (alleged) Armenian Genocide, without much prior knowledge when I started my work. I had a vague impression where I stood, but the more I dived into it the more I discovered how ungrounded my position was, quite expectedly. Somewhat more surprisingly, I noted during my work how frequently I happened to change my mind. Gradually opinions, even convictions, evolved, changed, dissolved, resurfaced, going round and round in circles. Some of the suggestions and conclusions I am proposing here would have troubled me in the beginning, and some of the views I nurtured initially seem disturbing now. What is worse, I cannot silence the apprehension (or is it hope?) that my thoughts would change even further if I was to delay the completion of this book by a few more weeks. Particularly, some of the ideas that emerged only towards the end of writing still arouse suspicion in me. I guess it is therefore favorable that at some point higher, institutional forces require me to make a clear cut and stand up to exactly where I am at this point—and that can be a valuable hub from where to start out afresh. In the end, all this ambiguity might be, on a personal level, extremely rewarding too, at least in the sense that it keeps open some mental doors—and curiously enough, that might be exactly what much of this book is all about anyway.

These precursory remarks are not to immunize myself against criticism, or at least not only, I believe. They should not obscure that I am equally confident in a number of propositions, at least for now, as I am skeptical about some others—though I am not going to disclose which these are. What these remarks in fact are, mostly, a reflection of two notions I hold about this topic itself: (a) first, I am convinced it is a highly complex matter. That applies certainly for many issues, and possibly not by coincidence especially to those about which we argue and fight. It is not my intention at this place to somehow vainly measure and compare complexity

(or importance, by the way) between disparate social and political affairs. Probably, this experienced complexity is not (only) a function of this topic on its own but instead of the depth to which we dive into it.

What makes this specific riddle a difficult one, I believe, is that no academic discipline could provide us some clear answer how to resolve it. On the surface level the fields concerned include notably history and law. However, I believe there is much more to it. For instance, it *is* (as a factual statement) also a political issue because it entails political repercussions, even if we bluntly declare it a matter for historians only. Moreover, if we extend our view to include also its relevance to themes such as identity, we can yet again add a few more disciplines. Thus, I would think it deserves attention, or, put differently, it must not be excluded from investigations in morality, political science, sociology, psychology, and philosophy too, to name but a few. Eventually, I do not think the larger discussion and any eventual resolution could or should (now as a normative statement) be dictated by only one of them.

But that certainly applies again to a wide range of topics. What adds yet another layer of complexity, at least within the social-scientific approach I want to pursue here, is for instance that a psychologically relevant concern, questions about resentments and identity and our very own history, phenomena to which we all individually have different and very personal relations, becomes a social and political matter. It is pretty difficult to find the one, the “right” solution to the variety of our needs and aspirations in this regard. Nevertheless, I believe that is exactly why we must not just brush the matter off from our political agenda—this is exactly the task of the polity, even though it may seem to present an intractable conundrum. And that is why “the solution” might better remain somehow flexible and open, allowing for adaptation to our different needs. At least as far as it appears (socially, politically, historically, legally, morally, psychologically) acceptable, this “somehow” is exactly what needs to be discussed.

By the same token this topic is not only difficult but also (b) very sensitive. Certainly to varying degrees, but for one or the other of the various stakeholders, this issue is highly personal—revolving around nothing less than her identity. I am sure that for some it is by far more sensitive an issue than for me, and this might be where my cautious words above emanate from. On me personally the events of 1915 have admittedly very limited impact: I do have a genuine interest in this topic, and it grew while I pursued my work, but it will not determine whether I will lead a happy and satisfying life or not. So, while it is pretty easy to accept criticism for my faults and deficiencies, I would like to use this evasive preface to make clear that the recklessness from which many of my thoughts undoubtedly originate and by which I present them at times is not a result of any intention to offend. At times I may (even deliberately) give in to a provocative position or formulation, but the (possibly missed) objective of such polemics is the evocation of further ideas and objections, not of hurt or fury.

Anyway, I am sure to a certain extent inflicting/taking offense with this sensitive matter cannot be avoided—both as a result of my own incompetence and by the

nature of this topic. But to derive some good from this as well: at least it might demonstrate to anyone who in any way takes offense that this is indeed a relevant matter to her, and that the outrage it may engender is maybe not only a matter of my own transgressions but possibly more of her own underlying sensitivities.

One way by which such offense could be caused is inadequate language. This applies particularly to issues such as this one, which virtually revolves around the most appropriate expression: is it “genocide” or something else? Given my preoccupation with this kind of delicate phenomena, I want to address at least this inevitable flaw upfront. I confess that I failed to arrive at a conclusive solution how to designate the subject of my work without suggesting what I do not intend to suggest, and thus without preempting, perverting, or depleting my own position. My point is basically that it is not me to suggest “the right” name. Honestly speaking, I do not want to. As I shall obsessively repeat throughout the pages to follow, I think what matters is the *meaning* we give to this event, and far less how we wrap it up. That comes closer to how we then present this meaning to others, how we advertise it, if you wish (now, that indeed might have been offensive. . .). And as such its wrapping *is* relevant, no doubt, but it is not what I would want to think about for a few years of my life, and it is therefore not my primary subject. Once we (or I, for that matter) have arrived at a viable solution what the most appropriate meaning is, then we should certainly debate by what terms to best capture and convey this meaning. But it might not make much sense to argue about the right wrapping if there is no consensus about content.

For that reason I helplessly oscillated to and fro in this work, adopting numerous designations, without even putting them in quotation marks, sometimes resorting to “the events of 1915,” at other times “the Armenian Genocide,” and there might also be some “alleged Armenian Genocide,” not to speak of additional labels and euphemisms (my “subject” or “topic”). In the end it would be nice if I had produced some random distribution of these various labels, but I am pretty sure I also failed in that respect.

Moreover, there is of course an incredible amount of other denominations that are equally sensitive and important, many not directly related to this topic (including my arbitrary handling of gender designations). For instance, are the (alleged) victims to be characterized as “Armenians,” or better “Ottoman Armenians,” “Western Armenians,” “(Armenian) Christians”? Or instead maybe best described simply as “victims”? And how about the people argumentatively defended by the Turkish government: are they “Turks,” or “Muslims,” “Ottomans,” “Young Turks,” and so forth—but what about “Kurds” and a number of other social groups? Obviously, none of these labels is irrelevant or neutral either, first for various present political reasons (such as the Kurdish affairs in the Republic of Turkey), and second because they also shape the subject studied here: they draw the line of (alleged) offenders and victims differently, and by extension also shape the structure of the divide today. Is it “Muslims” versus “(Armenian) Christians,” or rather “Turks” versus “Armenians”? And was it “Kurdish tribes” who were responsible for a vast number of massacres back then? And to what extent would each of those accounts be “true” or “false”? These are all dimensions I cannot do justice here, nor

can I help jumping from one such trap right into the next. Categorization is always simplification—which might be alright, even necessary at times, but we should be very aware of the costs and risks of a simplified picture of our world.

Eventually, I am not so much concerned with an accurate or “true” account of what happened in 1915, but instead how we today refer to the past and how history thus draws boundaries in the present and thereby perpetuates group conflict. Therefore, whatever naming convention(s) I shall adopt in the course of this book shall not be misunderstood as a historical representation of the past, or as a conscious disregard for its immanent complexity. Instead these inevitable terms shall help to illustrate how we deal with historical responsibility, irrespective of who the perpetrators and who the victims actually were, and how it affects collective identity and intergroup conflict in the present.

Finally, one last shortcoming I wanted to apologize for in this preface is the unsatisfactory way in which I managed to live up to the generous support I have encountered at many stages. There are a number of people who provided great support: they provided some ground where I could test some theses in amiable discussion; the ideas they offered proved highly informative and gave rise to crucial further thoughts on my part. Inadvertently, I may all but too frequently have distorted and perverted their ideas as they continued to evolve in my mind. Therefore, this book owes a great deal to all of them both in terms of quantity and quality of ideas, while the blame for any eventual inconsistencies and inaccuracies falls on my side since I remain responsible for their eventual formulation and presentation here. Whatever I wrote here does not necessarily reflect their opinions and positions, and some of my thoughts would most certainly not find their approval.

Several people who are very dear to me and thereby inadvertently got trapped in this, contributed primarily by the most indescribable and seminal task of enduring me throughout this time. Thank you. Moreover, I would specifically like to thank some others who dedicated their time and energy particularly to this work here. These are, in no other than chronological order, Cengiz Günay, senior fellow at the Austrian Institute for International Politics and a representative of the Armenian embassy at Vienna; Salpi Ghazarian, director of the Civiltas Foundation (Yerevan); and Hayk Demoyan, director of the Armenian Genocide Museum Institute (Yerevan) and a representative of the Armenian Church in Vienna. Apparently, this list appears flagrantly partisan, numerically dominated by persons who might be assumed to endorse the claims of genocide. I thus would like to add that I also approached the Turkish embassy in Vienna and tried to facilitate meetings with a few relevant persons during travels to Turkey—to no avail, unfortunately none of my requests for a personal encounter was met with acceptance. That, of course, might simply be a matter of the issue’s sensitivity, or for pragmatic reasons (such as the language barrier), and not intended to hinder any work on this topic or evade it in the first place. And on the other side, my continuous consumption of Turkish newspapers and various texts from the homepage of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs certainly outweighed any pro-Armenian bias.

Closer to the completion of my doctoral thesis, my brother Georg deserves great credits for taking the pains of reading through a crude draft of this book. At the beginning and the end of this work, stood my supervisors: John Bunzl initially set me on my way and Otmar Höll kindly accepted to accompany me for the second half of my journey.

Finally, after I accepted a kind offer by Springer to publish my thesis, Justin Stevens patiently spent many hours to iron out my most clumsy German formulations and bravely fought a myriad of personal pronouns and subjectivities. Similarly, my mother invested much effort in checking all my translations of German quotations into English. I hope they both will forgive my resistance against all their endeavors for proper expression.

Thank you all, too!

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