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"The Significance of Denial"*

Alice L. Eckardt

What do we mean when we speak of denial? Are there various forms of it? What are the reasons for or behind such denial? Are there differences, or a significant difference, between denial of the Armenian genocide and denial of the Holocaust/Shoah? Is there a hidden agenda that the deniers have? And does this affect the way in which we need to respond to the deniers? What, exactly, is the purpose of the denials or belittlings? And finally what are the pertinent lessons to be drawn from all this?

Let me address these questions more or less in the order in which I have given them to you.

Yes, there are different forms of denial, and in some instances the differences are significant.

What do we mean then? by denial? Or, since we assume we know the meaning of that word, how does the process work? How does it set out to accomplish its goal? What exactly is that goal? And what lies behind the surface claim?

Obviously the first type of denial is outright rejection of any element of truth in the assertion that a genocide or Holocaust occurred: It simply did not happen; the people are alive and well elsewhere (the Soviet Union, America, Lebanon,

Palestine/Israel, Russia), or may have died as a result of some other, and usually natural, cause. One scholar calls such denial "the ultimate obscenity." There is a connection between this kind of denial and the new and continuing antisemitism of a vicious and deadly sort that argues on the one hand that Hitler did not attempt to murder the Jewish people and on the other agitates for it being finished now.

One American scholar has asserted that "the age of genocide" opened with the slaughter of the Armenians. In the case of that genocide of some 1.5 million people carried out in Turkey during World War I (1915-17), the initiators and administrators of the attacks on the masses of Armenian people living in the eastern region of Turkey made very open and blunt statements to American Ambassador Henry Morgenthau, Sr. at the very time these were going on. These indicated that the government officials (Talat, Minister of the Interior, and Enver, Minister of War) had every intention of ridding Turkey of the Armenian population (regardless of its centuries-long residence in these areas) and of seeing that there were, at best, very few survivors, since survivors would doubtless seek revenge. The government officials did their best to prevent the fact that in this other domain of the Armenian...
Morgenthau with desperate pleas for something to be done to stop the murderous actions. Neither Talat nor Enver denied the government's actions to Morgenthau, nor gave any evidence of shame or guilt. (In a further preview of Nazi actions, the churches, place names and other distinctive features of any Armenian presence were eradicated.)

At the end of the war, a Special Inquiry Commission and Courts-Marshall was held that sentenced the ruling triumvirate (Talat, Enver, and Djemal) to death in absentia. It "left little doubt that there had been a genocide plan and that a bureaucratic network had existed" to carry it out. However, everything came to an abrupt halt with the Kemalist revolution, and not only did the process of denial begin, but Armenians in the Russian area of Transcaucasia were assaulted by Turkish troops in the summer of 1918, and those in the port city of Smyrna/Izmir were slaughtered in 1922 during the course of Turkey's waging a war (successfully) to retake the city from the Greeks. The subsequent Lausanne Treaty in 1923 brushed aside the issue of war crimes, including the Armenian genocide, thus giving the Turkish claim that the accusation was a fabrication a seeming basis.

[Dadrian, Documentation..., p. 102]

Since then the Turkish denial has become more absolute and unrelenting. Early on Atatürk himself showed a different face to those outside the country and those inside: A Swiss newspaper in August 1926 carried a quotation from the President saying that the Ittahadists "should have been made to account for the lives
of millions of our Christian subjects who were ruthlessly driven en masse from their homes and massacred." In contrast with this, when Ahmen Refik, a noted historian at Istanbul University and one of Atatürk's teachers at the War Staff College, published a book exposing the facts of the Armenian genocide (along with subsequent Armenian acts of reprisals), the president had the book banned, the professor fired, banned from public life, and condemned to life in poverty.® (Professor Vahakn Dadrian tells of a Turkish career officer who derided the early efforts to define the Armenian tragedy as a mere by-product of a justified deportation plan, and advised that the government spokesmen be blunt and say "the decision to exterminate the Armenians." He ultimately concluded that the country didn't have "the guts to face the truth."®) In 1982 when an international conference on the Holocaust and genocide was scheduled for Tel Aviv, the Turkish government let Israel know that holding or endorsing a conference in which the "Armenian genocide" would be discussed could well jeopardize the situation of Jews living in Turkey, not to mention trade between the two countries. The Israeli government buckled and brought pressure on the well-known participants (not all Israelis by any means), all of whom withdrew from the conference. The rest of the participants, only knowing what the newspapers were reporting rather than having been approached directly, were left without direction about how to proceed and agonized over the question of whether they were endangering innocent Jews by attending and giving their papers.
(Since then, to be sure, Israel has changed its tack; another conference dealing with the subject has been held there, and Turkey's treatment of the Armenians has been mentioned in the Knesset.)

In 1985 a full-page ad in three major American newspapers, signed by 69 scholars, called on Turkey and other governments to open all the archives so that facts about could be ascertained. This on-the-surface irenic ad was subsequently used and reused by the Turkish government to "prove" that many scholars do not believe there had been an Armenian genocide.\(^\text{10}\)

Is there a connection between the Turkish denial of the Armenian genocide and the ongoing struggle within that country against the Kurdish minority? Or is it more concerned with its international image? with its international standing? I find myself agreeing with what an American Armenian scholar wrote in 1986: The denial is a "Turkish invention. It is the political instrument of a modern nation state" that fears it losing friends in the international community. Probably more importantly, it views "the Armenocide as a threat to its inner strength, national security and reputation, as well as its relative power among the nations."\(^\text{11}\) [here? move this to later?]

[add in here or later re Permanent People's Tribunal, Paris, France, April 1984:

In April 1984 Turkey was called on by the Permanent People's Tribunal in Paris to state its case with regard to the charges of]
Armenocide. The Turkish reply was categorical: "No such massacre took place, at this time or at any other time during the war. In the face of great dangers that the Empire faced at that time, great care was taken to make certain that the Armenians were treated carefully and compassionately as they were deported."

The tribunal's verdict concluded that "The extermination of the Armenian population groups through deportation and massacre [did occur; this action] constitutes a crime of genocide. The methods used, the order in which towns were evacuated and routes chosen for the columns of deportees, all confirm the existence of a centralized command controlling the unfolding of the program."[12]

Turkey's stubborn denial "keeps the wound open," as one young Armenian in this country said (1987). It has also prompted small Armenian groups to take their own actions in search for recognition of the genocide, talks for recompense, vengeance, and (possibly) the liberation of Armenian territory inside Turkey. A number of Turkish Ambassadors and others in diplomatic missions were killed or attacked between 1975 and 1980 alone.

In sharp contrast to Turkey's continued public stance of denial on this issue, Germany's government has fully acknowledged the Holocaust of European Jews under the former government's auspices, and has recompensed a large number of Jewish survivors for some of their material losses resulting from the Third Reich's actions. This does not say, of course, that all the
German people either admit or regret their country's past in this regard. In fact, (as we will? note,) the "historians' dispute" begun in 1986-87 and continued for several years in newspapers, periodicals, and academic journals, while never denying the Holocaust, nevertheless exhibited efforts to put it in what was said to be a "general historical framework" and to "relativize" or "explain away" the Nazi crime against the Jews.14 (see below, p.? or here? see ff: ) Arguments used included claims that Stalin's crimes against the kulaks and all other political enemies confirmed the "group other" as total enemy, and that this set an example and precedent for the Nazi regime to follow (Hitler holding the same kind of absolutist and apocalyptic views as Stalin). At the same time Hitler saw "the enemy" as "Judeo-Bolshevism" and saw the need to annihilate such a dangerous enemy before it could assault his people (the pure "Aryan" people). The "revisers" or "relativizers" also made the fate of the Jews equivalent to the fate of the German Army on the Eastern front (though Jews did not have arms, an organized fighting force, a government to supply them with needs, etc.) and also equivalent to the fate of the German civilian population under the Soviet military attack.15

But if Germany is not denying the Shoah there are many outside that country doing so. In fact, Steven Jacobs has observed that "Shoah denial is the currently successful antisemitism of the 1990s, and will seemingly be with us for many
The denial is international in scope, though most of the deniers are westerners (Europeans or North Americans). The absolutists deny any attempted genocide of Jews ever took place (i.e., there was never a Hitler order for such a killing), insists there were no gas chambers and that American Zionists began the lie about the Holocaust. They do not stop here but go on to reverse the accusation by claiming that Jews in Europe were trying to destroy Germany and that therefore Hitler had to defend his country not only in the war which Jews initiated but also against these Jewish attackers by putting them in prison concentration camps.

The second type is a somewhat more modified denial: It acknowledges that some Jews died in the ghettos and camps or in the war situation (as some Armenians died in the process of the government's well-meant evacuation out of the war zones) but that these deaths were never the intention; they were simply the by-product of the war situation. Furthermore, the numbers are much smaller than is claimed. In both cases, of course, those so treated were seen either as enemies or potential enemies.

Then there are strange amalgams. One denies there was a Hitlerian war against the Jews but then says, "now let's finish it!" Another argues that Hitler was not guilty of the slaughter, but was a victim of the Zionists who "compelled him to perpetrate crimes that would eventually enable them to achieve their aim -- the creation of the State of Israel."
Other forms of denial include what one author calls "storvcide," meaning a "cultural assassination" of the Holocaust as primarily a Jewish story by making it into a general atrocity against Poland. This sort of "stealing" of the Holocaust was how Jews, in 1994, viewed the presence of Carmelite nuns who were still occupying a building, with a 24-foot cross, just outside the camp at Auschwitz several years after an agreement had been made that they would move elsewhere. By contrast, for the Polish people (that is, the Polish Christians) their "national myth" of being the crucified nation thoroughly justified the nuns' presence there. A number of actions and words intensified feelings before some sort of peace was made. 19

Other efforts to "steal" the Holocaust by applying it to other groups was particularly prevalent in the USSR, where all Soviet citizens were represented as equal "victims of Fascism" and the singular Jewish fate was persistently ignored. 20

(This technique of subsuming others under the victim category has not been used with regard to the Armenian genocide, as far as I know.)

In Germany the end of the war was generally perceived as "catastrophe," "disaster," or "collapse" (Zusammenbruch) rather than the defeat of a heinous regime. Since then some German historians have equated the suffering of Germans evicted from their former homelands outside Germany proper with the Jewish suffering. While revisionists assert that the expellees'
suffering was equal with that of Jews, deniers insist that these Germans were the real victims.

But in contemporary Germany there is another situation. The years of the Third Reich are summed up in such phrases as "the past misfortune" (das vergangene Unheil), "that dreadful time" (jene schreckliche Zeit), or "the bad years" (die schlimmen Jahre) as people seek to imply that they "suffered an unfortunate fate, similar to that of a cruel destiny which heaped tragic guilt upon them." The words and attitudes suggest a general lumping-together of all the evils and sufferings of the time into one undistinguished mass without any evaluations or distinctions.

The real threat of denial, as Professor Lipstadt finds it thorough study of denial in its various manifestations, is that it makes a more hospitable space for "revisers," and for those who would diminish the significance of the Holocaust without trying to totally eliminate it. (Here I am only speaking about the Shoah, as there is no real "revising" going on with regard to the Armenian genocide since Turkey is still in the denial stage.)

What do I mean by revisers? Those who not deny the Holocaust outright, but begin to pick away at its edges, question either its distinctiveness or extremity, challenge the figures, suggest external contributing factors, and so on. These are listened to more readily than is the outright denier and thus can prepare the way for a gradual undermining of the larger
realities. This kind of diminishment is particularly evident in Eastern Europe, especially Croatia and Slovakia, where extreme nationalist parties seek to be free of the taint of Nazism, especially their forerunners' collaboration with Germany in the pursuance of the "Final Solution."^{23}

Lipstadt makes a most important point when she insists that freedom of inquiry must be based on "reasonable inquiry and the use of standards of evidence" — which creates genuine scholars — rather than having preset conclusions that reject any evidence that controverts the pre-determined conclusion — as the deniers do. This standard must apply to the Turkish denial of the Armenian genocide as much as to the denial, or diminishment, of the Holocaust. The problem is with those who read or listen to the deniers and fail to observe the all-important difference: that the deniers, while they claim to present "evidence," do not deal with the hard evidence of the genuine scholars. (And, of course, when examined closely, the "evidence" they present is at best a limited or partial truth, and at worst an outright fabrication.)

One problem in our country is the proliferation of books, television programs, newspaper and magazine stories dealing with challenges to evidence of events of public interest in all too many situations. The television programmers in particular don't care what the topic is as long as it can create an argument, tension, and therefore audience interest. Professor Deborah Lipstadt found that out when she refused to engage in discussion/
argument with Holocaust deniers on a number of television programs. (The hosts could not understand her refusal.) The public, or significant portions of it, seems to dote on any challenge to any subject. Thus the deniers of the Holocaust have what appears to be a ready-made audience.

One finds that the students who respond at least to the more circumspect deniers are often the bright students who are pre-programmed (if you will) to look for flaws in mainline arguments or cases. Deniers have changed tactics in recent years, presenting their material in the guise of genuine scholarship (slick-paper "historical" journals, conferences, and, most recently, the computer Internet). (Use of the latest technology is also being utilized by hate-purveyors who not only write their own hate-inspired music but own their own companies to produce and sell it.)

The Federal Republic of Germany, having learned its lesson from the Nazi era and determined to fight against new seeds of race hatred, has a law against the production and distribution of antisemitic and other hate literature. Yet a significant amount of that material is surreptitiously gotten into the country via the international postal system, with most of it coming from our country.24

We must address the question, What is the purpose of the denials and belittlings? And what, if any, threat do they pose either to our nation's future or to the same people already so
terribly victimized?

I suggest the following purposes (although I do not mean to suggest that they will necessarily succeed):

1) to rehabilitate Nazism along with its anti-Jewish goals -- not necessarily in Germany, but in any country.

Since there is little reason to question this conclusion, we have the most substantial reason for opposing these efforts at every opportunity and on every front. Even if we conclude there is little chance of the birth (or rebirth) of a new Nazi state, that does not mean that another type of regime may not follow similar policies. And even without that happening the danger to individuals can be great. All we need to do is remember the all-too successful attack on a Jewish congregation in its newly refurbished synagogue in Istanbul, or learn about a neo-Nazi group's efforts to place gas in the air conditioning unit of a synagogue in Texas in order to wipe out the congregation.\(^{25}\)

(The Armenians do not have to fear this consequence of Turkey's denial since there is no world-wide anti-Armenian movement.)

2) to continue the antisemites' war against Jews wherever they may live, but especially wherever they are a significant community. That is one reason why the Jewish community in Argentina has been so harassed, and why "antisemitic incidents" have multiplied in our own country.

A number of scholars have said that they do not believe that the same groups will suffer further genocidal attacks but that
others will be the future targets. While the evidence of the callous mass killing of Cambodians under the Khmer Rouge between 1975 and 1978 certainly provides evidence that other murderous regimes will learn from their forerunners, the long and vicious history of attacks on Jews makes one hesitate to conclude that they do not need to worry about further assaults -- especially when one sees those attacks continuing in the Jewish people's own country with its own police and armed forces.

3) to undermine Western support for Israel, in order to make it more vulnerable to destruction. Obviously antisemites are not interested in the Jewish people having a means of defending themselves!

4) to attempt to complete the murderers' work, by undermining the opposition to renewed destructive attacks on the Jewish people, and ultimately by bringing to political power a force to carry it out.

5) to undermine remembrance of the Holocaust -- or the Armenian genocide -- by saying that there is nothing to remember! Neither one happened. (As Emil Fackenheim observes: "Hitler never murdered the Jews -- and -- he should have finished the job!"

6) to continue to affirm the basic superiority of the "Aryan" race.

7) to build or rebuild the pride of peoples who committed the genocide.

8) to justify that might makes right.

9) to continue to make the targeted group suffer, either
from anger, grief, or fear.

Elie Wiesel has said, "the enemy tries to kill them for the third time [that is, after being killed and after being burned to ashes] by depriving them of their past. . . . nothing is or could be as ugly, as inhuman, as the wish to deprive the dead victims of their death." Or, we may add, deprive their surviving relatives of at least the recognition of their death.

10) There is another purpose, and it is most important: It is to satisfy the ego needs of those who are the haters.

Does time heal all wounds? It appears not -- especially when the murderous action is denied. One observer commented that the "genocide ruptured the Armenians' sense of a morally ordered universe" and this rupture "worsens as time elapses and the campaign of denial by the Turkish government increases. It is one thing to suffer enormous tragedy. It is quite another to be told that nothing occurred. . . . At least the Jews have had the catharsis of the world's recognition of what happened to their people 40 years ago." (Here is where the deniers and diminishers pose a threat.) By contrast the Armenians are continuously told that their claims are "fabrications and lies," even the personal accounts of survivors. Vigen Guroian is one who tries to reassure his community by reminding them that there is "an historical moral consensus in the Western world [which] affirms that the destruction of so many Armenians and the forced removal of Armenians from their historic homeland was a grave evil
perpetrated by a morally blameworthy Ottoman regime."\textsuperscript{29}

The German historian who played such a major role in facing and overcoming his revisionist countrymen gives us a guideline to keep in mind and follow: "After Auschwitz our national self-consciousness can be derived only from the better traditions in our history, a history that is not unexamined but instead [is] appropriated critically . . . in the light of the traditions that stand up to the scrutiny of a gaze educated by the moral catastrophe, a gaze that is, in a word, suspicious."\textsuperscript{30}
Notes

1. The term genocide is almost always applied to the Armenians' experience under the Turkish government campaign, especially that of 1915-17, and yet, as Vahakn Dadrien has pointed out, that genocide was more genuinely "holocaustal" than the Shoah because "tens of thousands" of Armenians were burned alive in several regions of the interior of Turkey ("The Convergent Aspects of the Armenian and Jewish Cases of Genocide, Remembering for the Future, Yehuda Bauer et al, eds. vol. II [Oxford, New York, et al: Pergamon Press,1989]: 1990).


3. For example, the neo-Nazi James Ellison in Arkansas, USA, said, "Let's make the Holocaust a reality rather than a Jewish fable." Ellison thus combined denial with advocacy (cited in Alvin Rosenfeld, "The Holocaust in Jewish Memory and Public Memory", Dimensions: A Journal of Holocaust Studies 2, 3 [1986]: 12).


5. Talaat, in speaking to Ambassador Morgenthau one day, requested that Morgenthau contact the two American life insurance companies with whom so many Armenians had policies and have them send the Turkish government the list of these policy holders. As Talaat calmly said, since the policy holders "are practically all dead now and have left no heirs to collect the money," all payments revert to the state. The ambassador refused. (Robert Melson,"Provocation or Nationalism: A Critical Inquiry into the Armenian Genocide of 1915," The History and Sociology of Genocide, Frank Chalk & Kurt Jonassohn, eds. [New Haven: Yale University Press], 1990: 283).

   What were the reasons for this attack on the Armenians? Apparently, ridding Turkey of the only significant ethnic minority remaining, as well as the only Christian one; and ridding itself of the only group still seeking to reform the government.


On April 8, 1980 a news story in The New York Times gave evidence of having capitulated to the Turks by referring to "what was described as the "genocide" against Armenians" and that "many are thought to have died or been killed while fleeing...."


13. No one has received full compensation, and some victims have been denied payment on various grounds. Initially, when Germany was divided between East and West, only West Germany paid compensation. Austria has yet to make any payments, and only in the past year? has acknowledged its participation in the "Final Solution" process. However, Gypsies (Romanis and Sinti) have received no compensation from either government. [Have any other groups received payment? Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, etc.?]


17. See Robert Faurisson's argument along these lines, "Conclusion After Thirty Years of Research By Revisionist Authors," translated and distributed by the Liberty Lobby (cited by Alfred Kazin, "Americans Right, Left and Indifferent: Responses to the Holocaust," in Dimensions 4, 1 (1988): 8).


20. Other examples of this type of all-inclusiveness speak of the 11 million victims of the Nazism (for example, Simon Wiesenthal).
21. Johann N. Schmidt, "'Those Unfortunate Years': Nazism in the Public Debate of Post-War Germany," public lecture, Indiana University, 1986, published by the University in 1987, p.1. There is also a blatant trivialization of the word Holocaust by flippant remarks about "the holocaust of trees" through air pollution made by German leftists in the mid-1980s (p.9).


23. [Insert something re Slovakia or whatever country? Ceausceu?] Others who hang on the periphery of denial use "sleight of hand attempts at moral equivalence" and argue that murdering Jews was no more of a crime than fighting against " Algerians, Vietnamese, Africans, or Palestinians who were attempting to free themselves from foreign rule."

24. An American, Gary Lauck, sought by the German police for two decades because of supplying hate literature to German homes via the postal system has just been caught in Denmark (March 20, 1995). In the homes of 80 of his teen-age supporters police found not only propaganda but also weapons (in a country where weapons are far less accessible than they are in the United States).

Lauck has said that Jews were treated too nicely in the Nazi concentration camps, and that Jews were the "main belligerents" in World War II. The German police had requested that the FBI shut down Lauck's printing press in Lincoln, Nebraska, but the Americans had to reply that the constitutional guarantee of free speech made that impossible (Allentown Morning Call, March 24, 1995).

25. The attempt by the Confederate Hammerskins of Texas was mentioned in Martyrdom and Resistance, 17, 1 (Sept-Oct. 1990): 7.


30. Cox, "Revisionism ..."