

The Sunday Times (London), UK

January 25, 2015 Sunday

by DOMINIC LAWSON

Among the evidence brought by prosecutors at the Nuremberg war crimes tribunal was an account of a speech Adolf Hitler gave in Obersalzberg to his generals on the eve of the invasion of Poland, to steel them for the atrocities to come. In it the Nazi leader put the rhetorical question: "Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?"

If the intention was to suggest that the slaughter of millions of Polish Jews and other "inferior races" would be forgotten by history, the Fuhrer has been proved wrong. What became known as the Holocaust is now seen as one of the defining events of the 20th century. On Tuesday we will be reflecting on it with particular intensity, as it marks the 70th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp in Nazioccupied Poland, where an estimated 1m Jews were exterminated: January 27 is commemorated as Holocaust Memorial Day.

Yet while the continental scale and industrialised efficiency of the Nazis' genocidal campaign against the Jews was unique, there was, as Hitler implied, an antecedent: and this year marks its 100th anniversary. As the website of Britain's Holocaust Memorial Day Trust points out: "The term 'genocide' was first used in 1933, in a paper presented to the League of Nations by the Polish lawyer Raphael Lemkin. He devised the concept in response to the atrocities perpetrated against the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire between 1915 and 1918." The website goes on to explain: "It is unknown how many Armenians were murdered in this period but estimates range from 1.3m to 1.9m."

That would suggest roughly threequarters of the Armenian race were wiped out - a greater proportion than even Hitler managed in respect of Europe's Jewish population. Yet this is a remarkably littleknown fact. There is a curious inverse relation between this genocide and that of the Jewish people. The latter was downplayed by the British and American governments while it was taking place, largely because President Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill were concerned not to give the public the faintest reason to believe Hitler's claim that the war was being fought "for the Jews". It was only with the televised trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961 that the scale and true nature of the Holocaust impinged on public consciousness in Britain and America.

The opposite process happened with the genocide of the Armenian people. The shocked US consul in Aleppo in 1915-16 reported in dispatches "a gigantic plundering scheme and a final blow to extinguish the Armenian race". Churchill in his 1929 book *The World Crisis* wrote: "In 1915 the Turkish government began and ruthlessly carried out the

infamous general massacre and deportations of Armenians in Asia Minor
... whole districts were blotted out in one administrative holocaust
... there is no reasonable doubt that this crime was planned and
executed for political reasons."

But nowadays the British and American governments refuse to attach the word "genocide", let alone "holocaust", to what happened to the Armenians. This is pure realpolitik. Modern-day Armenia - which represents about 10% of the landmass of its historic territory - is a poor landlocked country of no great strategic significance. Turkey, by contrast, is a vast country, a Nato member of tremendous geostrategic importance - and its government has long been intensely neuralgic on the Armenian issue.

As the eminent lawyer Geoffrey Robertson pointed out in his recent book *An Inconvenient Genocide*, while the British government disingenuously states that it has asked Turkey to work with the Armenians "to address their common history", "this is not possible as long as Turkey maintains its obsessive denialism and uses Article 301 of its Penal Code to threaten those of its citizens who 'insult Turkishness' by referring to the treatment of Armenians in 1915 as genocide." Even its great novelists, such as Orhan Pamuk and Elif Shafak, have faced prosecution under Article 301, the latter when some of her fictional characters spoke about the genocide.

It is not as if the current government of Turkey needs to defend the reputation of the ultra-nationalist regime that controlled the Ottoman Empire in 1915-18, any more than the current German government would feel the need to justify what the Nazis did during the Second World War. Yet it does: last November the director-general for policy planning at the Turkish foreign ministry, Altay Cengizer, said his government was bracing itself for the 100th anniversary of "the events" of 1915 and that "Turkey does not deserve to appear before the world as a nation that committed genocide ... these claims target our very identity".

It seems to be lost on such people - though not on the many wonderful Turks I have met who despair of their government - that one reason Germany has such a high standing in international opinion is that it is open and contrite about the crimes of an earlier era.

Obviously such matters are difficult to talk about, once you get down to grisly details beyond mere numbers. In essence: because they saw the presence of the minority Christian Armenians in Anatolia as a potential threat to the disintegrating Ottoman Empire, the government known as the Young Turks implemented a plan - to quote that brave Turkish commentator Cengiz Aktar - "to engineer a homogeneous population composed of Muslims designated to form the backbone of the yet-to-be-invented Turkish nation. Thus there was no place for Christian populations."

>From April 24, 1915, the Armenian population saw their menfolk murdered en masse and women and children sent on what amounted to death marches (or "relocation") into the Syrian desert. The language used in justification was a foul foreshadowing of that later employed by the Nazis against the Jews. Thus Dr Mehmed Resid, the governor of Diyarbakir province: "The Armenian bandits were a load of harmful microbes that had afflicted the body of the fatherland. Was it not the duty of the doctor to kill the microbes?"

Another parallel is that the Armenians, like the Jews of Europe, tended to be successful traders, wealthier than the general population. There was similar profit to be made by their expropriation and removal, with the Ottoman Treasury the principal beneficiary.

While the bacillus of anti-semitism continues to infect men's minds, the attempted annihilation of the Armenians - the first nation to become Christian, long before the Roman Empire - also has its modern version; though in this case the incubator is a form of religious rather than racial ideology.

Across swathes of the Middle East Christians are suffering persecution. In Syria and Iraq the forces of Isis offer them the deal the Turks made to some of the (more fortunate) Armenian women and children a century ago: you will be spared, but only if you convert to Islam. And in a cruel echo of what happened to thousands of Armenian churches during the massacres, Isis has destroyed the Armenian Genocide Memorial Church and Museum in the Syrian town of Deir ez-Zor.

Much though some people wish to eradicate or deny the evidence for what happened to the Armenians a century ago, this year - of all years - it should be commemorated. But don't expect Washington or Westminster to make the effort.

dominic.lawson@sunday-times.co.uk

FROM APRIL 24, 1915, THE ARMENIANS SAW THEIR MENFOLK MURDERED
EN MASSE

<http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/comment/columns/dominiclawson/article1510903.ece>