

Book Review: *A Shameful Act*

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Turkish historian Taner Akcam describes the acts of cruelty endured by the Christian Armenians and other Christian minorities under the rule of the Ottoman Empire in *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility*. Ultimately, Akcam questions why the current Turkish Republic still denies the Armenian genocide, which was the first genocide of the twentieth century. According to Akcam, the Armenians were regarded as second class citizens simply because they were Christian and not Muslim. Even though the general population of the Ottoman Empire was composed of both Christians and Muslims, the courts functioned under Islamic Sharia law that was enforced by the Sultans. This brings into question why the Armenians, in particular, were seen as a huge threat to the local Muslim population and especially to young Turks.

The Ottoman Empire faced instability and drastic changes within its borders during the nineteenth century. Greek and Bulgarian minorities composed a large portion of the Christian population and, like Armenians, started having nationalistic ideas that worried the Ottoman authorities. They were simply fed up with constant prosecution by the Turks and other Muslims within the Ottoman Empire. These nationalistic shifts would eventually lead towards independence struggles in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The war between Ottoman Greeks and Turks (1828 to 1829) would finally establish an independent Greek state in March of 1830, for instance. Bulgarians were next in line

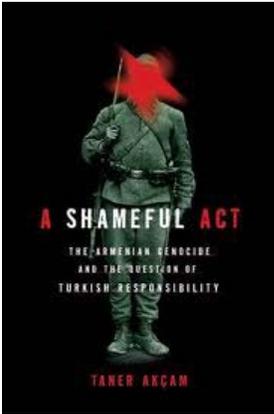
for an independent state, which they won in 1908. Losing the Balkans was a major defeat for the Ottoman Empire and its rulers, having lost vast amounts of territories on their western frontiers.

According to Akcam, the Ottoman authorities were especially irritated about the fact that they lost these territories to Christian Bulgarians and Greeks. This brought an end to Turkish reign over the Balkans, which was under their control for over six hundred years. After losing the Balkans, the Turkish authorities feared that eventually Christian Armenians in the eastern frontier of the Ottoman Empire would demand their own independence as well, backed by the Russians. The Russians were already stationed in Eastern Armenia, because Armenia at that time was split between the Turks and Russians. Armenians, now seen as a threat to the Ottoman Empire, were about to witness the first wave of violence used against them by the state; the first wave of massacres against the Ottoman Armenians came from 1894 to 1896 by the orders of Sultan Abdul Hamid II. By the end of these horrific massacres, around 300,000 Armenians had perished. These massacres would eventually be known to present day historians as the Hamidian massacres. But the events of 1894 to 1896 would not be the end of the tragedies which the Armenian people and nation would endure.

Akcam writes that the young Turks who were rising to power in 1906 were not only bringing new ideologies to the Ottoman Empire; their main goal was that Christians could live in the Ottoman Empire, as long as they recognized that the Turks were their leaders. The goal of the young Turks was to build an empire that would be called Pan-Turkism. The purpose of this empire was to eventually eliminate both Armenians and other Christians stretching from the plains of Anatolia to Central Asia. By doing this, the Turks would eventually build an empire uniting all Turkish-speaking people together. In 1909, another wave of massacres was carried out against the Armenian Population, this time in the Adana Province. This particular massacre would be known to many historians and scholars as the Adana Massacre, leaving roughly 30,000 Armenians dead.

Violence continued to escalate and, on the eve of April 24, 1915, Armenian intellectuals – including doctors, lawyers and diplomats – were gathered and eventually killed in Istanbul. Ottoman authorities then moved on to exterminating women, children and elderly Armenians. This would eventually be known as the starting point of the Armenian genocide. Akcam writes that one of the three main perpetrators of the Armenian genocide was a man named Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founding father and first president of the modern day Republic of Turkey. The others were Enver Pasha and Talat Pasha; these three men wanted the Armenians eliminated from the land. According to Akcam, young Armenian males serving in the Ottoman Army at that time were automatically rounded up and brutally killed. Armenians were accused of betraying the Ottoman Empire by siding with the Russians in a fight for the reestablishment of the Armenian nation after 600 years of Ottoman rule. After all, the Armenians saw Russians as the only Christian people who could save them after being persecuted by the Muslim Ottoman Turks for so many centuries. These killings were witnessed by many diplomats from around the world, as well as journalists who were in the area at that time. At the end of the Armenian genocide on April 24, more than 1.5 million people were dead.

There are many reasons why the present day Republic of Turkey continuously denies the Armenian genocide, as Akcam highlights in his book. Some of the reasons are that Turkish society itself is not ready to admit that what happened to the Ottoman Armenians could be constituted as genocide. The government has been hiding from its own population regarding this issue. If Turkey did admit that it perpetrated the Armenian genocide, what would the state give back to the heirs of those victims? After all, the Armenians had their property and belongings confiscated before being killed. Would the government be willing to compensate the Republic of Armenia and Armenians worldwide? Akcam explains that there are many questions which may arise, when and if Turkey eventually takes responsibility and recognizes the Armenian genocide.



Book Information

A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility

By Taner Akcam (2007)

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