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Israel and Poland Find It Difficult to Acknowledge the Facts of History

The Israelis have been mighty pissed off with the Polish government these past few days. I don't blame them. In fact – and I'm not referring to the racist, extremist military occupation government of Benjamin Netanyahu – the Israeli people and Jews around the world are quite right to be enraged at Poland's latest Holocaust denialism.

The Polish decision to criminalise any accusation of Polish complicity in the Holocaust, passing a law which effectively prevents any Pole from acknowledging that Poles themselves assisted in the genocide of six million European Jews, is iniquitous. Its purpose is not to elicit the truth, but to bury it. It certainly constitutes part of the denialism of the Jewish Holocaust.

But – to give a taster to what this column is also about – I will say one word: Armenia. And reveal henceforth one of the most remarkable coincidences in recent publishing history. It involves century-old telegrams – hitherto regarded as forgeries, but in fact real – ordering the mass extermination of more than one million Christians, a truly courageous Turkish historian, and a total denial of the Armenian Holocaust by the one nation which should acknowledge its existence. But first, Poland.

So let's get the facts – “just the facts, Ma'am, just the facts,” as Sgt Joe Friday never actually said in *Dragnet* – out of the way. Jews accounted for 10 per cent of the Polish population in 1939. Pre-war Polish governments took anti-Semitic measures to exclude Jews from important state posts. When the Germans invaded, they regarded the Poles as

Slavic “untermenschen”, but understood all too well how latent anti-Semitism stained the Christian nationalist state of Poland.

Poland lost two million non-Jewish citizens at the hands of the Nazis. Polish Jews were virtually annihilated. Many Poles hid Jews from the Nazis and fought alongside them against the Wehrmacht and the SS.

But the Germans used Polish police forces to guard Jewish ghettos, the last transit point before the Jews were sent in their tens of thousands to the extermination camps on Polish soil. No, they were not “Polish death camps” – both the Poles and the Israelis agree on that – but Polish collaborators (the “Blue Police”) did enforce curfews against Jews and assisted in the liquidation of the ghettos.

There is clear and unimpeachable evidence that some (perhaps more than “some”) Poles blackmailed Jews in return for keeping their hiding places secret. In eastern Polish towns, Poles in a few cases participated in the murder of their Jewish neighbours. The massacre at Jedwabne comes to mind. But Poles were the first to reveal the facts of the Jewish Holocaust to the Allies, and at least one Polish resistance group saved thousands of Jewish lives by producing forged papers and finding escape routes for Jews.

As in most German-occupied European nations, morality – or immorality – was coloured grey. Think Vichy, and the French “maquis”. Think Italian fascism, and the Italian communist resistance.

In 2015, Ukraine passed laws that forced its citizens to honour nationalists who briefly collaborated with the Nazis and participated in the mass killing of Jews. No uproar from the West, of course, since we currently support brave little Ukraine against the Russian beast that has gobbled up Crimean Sevastopol.

But now to the incredible timing of the Polish legislation. For even as this disreputable law was actually passing through the parliament in Warsaw a few days ago, that most brave of Turkish historians, Taner Akcam, was publishing a short but revelatory book (*Killing Orders*, published by Palgrave Macmillan) which proves, finally and conclusively, that the extermination orders of Talat Pasha, a leader of the Young Turks and one of the Three Pashas who ruled the Ottoman Empire in the First World War, to destroy the entire Armenian Christian population in 1915 were real.

Not forgeries as Turkey’s apologists and denial historians would have the world believe. Not concocted by Armenian counterfeiters, or fiction created by a non-existent Ottoman official, as these wretched people would have us think. But as copper-bottomed and

terrible as the Nazi documents which prove Germany's responsibility for the Jewish Holocaust – and the evidence that proves Poles sometimes joined in the slaughter.

The facts of the Armenian Holocaust – for “Shoah” (holocaust) is the very word that many honourable Israelis use for the Armenian genocide – are well known but need, however briefly, to be repeated. In 1915 and in the immediate years that followed, the Ottoman Turks deliberately set out to liquidate a million and a half of their Armenian Christian citizens, sending them into the desert on death marches, butchering the men, raping the women, spitting the children on bayonets or starving them to death with their mothers and other family members in what is now northern Syria.

The Kurds, sorry to say, assisted in this barbarity. Taner Akcam has written extensively and with immense authority on this appalling period of Turkish history – which the Turkish government, to this day, shamefully denies – and has as a result been abused by hundreds of right-wing Turkish extremists who have even tried to place him on an American “terrorist” list (he teaches at Clark University in the US).

Akcam's new book contains a dark and haunting – almost frightening – geography, for most of the 1915 massacres he writes about took place in or near towns which carry their own fearful message of slaughter and horror to us today: Mosul, Raqqa, Deir ez-Zour and, yes, Aleppo.

It was in the Baron Hotel in Aleppo – still standing today, the descendants of the then owner Mazlouyan still (just) occupying its lobby – that a set of original telegrams from Talat Pasha, along with other liquidation messages memorised by an Ottoman official, Naim Bey, were handed over to an Armenian Holocaust survivor called Aram Andonian. He paid cash for the documents. We don't know how much.

Until now, Turkish historians and their supporters in the West have regarded these vital papers as false. They claimed that Naim Bey did not exist, that Andonian was a forger, that the cypher in which Talat's telegrams were written did not match the Ottoman cypher system of the time. They ignored the mass of evidence presented to the existing but quickly suppressed post-war trials in Istanbul, archives which subsequently went missing. And they held up telegrams – real enough but deliberately misleading – that “proved” Talat had the best interests of the Armenians at heart when he deported them.

Akcam's unravelling of the truth is both a detective story and a volume of sudden, inconceivable horror. He proves the cypher numbers were real, that Naim Bey did indeed exist; an Ottoman document on a corruption investigation – in which Turkish officials accepted bribes from Armenians in return for their lives – identifies him as “Naim Effendi,

the son of Huseyin Nuri, 26 years of age, from Silifke, former dispatch official for Meskene, currently the official in charge of Municipal Grain Storage Depots”. And more powerfully than any previous historian, Akcam proves – along with papers from the archive of a dead Armenian priest – that the Ottoman authorities were sending two sets of telegrams about the Armenians. One set expressed the government’s insistence that food and tents should be provided for Armenian deportees and that their confiscated property should be recompensed. The other set insisted upon their secret liquidation, preferably away from the cameras of prying US diplomats (America was neutral until 1917) and German officers allied to the Turkish army.

The Nazis told their Jewish victims that they were going to be “resettled” in the east rather than gassed. They also tried to cover the traces of the gas chambers of Treblinka before the Red Army arrived. But the “double” instructions sent by Talat Pasha and his 1915 genociders demonstrate that the pretence of humanitarian resettlement was conceived even before the organised genocide began. Some of the young German officers who witnessed the killings of 1915 turned up 26 years later in the Soviet Union, overseeing the slaughter of Jews.

And here is one very short account (courtesy of the Turkish historian Akcam) of an Armenian witness to his people’s destruction, which could – if the identities and locations were changed to the Ukraine or Belarus – have been written during the Second World War: “In order to eliminate the last remaining Armenian deportees...between Aleppo and Deyr-i Zor [sic] who had managed to survive...Hakki Bey...evicted all the deportees along the Euphrates, starting from Aleppo... Close to 300 young men and boys...surviving in the camp Hamam were sent to the South in a special convoy... Solid reports about them arrived that they had been killed in Rakka [sic]... Elsewhere, we learned in no uncertain terms that in the area around Samiye, 300 children were thrown into a cave opening, gas was poured in and they were burned alive.”

So here’s the real hypocrisy of this story. The Israeli government, so outraged by Poland’s Jewish Holocaust denialism, refuses to recognise the Armenian Holocaust. Shimon Peres himself said that “we reject attempts to create a similarity between the [Jewish] Holocaust and the Armenian allegations. Nothing similar to the Holocaust occurred. What the Armenians went through is a tragedy, but not genocide.”

The Americans, I should add – Trump included, of course – have been equally pathetic in their failure to acknowledge the Armenian truth. But oddly, not Poland.

For 13 years ago, the Polish parliament passed a bill which specifically referred to the “Armenian genocide”. The speaker of the Polish parliament, Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz, said at the time that the Armenian genocide did indeed take place, that responsibility fell on the Turks, and that Turkish documents – though not yet those which Akcam has just revealed – “confirm” this.

So there you have it. Poland punishes anyone who speaks of Polish participation in the Jewish Holocaust, but accepts the Armenian Holocaust. Israel insists that all must acknowledge the Jewish Holocaust – and Poland’s peripheral guilt – but will not acknowledge the Armenian Holocaust.

Mercifully, Israeli scholars like Israel Charny do so. And mercifully, Turks like Taner Akcam agree. But how many times must the dead die all over again for nations to accept the facts of history?