

## CHAPTER 10

# ‘It’s Happening Again’ Genocide, Denial, Exile and Trauma

Armen Gakavian

This essay explores the ways in which survivors of the Armenian Genocide and their descendants have responded to the ongoing trauma of the genocide in the last three decades. In 1986, Donald E Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller published a chapter identifying six responses to the genocide, drawing on their oral history work: repression, rationalisation, resignation, reconciliation, rage and revenge.<sup>526</sup> In this essay I offer two extensions to this typology. First, I suggest a seventh response that has emerged in recent years: engagement with the Turkish government, civil society and individuals. Second, building on the

---

<sup>526</sup> Donald E Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller, ‘An Oral History Perspective on Responses to the Armenian Genocide’, in *The Armenian Genocide in Perspective*, ed. Richard G Hovannisian (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1986), 187–204. Miller and Miller later published their findings in a book, *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

---

### How to cite this book chapter:

Gakavian, A. 2020. ‘It’s Happening Again’: Genocide, Denial, Exile and Trauma. In: Marczak, N. and Shields, K. (eds.) *Genocide Perspectives VI: The Process and the Personal Cost of Genocide*. Pp. 177–191. Sydney: UTS ePRESS. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5130/aaf.k>. License: CC BY-NC-ND

findings of Miller and Miller<sup>527</sup> and of Ani Kalayjian and Marian Weisberg,<sup>528</sup> I explore how the continuing sense of exile, the unresolved trauma of the genocide and denial by Turkish governments have fuelled the fear that the genocide 'is happening again.' This fear has shaped the response by Armenians to events in the last three decades: in Armenia (the 1988 earthquake, the 1991–94 war with Azerbaijan and the 2016 Four-Day War); in Azerbaijan (pogroms against Armenians in 1987–90); and in the Middle East (the Syrian civil war and the brief occupation of Kessab by the Syrian opposition in 2014).

### Exile and trauma

Classic diasporas are characterised by 'a collective trauma, a banishment, where one dreamed of home but lived in exile.'<sup>529</sup> Exile and dispersion have been, in one form or another, part of the Armenian experience since the sixth century AD. Those who have remained in the homeland have lived with the constant *threat* of exile, domination or annihilation, with these experiences becoming 'normalised'.

The genocide of the Armenians, launched by the Ottoman Turkish government during World War One and completed by its successor Kemalist state, created conditions of exile and trauma on an unprecedented scale. Up to 1.5 million Armenians were killed, and hundreds of thousands were forcibly converted to Islam or deported into the Syrian Desert.<sup>530</sup> The millennia-old Armenian homeland was emptied of its indigenous inhabitants in what former Armenian Foreign Minister Raffi Hovannisian has referred to as the 'Great National Dispossession',<sup>531</sup> with survivors eventually scattered across the world

---

<sup>527</sup> Donald E Miller, 'The Role of Historical Memory in Interpreting Events in the Republic of Armenia', in *Remembrance and Denial: The Case of the Armenian Genocide*, ed. Richard G Hovannisian (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998).

<sup>528</sup> Ani Kalayjian and Marian Weisberg, 'Generational Impact of Mass Trauma: The Post-Ottoman Turkish Genocide of the Armenians', in *Jihad and Sacred Vengeance*, eds. JS Piven, C Boyd, and HW Lawton (New York: Writers Club Press, 2002), 254–79.

<sup>529</sup> Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (London: UCL Press, 1997), ix.

<sup>530</sup> Greeks and Assyrians were also subjected to genocide, with an estimated 1,000,000 killed.

<sup>531</sup> See, for example, Raffi Hovannisian, 'Forward To The Past: Russia, Turkey, And Armenia's Faith', *RadioFreeEurope, RadioLiberty*, October 21, 2008, [https://www.rferl.org/a/commentary\\_Russia\\_Turkey\\_Armenia/1331509.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/commentary_Russia_Turkey_Armenia/1331509.html), accessed April 10, 2019.

or making their way to the newly declared independent Republic of Armenia that lasted from 1918 to 1920.<sup>532</sup>

Kalayjian and Weisberg's 2002 study documented the transmission of the trauma of the genocide to the second and third generations.<sup>533</sup> Eight participants aged 22 to 78, consisting of both survivors and their offspring, all reported feelings of grief, sadness, anger, pain and confusion over the genocide and its continued denial by the Turkish government, experiencing this denial as 'an attack on their personhood, feeling like a non-person'.<sup>534</sup> Both survivors and their offspring reported a distrust of outsiders and 'deep and intense feelings of helplessness', mostly in response to persistent Turkish denial.<sup>535</sup> They found that 'anger that was not expressed internally was expressed horizontally: toward one another, to other Armenians, toward the facilitators in the workshop'.<sup>536</sup> Offspring of survivors felt 'like orphans: no roots, no relatives, no uncles and great aunts'. Importantly, they felt 'burdened by having to carry emotional memories of previous generations', for which 'some second-generation respondents reported resentment'.<sup>537</sup>

In both the diaspora and Armenia, events throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries reinforced the sense of exile and made the healing of the post-genocide trauma more difficult. Among the diasporan communities, this trauma was compounded by the growing realisation that exile was now permanent. The creation of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1922 confirmed Armenia's re-absorption into the Russia sphere, and any chance of regaining independence and returning from exile now seemed lost. The second wave of emigration during and after World War Two from the long-established Middle Eastern and European communities to North and South America and Australia, pushed the epicentre of the diaspora further away from the homeland, making it more difficult to contemplate return if Armenia were to regain independence. For those living in Soviet Armenia and in other parts of the Soviet Union, a series of events reinforced the sense of trauma: the Stalinist purges of the 1930s and the exile of thousands to Siberia were followed by heavy losses during World War Two, and more recently the earthquake in 1988, the pogroms in Azerbaijan, the war over Nagorno-Karabakh (*Artsakh* in Armenian) in the 1990s, the Four-Day War in 2016 and the ongoing economic, political and

---

<sup>532</sup> The independent Republic of Armenia was established, along with the Republics of Georgia and Azerbaijan, following the Bolshevik Revolution and collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917. It was reabsorbed into what was by then communist Russia in 1920, and became one of the 15 republics of the Soviet Union in 1922.

<sup>533</sup> Kalayjian and Weisberg, 'Generational Impact'.

<sup>534</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>535</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>536</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>537</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

social challenges in post-Soviet Armenia leading to mass emigration from the homeland.

These conditions created what poet Vahe Oshagan refers to as a sense of ‘constant vigilance’—‘sleeping with one eye open.’<sup>538</sup> The unresolved post-genocide trauma, along with the ongoing denial of the genocide by Turkey, is key to understanding the response of many Armenians to those events, particularly in the last three decades.

### Responses to the genocide and to Turkish denial

In 1986, Donald and Lorna Miller carried out in-depth interviews with 92 Armenian Genocide survivors in California. They identified six responses to the experience of genocide: repression, rationalisation, resignation, reconciliation, rage and revenge.<sup>539</sup> Miller and Miller argued that an individual’s experience of these six responses is often sequential, though there is overlap between stages and different people experience each stage differently. Their research showed how individual responses are shaped, among other things, by the extent and type of trauma, by pre- and post-genocide positive or negative interactions with Turkish people, and by the level of involvement in the Armenian community and its religious, political and cultural organisations.<sup>540</sup>

I suggest that Miller and Miller’s typology also describes the *collective* Armenian response to both the genocide itself and to its denial by successive Turkish governments. Furthermore, I suggest that, in the decades since Miller and Miller developed their typology, there has emerged a seventh response: engagement with Turkish government, civil society and individuals. This seventh response is qualitatively different to the previous six responses, in that it has an outward, positive focus. I also explore how the ongoing trauma of the genocide and its denial have fuelled the fear that the genocide ‘is happening again’, shaping the response by many Armenians to events in the homeland and the Middle East in the last three decades.

#### Repression, rationalisation, resignation and reconciliation (1918–1965)

Repression, rationalisation, resignation and reconciliation are inward-looking, essentially reactive responses to trauma. Repression involves ‘putting a lid on’ painful memories as a way of coping with past events that are ‘too horrible to

---

<sup>538</sup> Notes from lectures by Vahe Oshagan at Macquarie University, Sydney, in 1992–93.

<sup>539</sup> Miller, ‘An Oral,’ 187–202.

<sup>540</sup> *Ibid.*, 189–190.

contemplate.<sup>541</sup> The sheer trauma of the genocide, along with ‘survivor guilt’,<sup>542</sup> left the Armenian exiles numb, with barely enough motivation to focus on personal survival and the preservation of their cultural heritage in the face of ‘white massacre’ (*jermag chart* or assimilation without bloodshed).<sup>543</sup> Aside from the targeted assassination of members of the former Committee for Union and Progress (Young Turk) government in the 1920s, the desire for justice and recognition of the genocide by Turkey and the world did not translate into consistent, organised political activism until 1965.

Rationalisation can take the form of political, pragmatic or religious explanations for a traumatic experience. Miller and Miller found that, while many survivors were reluctant to allow repressed memories to resurface, they tried to give meaning to the genocide. Some viewed the genocide as a means of ‘salvation’; that is, as an opportunity for personal and collective religious or political awakening, while others suggested that exile from the homeland provided better opportunities for long-term national flourishing.<sup>544</sup> The Armenian Apostolic, Catholic and Protestant churches have drawn on sacred concepts of martyrdom, death-burial-resurrection, moral victory and redemption through suffering to make sense of the genocide and its aftermath.<sup>545</sup> However, beyond these basic rationalisations, there has been little philosophical or theological reflection on the meaning and impact of the genocide, making it difficult for diasporan thinkers and leaders to achieve true ‘reconciliation’ with self and the Turkish nation due to the inability to derive meaning from the genocide.<sup>546</sup>

As memories become submerged beneath the realities of everyday life, and simplistic rationalisations seem increasingly inadequate, resignation expresses a sense of helplessness in the face of a past that cannot be changed and of a recognition that is increasingly elusive. The sense of resignation was fuelled by the international community’s abandonment of Armenia in the immediate post-war period, whose recognition of Kemalist Turkey and its borders in 1923, along with the sovietisation of the Armenian Republic, removed any hope for

---

<sup>541</sup> Miller, ‘An Oral’, 192.

<sup>542</sup> Lorne Shirinian, ‘Survivor Memoirs of the Armenian Genocide as Cultural History’, in *Remembrance and Denial*, ed. Richard G Hovannisian (Detroit: Wayne State University Press), 171–72.

<sup>543</sup> Rouben Manuel Torossian, ‘The Contemporary Armenian Nationalist Movement’ (PhD diss., United States International University, 1980), 48.

<sup>544</sup> Miller, ‘An Oral’, 193–94.

<sup>545</sup> For discussion of religious explanations for the Genocide, see for example Leonardo Alishan, ‘Crucifixion Without “The Cross”: The Impact of the Genocide on Armenian Literature’, *Armenian Review* 38, no. 1 (1985): 27–50; and Vigen Guroian, ‘When Remembering Brings Redemption: Faith and the Armenian Genocide’, *Liturgia Special Issue* 3 (1993): 77–88.

<sup>546</sup> Alishan, ‘Crucifixion Without’, 149.

return or recognition. Meanwhile, the Turkification of Armenian place names in historical Armenian lands was completed by the 1930s.

French-Armenian writer Shahan Shahnour expressed this sense of resignation in his novel, *Nahanch Arants Yerki (Retreat without Song)*, published in 1929, in which six Parisian survivors of the genocide angrily reflect on their powerlessness in the face of the pressures of assimilation:

Parents, sons, uncles, and sons-in-law, retreat;  
 customs, conceptions, morals, and love, retreat.  
 The language retreats, the language retreats, the language retreats.  
 And we are still retreating in words and in deed,  
 willingly and unwillingly, knowingly and unknowingly:  
 forgive them, forgive them, Ararat!<sup>547</sup>

Reconciliation is an acceptance of things as they are, but unlike resignation it involves a conscious decision. Reconciliation on an individual level might involve confronting one's own anger, or concluding that disasters are 'part of life' and that one needs to 'move on', or beginning to recount stories of Turks who saved them. However, until the perpetrator acknowledges their crime, full reconciliation is impossible. Miller and Miller found that 'Turkey's current denial campaign simply fuels feelings of resentment and hostility' among survivors. Denial is the 'salt' that is rubbed into the open wound.<sup>548</sup> Collectively, this means that it is difficult for the nation to 'be at peace' within itself.

### Rage and revenge (1965–2001)

Fifty years of Turkish denial and continuing exile have made full reconciliation impossible, and have given birth to rage and, in some cases, revenge. While rage is generally an 'internalised' emotion, revenge is the acting out of these 'hostile feelings' or giving approval to others who do so.<sup>549</sup>

Among some Armenians, rage was and continues to be expressed in the form of hatred towards the Turkish population and for anything Turkish: boycotting Turkish goods; avoiding travel to Turkey; expressing anger at annual commemorative events; or preventing their children from befriending Turks. However, 1965 marked the beginning of the politicisation of that rage; that is, its outward expression in non-violent form. Aside from ongoing Turkish denial, the emergence of activist rage was triggered by several factors: the

<sup>547</sup> From Shahan Shahnour, *Retreat Without Song*, cited in Hagop Oshagan, *Hai Kraganoutiun [Armenian Literature]* (Jerusalem: St. James Patriarchate Press, 1942), 634–35.

<sup>548</sup> Miller, 'An Oral', 195–98.

<sup>549</sup> *Ibid.*, 198–200.

environment of activism in the Western world of the 1960s; the symbolism of the 50-year anniversary; the tensions of the Cold War; and the emergence of a second generation of diasporans who carried the historical memory ('trauma by proxy')<sup>550</sup> but who did not carry the burden of repressed memories.

On 24 April 1965, the government of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic held an official commemoration of the genocide. While delegates inside the theatre delivered solemn and cautious speeches, over 100,000 people gathered outside calling for the return of Turkish occupied Armenian lands.<sup>551</sup> On the same day, services commemorating the genocide were held in diasporan communities throughout the world. As a result of this awakening, Armenian National Committees were established throughout the world to pursue the 'Armenian Cause', by lobbying world governments for official recognition of the genocide.

This recognition was slow to come. Rage turned into revenge for some Armenians who saw violence as a means of expressing their frustration with ongoing Turkish denial and of expediting international recognition.<sup>552</sup> In 1973, a lone gunman, genocide survivor Gourgen Yanikian, assassinated the Turkish Consul and Vice-Consul in Los Angeles. Over the next decade, a number of Armenian terrorist organisations were formed that targeted Turkish consular staff, businesses and citizens around the world.<sup>553</sup> Cohen suggests that 'it is easy to see that the 60-year silence about the genocide and the obstinate denials of the Turkish government were at some point going to provoke open rage rather than resignation and repressed anger'.<sup>554</sup> While violence is never an inevitable (or justifiable) expression of trauma, terrorism was an act of desperation by those who lived with either the direct or inherited unresolved trauma of the genocide.

Armenian response to the terror attacks was mixed. Most Armenians in the United States were opposed to terrorism,<sup>555</sup> and the acts of terror were publicly

---

<sup>550</sup> Amanda Wise, *Exile and Return Among the East Timorese* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 11.

<sup>551</sup> Richard Hrair Dekmejian, 'Soviet-Turkish Relations and Politics in the Armenian SSR', *Soviet Studies* 19, no. 4 (1968): 513–15.

<sup>552</sup> Khachig Tololyan, 'Cultural Narrative and the Motivation of the Terrorist', *Journal of Strategic Studies, Special Issue: Inside Terrorist Organizations* 10, no. 4 (1987): 226.

<sup>553</sup> See Torossian, 'Contemporary Armenian,' 231–37, for a complete list of Armenian terrorist organisations and a breakdown of terrorist activities until 1980.

<sup>554</sup> Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 54.

<sup>555</sup> Anny Bakalian states that 65 per cent of the American-Armenians she interviewed did not agree with terrorism as a means of furthering the Armenian cause. The percentage was highest among American-born Armenians. Anny Bakalian, *Armenian-Americans: From Being to Feeling Armenian* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1993), 53–54.

condemned by most Armenian organisations. However, a number of Armenian writers and commentators expressed sympathy with the frustration that had given impetus to the killings, and some media outlets even praised the ‘bravery’ of the terrorists.<sup>556</sup> By appealing to ‘shared symbols’<sup>557</sup> associated with the Armenian revolutionary movements in the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century<sup>558</sup>—martyrdom, justice and revenge—terrorists were able to appeal to the popular imagination. In any case, the spate of terrorist attacks succeeded in placing the issue of the genocide and its ongoing denial on the global agenda.

In response to Armenian lobbying and terrorism, the Turkish government launched a propaganda counter-offensive. Beginning with the publication of booklets distributed to governments, embassies and libraries across the world, the denial campaign grew into a multi-million dollar industry, with a large proportion of the funds spent paying public relations firms in Washington DC in an attempt to prevent the US President, Congress and Senate from publicly affirming the genocide. Turkish Studies Chairs were established in the United States, funded by the Turkish government and often run by known denialists of the Armenian Genocide. In Australia, in 1988, Turkish consular representatives attempted to prevent the Centre for Comparative Genocide Studies at Macquarie University, Sydney—the forerunner of the Australian Institute for Holocaust and Genocide Studies—from teaching the Armenian Genocide. The ongoing denial of the genocide has had a profound psychological impact on the Armenian survivors and on subsequent generations:<sup>559</sup> ‘The distortion of the truth impacts directly upon his own identity, and therefore the identity

---

<sup>556</sup> For examples of overt or tacit support in the Armenia press, see Torossian, ‘Contemporary Armenian.’

<sup>557</sup> Jenny Phillips, *Symbol, Myth and Rhetoric: The Politics of Culture in an Armenian-American Population* (New York: AMS Press, 1989), 142.

<sup>558</sup> A number of Armenian nationalist revolutionary groups and parties formed in the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth century. Of these, two continue to operate today: the Social Democrat Hunchak Party, founded in 1887 by a group of students in Geneva; and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation founded in 1890 in Tbilisi, Russia (now in Georgia). These parties initially pursued the recognition of Armenian minority rights within the Ottoman Empire, but later sought independence for Armenians. They engaged in both terrorist and self-defensive acts in pursuit of their goals.

<sup>559</sup> Vigen Guroian, ‘Collective Responsibility and Official Excuse Making: The Case of the Turkish Genocide of the Armenians’, in *The Armenian Genocide in Perspective*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1986), 135–36; and Leo Hamalian, ‘The Armenian Genocide and the Literary Imagination’, in *The Armenian Genocide in Perspective*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1986), 153–203, *passim*.

of his children, because their identity formation is so closely tied to his own perceptions and feelings about himself, his past, and his worth.<sup>560</sup>

### Engagement (2001–present)

As an alternative to rage and revenge, I suggest that some Armenians have more recently adopted a seventh response to the genocide and its denial: engagement with Turkish government, civil groups and individuals. This has involved reflection on the current reality and a re-adjustment of goals and methods, and is qualitatively different to the previous six responses in that it has an outward, positive focus.

On the Armenian side, engagement has been prompted by the conditions of their host countries, in particular Europe, the United States of America, Canada and Australia, where Armenian intellectuals and community members alike have the opportunity to interact with their Turkish peers in a less restrictive environment. In addition, since a large number of countries have now formally recognised the Armenian Genocide, there has been a call by some Armenians to move from a strategy of seeking recognition to seeking reparations.<sup>561</sup>

On the Turkish side, a growing number of journalists, scholars and other leaders have publicly acknowledged the Armenian Genocide, or have recognised that Armenians died as a result of government-sponsored massacres rather than employing the previous euphemisms of 'mutual massacres' or 'civil war'. This is despite Turkish laws prohibiting such acknowledgement.<sup>562</sup> Early Turkish voices included prominent authors Elif Şafak and Orhan Pamuk, and historian Taner Akçam who has gained access to Ottoman records and written a number of important books outlining Turkish responsibility for the genocide. More recently, journalist Hasan Cemal, the grandson of Cemal Paşa who was one of the Young Turk triumvirate responsible for the Armenian Genocide, has acknowledged the reality of the genocide.

---

<sup>560</sup> Levon Boyajian and Haigaz Grigorian, 'Psychosocial Sequelae of the Armenian Genocide', in *The Armenian Genocide in Perspective*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1986), 183.

<sup>561</sup> For example Harut Sassounian, 'Genocide Recognition and a Quest for Justice', *Loyola of Los Angeles International and Comparative Law Review* 32, no. 115 (2010): 115–22.

<sup>562</sup> The first part of Turkish Penal Code 301 reads: 'A person who publicly denigrates the Turkish Nation, the State of the Turkish Republic or the Grand National Assembly of Turkey and the judicial institutions of the State shall be punishable by imprisonment from 6 months to 2 years'. The code has been used to charge authors, writers and activists who use the term 'Armenian Genocide'.

The Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission (TARC, 2001–04) was the first major attempt at organised dialogue between Armenians and Turks. TARC highlighted the challenges of such engagement: conflicting agendas; the involvement of known denialists on the Turkish side; and the involvement of third party governments. Nevertheless, TARC created a precedent for civil society engagement. The assassination of Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink in January 2007 gave further impetus to grassroots initiatives in Armenian-Turkish relations. Gatherings to commemorate Dink's death were held throughout the world, initiated by members of the Armenian, Turkish and Kurdish communities. Also, the 'I Apologise' campaign, launched in December 2008 in Turkey by a group of academics, journalists and others, was endorsed by over 30,000 signatories. The apology stated: 'My conscience does not accept the insensitivity showed [sic] to and the denial of the Great Catastrophe that the Ottoman Armenians were subjected to in 1915. I reject this injustice and for my share, I empathise with the feelings and pain of my Armenian brothers. I apologise to them.'<sup>563</sup> Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan refused to endorse the apology campaign, arguing that Turkey had done nothing for which to apologise.<sup>564</sup> Instead, in a statement made on 23 April 2013, he called the 'mass killings' by Ottoman forces 'inhuman' and offered his 'condolences' to the grandchildren of those killed. However, he embedded his comments in the language of 'shared pain', arguing that all Ottoman citizens suffered and that it was 'inadmissible' for these events to be used as a way of stirring up hostility against Turkey today.<sup>565</sup> Erdoğan's comments came against the backdrop of the failed Armenian-Turkish Protocols initiated by Turkey in 2009, aimed at restoring diplomatic relations with Armenia and opening up discussion about the genocide. The impetus for this initiative came from Erdoğan's initial push for entry into the European Union, and subsequently from his desire to raise Turkey's profile in regional affairs. In the end, the Protocols were buried, in part due to Turkey's insistence that Armenian forces withdraw from Nagorno-Karabakh as a pre-condition.<sup>566</sup>

<sup>563</sup> *Özür diliyorum* (I Apologise), <http://www.ozurdiliyoruz.com/>. The site has since been shut down and the signatories punished under Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code—see "'Özür diliyorum" yine takip altında', *Radikal*, March 3, 2009, [www.radikal.com.tr/turkiye/ozur-diliyorum-yine-takip-altinda-924313/](http://www.radikal.com.tr/turkiye/ozur-diliyorum-yine-takip-altinda-924313/), accessed October 10, 2018.

<sup>564</sup> İlgili Gündem Haberleri, 'Turkish PM Says Apology Campaign to Armenians Unacceptable', *Hurriyet Daily News*, December 17, 2008, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/domestic/10587736.asp>, accessed October 10, 2018.

<sup>565</sup> Constanze Letsch, 'Turkish PM Offers Condolences Over 1915 Armenian Massacre', *Guardian*, April 24, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/23/turkey-erdogan-condolences-armenian-massacre>, accessed October 10, 2018.

<sup>566</sup> For the text of the Protocols and a discussion of the reasons for their suspension, see David L Phillips, Michael Lemmon, and Thomas de Waal,

The response from Armenians to these initiatives is mixed. Some have viewed them as a 'crack' in the wall of denial, seeing the narrative of 'shared pain' as an improvement on the argument that 'it never happened, but they deserved it anyway'. However, critics pointed out that the language and content of the 'I Apologise' campaign were problematic and that Armenians were not consulted in formulating the wording.<sup>567</sup> They saw Erdoğan's comments as an attempt to 'soften' the Armenians in the lead-up to the 100th anniversary of the genocide in 2015. Overall, critics saw Turkish efforts as a way of strengthening Turkey (rather than bringing about justice for the Armenians), or of simply neutralising Armenian efforts at obtaining recognition and reparation while reinforcing the unequal power relations between Armenians and Turks.

The narrative of 'it's happening again' has been a strong factor in shaping the response of some Armenians to these apologies. For many, it is difficult to trust any Turkish overtures. This distrust is shaped by previous experience. When the Young Turks came to power in 1908, Armenians were promised reforms that would give them equal rights within the Ottoman Empire. By 1915, the Armenian dream of freedom and fraternity under the Young Turks had transformed into a genocidal nightmare.

### Unresolved trauma, re-traumatisation and 'history repeating'

So far, I have explored how the seven responses to the genocide and its denial have been experienced sequentially. Yet the unresolved nature of the trauma means that it is possible for Armenians to continue to experience a number of different responses at any given time. For example, a genocide survivor might relive rage or resignation, or even the very same emotions they experienced during the genocide itself, in the face of fresh trauma.

On 8 December 1988, a magnitude 6.8 earthquake struck northern Armenia. The earthquake flattened several villages and a major town, Spitak, and caused severe damage to Armenia's second largest city, Gyumri. The death toll was estimated at between 25,000 and 50,000, with 130,000 injured and up to half a million rendered homeless. In her work among earthquake survivors, Anie Kalayjian found that some elderly survivors who had lived through the genocide

---

*Diplomatic History: The Turkish-Armenian Protocols* (Harvard: Institute for the Study of Human Rights, 2012), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2012/04/17/diplomatic-history-turkey-armenia-protocols-event-3630>, accessed October 10, 2018. For background to the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, see the next section.

<sup>567</sup> Ayda Erbal, 'Mea Culpas, Negotiations, Apologies: Revisiting the "Apology" of Turkish Intellectuals', in *Reconciliation, Civil Society, and the Politics of Memory: Transnational Initiatives in the 20th and 21st Century*, ed. Birgit Schwelling (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2012), 53–54.

were now experiencing nightmares of the horrors of 1915.<sup>568</sup> The fresh trauma (the earthquake) gave opportunity for the repressed trauma of the genocide to surface, with the earthquake being seen through the lens of the ‘memory of trauma’.<sup>569</sup>

Survivors and eyewitnesses of the pogroms against Armenians in Azerbaijan between 1988 and 1990 also interpreted their experience through the lens of previous trauma. Armenians had lived in what is now Azerbaijan for hundreds of years. There had been massacres and inter-ethnic conflict in the early part of the twentieth century (the Armenian-Tatar massacres in 1905–07 and three massacres of Armenians between 1918 and 1920), followed by seven decades of relative stability under Soviet rule. However, in February 1988, Azerbaijani mobs killed dozens of Armenians and looted their homes in the city of Sumgait just north of the Azerbaijani capital, Baku, with police standing by. This was followed by similar pogroms in Kirovabad, north of Nagorno-Karabakh, in November 1988, and in the capital, Baku, in January 1990.

The death toll from the pogroms ranged from the official figure of 120 to unofficial estimates of several hundred. Eerily, Harutyun Marutyan noted that ‘the method of killing was the same as that used by the Turks during the genocide’. Victims in both cases ‘were beaten, tortured, raped, and thrown out of windows, slain with metal rods and knives, chopped with axes, beheaded and burnt in fires ...’.<sup>570</sup> This similarity was confirmed by interviews conducted by Donald E. Miller with the observers of the Sumgait massacres.<sup>571</sup>

Armenians around the world immediately linked the pogroms to the genocide. Evan Pheiffer added that ‘Armenians seem incapable of separating the 1988 pogroms from the 1915 Ottoman atrocities—mention of one immediately triggers talk of the other’.<sup>572</sup> Mari Hovhannisyan noted that ‘the posters carried by the Armenians on April 24, 1988 were verifications of the fact that Armenians saw the Sumgait massacres as the continuation of the genocide. ... The events in Sumgait are the sequence of 1915 Genocide. Reluctance to acknowledge the 1915 Genocide led to the Genocide of 1988’.<sup>573</sup> As a result

<sup>568</sup> Anie Kalayjian, Rania Lee Kanazi, Christopher L. Aberson, and Lena Feygin, ‘A Cross-Cultural Study of the Psychosocial and Spiritual Impact of Natural Disaster’, *International Journal of Group Tensions* 31, no. 2 (2002): 178.

<sup>569</sup> Erica Resende and Dovile Budryte, *Memory and Trauma in International Relations: Theories, Cases and Debates* (London: Routledge, 2013), 65.

<sup>570</sup> Harutyun Marutyan, ‘Iconography of Armenian Identity: The Memory of Genocide and the Karabagh Movement’, *Gitutyun* (Yerevan: Publishing House of The National Academy of Sciences, Republic of Armenia, 2009).

<sup>571</sup> Miller, ‘The Role’, *passim*.

<sup>572</sup> Evan Pheiffer, ‘A Place to Live For’, *Jacobin*, June 1, 2016, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/06/nagorno-karabakh-armenia-azerbaijan-four-day-war/>, accessed April 10, 2019.

<sup>573</sup> Mari Hovhannisyan, *The Collective Memory of the Armenian Genocide* (Budapest: Central European University, 2010), 21–22.

of the pogroms, 350,000 Armenians fled Azerbaijan to neighbouring Armenia or Russia. As Miller and Miller point out, 'The pogroms, while horrific, did not justify in themselves the mass exodus that occurred unless viewed as the precursor to an actual genocide'.<sup>574</sup> The reason for this 'overreaction' lies in the memory of the Armenian Genocide a century earlier: the Azerbaijani 'other' was reminiscent of the Turkish 'other' of that genocide. (Azerbaijanis are a Turkic people and speak a language similar to Turkish). The Armenians of Azerbaijan were re-traumatised, fearing that 'it is happening again.' Their fears may have been well-founded: one wonders what the fate of these Armenians would have been if they had remained in Azerbaijan during the ensuing war over Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>575</sup>

The pogroms in Azerbaijan raised fears that Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh could meet a similar fate. In 1921, in an effort to appease Kemalist Turkey and the more numerous Muslim inhabitants in the region, the newly formed Soviet Union had placed the Armenian-populated enclaves of Nagorno-Karabakh and Nakhichevan under Azerbaijani control.<sup>576</sup> Large-scale demonstrations calling for greater autonomy for Nagorno-Karabakh, and eventually for re-unification with Armenia, began in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh in 1987, and gained impetus after the pogroms. Tensions escalated between Armenia and Azerbaijan,<sup>577</sup> leading to a successful referendum for Nagorno-Karabakh's independence in 1991, followed by military conflict that erupted into full-scale war in 1992 and ended with a ceasefire in 1994. By that time, the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast of Soviet times and its surrounding territories were under Armenian military and political control—a total area of approximately 12,000 square kilometres. Since then, regular peace talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan have failed to make progress, and clashes have become a regular occurrence on the frontline.

The Armenians were victorious in the war; however, the ceasefire is precarious and there remains a threat of renewed hostilities. Azerbaijan's military budget is greater than Armenia's total state budget, and the rhetoric of Azerbaijan's leadership has become increasingly bellicose.<sup>578</sup> The Four-day War in 2016

<sup>574</sup> Miller, 'The Role', 187.

<sup>575</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>576</sup> Subsequently, while Nagorno-Karabakh had retained its Armenian majority, Nakhichevan's Armenian minority reduced from 40 per cent in 1917 to 15 per cent in 1926 and 1.5 per cent in 1979, mainly through emigration to Armenia and Russia.

<sup>577</sup> For discussion of this escalation, see Armen Gakavian, 'Armenia: From Irredentism to Independence: The Dynamics of the Nagorno-Karabagh Crisis' (Honours thesis, University of Sydney, 1991).

<sup>578</sup> For example Joshua Kucera, 'Following Armenian Uprising, Azerbaijan's Saber Rattling Grows Louder', *Eurasianet*, July 3, 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/following-armenian-uprising-azerbaijans-saber-rattling-grows-louder>, accessed April 10, 2019.

confirmed Armenia's fear that war could erupt at any time. On 2 April 2016, fighting broke out between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces on the Nagorno-Karabakh frontline. As a result, dozens of soldiers and civilians were killed on both sides, and Azerbaijan obtained approximately eight to 20 square kilometres of land from Nagorno-Karabakh, marking the first time that the line of contact had shifted since 1994.<sup>579</sup> There were reports of war crimes by Azerbaijani troops, including 'torture, execution, and mutilation', and 'beheadings, ears and hands cut off, and throats cut',<sup>580</sup> again reminiscent of methods used in the genocide. The most famous case was that of three elderly members of the Khalapyan family who were discovered by Armenian photojournalist Hakob Poghosyan in the village of Talish. The family appeared to have been tortured, mutilated and killed.<sup>581</sup> A photo of the deceased family was widely circulated in the Armenian media,<sup>582</sup> again feeding the sense of 'it's happening again'.

Armenians in the Middle East have similarly experienced this sense of history repeating. Genocide survivors and their descendants were 'gripped with fear' at the possibility of mass violence against Christian minorities during the 1956 nationalist revolution in Egypt.<sup>583</sup> More recently, the advance of Islamic fundamentalism in Iraq, Egypt and Syria following the 'Arab Spring' has created a

---

<sup>579</sup> For an analysis of the causes, course and outcome of the Four-Day War, see Masis Ingilizian, 'Azerbaijan's Incremental Increase On The Nagorno Karabagh Frontline', *Bellingcat*, April 12, 2016, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/rest-of-world/2016/04/12/detailing-azerbaijans-incremental-increase-in-nagorno-karabaghs-frontline/>, accessed April 10, 2019. Estimates of the number of casualties vary. While both sides blamed the other for the hostilities, the evidence points to Azerbaijan as the instigator. Mikayel Zolyan argues that: 'Arguably, apart from testing the defences on the line of contact, the operation pursued external and internal political goals: modifying the status quo in the peace process and testing the international community's reaction to military action in the region, as well as consolidating Azerbaijani society around its ruling government'. See Mikayel Zolyan, 'The Karabakh Conflict After the "Four-Day War": A Dynamic Status Quo', *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, March 14, 2017.

<sup>580</sup> Artsakh Ombudsman's 'Second Interim Report on Atrocities Committed by Azerbaijan During the 2016 April War', *Karabakhfacts.com*, December 9, 2016, <https://karabakhfacts.com/tag/4-day-war/>, accessed April 10, 2019.

<sup>581</sup> See Maria Titizian, 'War Crimes in Spring: The Four Day War One Year On', *EVN Report*, April 1, 2017, <https://www.evnreport.com/spotlight-karabakh/war-crimes-in-spring>, accessed April 10, 2019.

<sup>582</sup> See, *inter alia*, 'Azerbaijani Soldiers Execute Elderly Armenian Couple in Artsakh; Then Cut Off Their Ears', *HETQ*, April 4, 2016, <https://hetq.am/en/article/66976>, accessed April 10, 2019.

<sup>583</sup> Based on my conversations with Egyptian-Armenian *émigrés*.

new wave of refugees and nurtured a new narrative of exile, massacre and even genocide in describing these events.

The #SaveKessab campaign of the first half of 2014 epitomised this fear. On 21 March 2014, the predominantly Armenian village of Kessab in northeastern Syria was captured by opposition forces. Most Armenian residents had been evacuated to safety in nearby towns before the capture, with only a handful of residents left behind. While the Kessab 'genocide' narrative circulated by some of the Armenian mainstream and social media did not hold up to analysis, the fact that the #SaveKessab campaign resonated so quickly and so widely, and the panic spread so easily, is telling. The sense of 'it's happening again' was fuelled by several factors: Kessab had twice before experienced deportations (in 1909 and 1915); Kessab was one of the only two remaining Armenian villages along the Mediterranean coast (the other being Vakıflı, across the border in Turkey); Turkey's involvement in allowing Islamic militant groups to cross the border into Syria aroused suspicions of Turkey's intentions regarding the Armenians; and the killing, rape, forced conversion and deportation of Christian, Yazidi and Shia minorities in Syria and Iraq by ISIS were a haunting repetition of some of the methods used during the Armenian Genocide.<sup>584</sup>

## Conclusion

The unresolved post-genocide trauma, continuing sense of exile, denial by successive Turkish governments and geopolitically driven reluctance of some countries to acknowledge the Armenian Genocide have had a profound psychological impact on the survivors of the genocide and subsequent generations. The six responses identified by Miller and Miller—repression, rationalisation, resignation, reconciliation, rage and revenge—and the more recent response of engagement provide a helpful framework for documenting this impact and explaining the fear that 'it's happening again'. This fear is key to understanding the response to events in the past three decades in Armenia (such as the earthquake and the war with Azerbaijan), Azerbaijan (pogroms) and the Middle East (the Syrian civil war and the brief occupation of Kessab). Until there is a resolution of the trauma there can be no collective healing or closure, and each subsequent traumatic experience will reinforce the fear that 'it's happening again'.

---

<sup>584</sup> For an excellent discussion of the post-genocide dynamics around events in Kessab, see Elyse Semerdjian, '#SaveKessab, #Save Aleppo, and Kim Kardashian: Syria's Rashomon Effect', *Jadaliyya*, April 24, 2014, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/30576#SaveKessab,-#Save-Aleppo,-and-Kim-Kardashian-Syria%E2%80%99s-Rashomon-Effect>, accessed October 10, 2018.