

The Enduring Testimonial Injustice of Genocide Denial

**Maria Baghramian,
School of Philosophy
University College Dublin**

The large scale massacres of Armenians, in their historic homeland of Eastern Anatolia, in the hands of Turkish forces and their henchmen, commemorated here today, took place over one hundred years ago. From a population, conservatively estimated at 2 million in 1914, only 70000 Armenians still remain in today's Turkey. The descendants of the survivors of the genocide are scattered to the four corners of the globe, and all those who witnessed and had first-hand knowledge of the atrocities are now dead. And yet this event, more than anything else, shapes the historic consciousness and sense of identity of the Armenian people.

Armenians and non-Armenians, particularly younger people, have frequently asked me how it is that an event from a different century and, in effect, from a different world plays such a pivotal role in shaping the collective psyche of the Armenian people. Why is it that we the Armenians, unlike many other victims of brutality and injustice, cannot forget and move on? Would it not be better, psychologically, economically and politically, for the Armenians to try and come to terms with a past that cannot be changed?

Today's talk is a response to that question.

The question must be understood in the context of today's commemoration.

On this day, April 24, Armenians all over the world commemorate an event that they characterise as a

genocide, a wilful attempt by the Turkish government of the time to destroy and exile their people. The Government of Turkey, on the other hand, instead of distancing itself from the acts of a very different political system insists that the tragic events of the tumultuous year of World War I should not be characterised as an act of ethnic cleansing but a consequence of the violence afflicting all during of a murderous war. Efforts to persuade the world that the massacres of the 1915 were the first systematic genocide of the 20th Century have been central to Armenian social and political life, at least for the past 50 years, and before. Successive Turkish governments, on the other hand, have intransigently refused to recognise the extent of the injustices perpetrated by their distant ancestors and continue to run a very active campaign to silence all efforts to achieve official recognition for the genocide.

Different reasons, all of them convincing in their own way, are given for the Armenians' persistence in their quest for recognition. A need for closure, the imperative of intergenerational justice, a demand for some form of official acknowledgement of guilt and reparation, a lesson for future generations and those inclined to perpetrate similar acts, are some of these responses. I do not wish to debate their validity or strength. But I would like to explore a different reason why Armenians cannot simply "move on", in the hope that the wounds of the past would heal on their own accord.

Simply put, the Armenian genocide cannot be forgotten or even forgiven by its victims because it is not just a grave injustice of the past, but also a continuing, indeed ongoing injustice perpetrated against those who have given and continue to transmit deeply felt testimonies to its truth.

The point I am trying to make needs some explanation and justification, but before doing so, let me read you

extracts from one of the testimonies of the survivors of the genocide.

Here is the testimony of Verjine Svazlian who was a girl of 7 in 1915. She remembers:

In 1914, my father was drafted into the Ottoman army from the village of Hadji-Habibli, Moussa Dagh region. [He was killed]. [When the massacres started] My young mother with her three small children ended up in a caravan of exiles into the deserts of Arabia. I remember the Turkish gendarmes came with whips in their hands and drove us forward by whipping and beating us to Der-Zor. They beat so much that an old man, right in front of me, fell down and died.

There were many people there from everywhere. The sun was very hot. There was no water. If you spat, the saliva would not reach the ground. I had a small sister. The poor one died in mother's arms, saying, 'Water, water'. Together with grandpa, we dug the earth a little, put her in there and went on.

We reached a place and that night remained there among the stones and rocks. Among us there were a few sick, old, blind, lame men; the rest were women and children. Suddenly, the Turks arrived to plunder us. My grandpa died there... We left him behind.

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I remember, at night there was no place to sleep. Mother slept on the ground, I and my sister, Khatoun, sitting near mother, braided her hair. A woman passed, looked at us and said: "Why, poor darlings, they don't know their mother has died..." We were children, how could we know that our only mother was no more?

Verjine survived because, after being taken in by an Arab family as a house servant, she eventually found her way to an orphanage set up by Christian missionaries.

Most Armenians have grown up with stories such as this, told by their parents or grandparents. These stories are

part of the fabric of who we are, for we, all of us, Irish or Armenian, are the repository of the testimonies of past generations.

Injustice comes in many forms, the injustices that Verjine had suffered are the consequences of extreme acts of physical and emotional cruelty. But, there are other forms of injustice, maybe not equal in the magnitude of physical pain and humiliation they inflict, and certainly far less visible, nevertheless they are corrosive and dehumanizing. One such injustice is what philosophers call 'testimonial injustice', the injustice suffered by those speaking truthfully, those who give rightful testimonies about their suffering, their lives and experiences, and are not believed or taken seriously because of who they are or where they come from. We are all familiar with various instances of testimonial injustice, even if we have not heard the term before. Abused children who are not believed, women whose accusations of sexual harassment are dismissed, witnesses in court whose testimonies are disregarded because of their race, ethnic origin or religion. They are all victims of testimonial injustice.

And I put it to you that by denying the magnitude and goal of what was done to the Armenians in Turkey, successive Turkish governments and their supporters elsewhere are inflicting testimonial injustice on all those have born witness to the century old crime of ethnic cleansing in the Western Armenia. And even though the injustice may not seem as grave or cruel as the actions of the Turkish gendarmes during Verjine and her family's death march, the ultimate effect is the renewed and continued dehumanization of the victims and their descendants. To see why, we need to consider an important philosophical question: what is it that make us human and sets us apart from other living beings on this planet?

What makes us humans, among other things, is our ability to use languages for recording and transmitting not just our thoughts, wishes and hopes but also our stories and histories. Language is our primary tool for learning from each other and transmitting past experiences to new generations. It is the instrument and the means for creating our distinct cultures. But we will not be able to learn a language if we did not trust and accept what we are being told by our parents and others, and this process of learning by accepting what we are told continues through our lives. By trusting in what we are told we learn to become human, and by entering into trusting communication with others we accept and affirm their and our own humanity.

We also use language to construct our identity, both as a person and as groups, through the narratives we tell about ourselves. Many of these narratives are the direct result of the testimonies we hear and accept. We are who we are by what we know and remember and the testimonies we give and receive are essential to our identity as a people and as individuals.

The accusation that the stories that go to the essence of the cultural memories and identity of a people are lies and fabrications not only negates our identity as a people but also denies our humanity. In rejecting the enormity of what effectively a whole nation gives testimony to, the genocide deniers rob the bearers of those testimonies of what is essential to their identity and to their humanity. And importantly, the testimonial injustice I am speaking of is not a wrong of a distant past, but an ever-present experience in the lives of generations of Armenians who have inherited the burden of carrying the first-hand accounts of their parents, grandparents and other survivors.

This continued injustice is an important part of why we Armenians cannot simply forget, for if we did, then we

will not only lose our continuity with our past but we will also be consenting to an ongoing form of injustice.

But what of proof of these testimonies, you may ask? Only true testimonies can be subjected to unjust denials. What establishes the truth of the survivors' claims? We can of course go to historians or to the photo libraries of the genocide where there is abundant proof. But, even more simply we can ask ourselves and others: What happened to a people who lived in Western Anatolia for 3000 years, why did they abandon their ancient towns, villages, churches and schools and disappear into the desert? And how can we characterize their whole scale forced disappearance other than as an act of ethnic cleansing, a genocide?

The corrosive effect of testimonial injustice renews the pain of a century old suffering. But with this diagnosis of the source of the ongoing pain, there also comes the hope of a resolution. What is required to set things right, or at least to start on such a path, is the opportunity for Armenians to receive fair public hearing of their case, free of prejudgments and politically inspired distortions. I thank The Christ Church Cathedral, the Archbishop, the Dean and all those present here, for giving me the opportunity to give voice to the collective cry of so many wounded souls in need of healing and for not treating those voices as lies or mere figments of imagination.