

State of Denial

Turkey Spends Millions to Cover Up Armenian Genocide

By David Holthouse

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Retraction and Apology

In the summer 2008 issue of its *Intelligence Report*, the Southern Poverty Law Center reported that Guenter Lewy, a professor emeritus at the University of Massachusetts, was part of a network of persons, financed by the Government of Turkey, who dispute that the tragic events of World War I constituted an Armenian genocide. We now realize that we misunderstood Professor Lewy's scholarship, were wrong to assert that he was part of a network financed by the Turkish Government, and were wrong to assume that any scholar who challenges the Armenian genocide narrative necessarily has been financially compromised by the Government of Turkey. We hereby retract the assertion that Professor Lewy was or is on the Government of Turkey's payroll.

To our knowledge, Professor Lewy has never sought to deny or minimize the deaths of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey; nor has he sought to minimize the Ottoman regime's grievous wartime miscalculations or indifference to human misery in a conflict earmarked by widespread civilian suffering on all sides. What he has argued in his book, *The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey: A Disputed Genocide*, and elsewhere is that the present historical record does not substantiate a premeditated plan by the Ottoman regime to destroy because of ethnicity, religion, or nationality, as opposed to deport for political-military reasons, the Armenian population. In this view, he is joined by such distinguished scholars as Professor Bernard Lewis of Princeton University. As additional troves of archival information come to light, Professor Lewy advocates greater study of this contentious subject.

We deeply regret our errors and offer our sincerest apologies to Professor Lewy.

Professor Lewy adds the following comment:

"The SPLC has made important contributions to the rule of law and the struggle against bigotry. Thus I took no pleasure in commencing legal action against it. But the stakes, both for my reputation as a scholar and for the free and unhindered discussion of controversial topics, were compelling. It must be possible to defend views that contradict conventional wisdom without being called the agent of a foreign government."

Early this year, the Toronto District School Board voted to require all public high school students in Canada's largest city to complete a new course titled "Genocide: Historical and Contemporary Implications." It includes a unit on the Armenian genocide, in which more than a million Armenians perished in a methodical and premeditated scheme of annihilation orchestrated by the rulers of Turkey during and just after World War I.

The school board members each soon received a letter from Guenter Lewy, a professor emeritus of political science at the University of Massachusetts, rebuking them for classifying the Armenian genocide in the same category as the Holocaust. "The tragic fate of the Armenian community during

World War I," Lewy wrote, is best understood as "a badly mismanaged war-time security measure," rather than a carefully plotted genocide.

Lewy is one of the most active members of a network of American scholars, influence peddlers and website operators, financed by hundreds of thousands of dollars each year from the government of Turkey, who promote the denial of the Armenian genocide — a network so influential that it was able last fall to defy both historical truth and enormous political pressure to convince America's lawmakers and even its president to reverse long-held policy positions.

Lewy makes similar revisionist claims in his 2005 book *The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey: A Disputed Genocide* and in frequent lectures at university campuses across the country. Speaking at Harvard University in March 2007, he chalked up the ghastly Armenian death toll to "bungling misrule," and stressed that "it is important to bear in mind the enormous difference between ineptness, even ineptness that had tragic consequences" and deliberate mass murder.

"Armenians call the calamitous events of 1915-1916 in the Ottoman Empire the first genocide of the twentieth century," he said. "Most Turks refer to this episode as war time relocation made necessary by the treasonous conduct of the Armenian minority. The debate on what actually happened has been going on for almost 100 years and shows no signs of resolution."

But it's not only Armenians calling the slaughter a genocide, and there is no real debate about its essential details, according to the vast majority of credible historians. Although Lewy's brand of genocide denial is subtler than that of Holocaust deniers who declare there were no gas chambers at Auschwitz, it's no less an attempt to rewrite history.

"The overwhelming opinion of scholars who study genocide — hundreds of independent scholars, who have no affiliations with governments, and whose work spans many countries and nationalities and the course of decades — is consistent," the International Association of Genocide Scholars stated in a 2005 letter to the Turkish government.

"The scholarly evidence reveals the following: On April 24, 1915, under cover of World War I, the Young Turk government of the Ottoman Empire began a systematic genocide of its Armenian citizens — an unarmed Christian minority population. More than a million Armenians were exterminated through direct killing, starvation, torture, and forced death marches. The rest of the Armenian population fled into permanent exile. Thus an ancient civilization was [expunged from its homeland](#) of 2,500 years."

Double Killing

Despite this clear consensus of experts, Turkey exerts political leverage and spends millions of dollars in the United States to obfuscate the Armenian genocide, with alarming success even at the highest levels of government. Lobbyists on the Turkish payroll stymied a Congressional resolution



Turkish president Abdullah Gul warns of severe repercussions to the relations between the United States and Turkey if the "Armenian allegations are accepted."

commemorating the genocide last fall by convincing lawmakers to reverse their stated positions. Even President Bush flip-flopped.

Revisionist historians who conjure doubt about the Armenian genocide and are paid by the Turkish government provided the politicians with the intellectual cover they needed to claim they were refusing to dictate history rather than caving in to a foreign government's present-day interests.

"This all happened a long time ago, and I don't know if we can know whether it was a massacre or a genocide or what," said U.S. Rep. John Murtha (D-Penn.) after changing his vote.

"The last thing Congress should be doing is deciding the history of an empire [the Ottoman empire] that doesn't even exist any more," said President Bush.

But experts in genocide saw things quite differently.

"Denial is the final stage of genocide," says Gregory Stanton, president of the International Association of Genocide Scholars. "It is a continuing attempt to destroy the victim group psychologically and culturally, to deny its members even the memory of the murders of their relatives. That is what the Turkish government today is doing to Armenians around the world."

Last year, the Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity issued a letter condemning Armenian genocide denial that was signed by 53 Nobel laureates including Wiesel, the famous Holocaust survivor and political activist. Wiesel has repeatedly called Turkey's 90-year-old campaign to cover up the Armenian genocide a double killing, since it strives to kill the memory of the original atrocities.

He was hardly the first. As long ago as 1943, law professor Raphael Lemkin, who would later serve as an advisor to Nuremberg chief counsel Robert Jackson, coined the term "genocide" with the Armenians in mind.

Stanton, a former U.S. State Department official who drafted the United Nations Security Council resolutions that created the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, spoke this April at a United States Capitol ceremony honoring victims of the Armenian genocide — a ceremony held four months after the bill to commemorate the slaughter was shot down.

"The U.S. government should not be party to efforts to kill the memory of a historical fact as profound and important as the genocide of the Armenians, which Hitler used as an example in his plan for the Holocaust," Stanton said before an audience that included three survivors of the Armenian genocide and more than 100 representatives and senators.

Infiltrating the Academy

Efforts to kill the memory of the Armenian genocide began while carrion birds were still picking over corpses in their desert boneyards, with Turkey issuing a first official statement assuring the world at large that no atrocities had occurred. Turkey's primary strategy for denying the Armenian genocide since then has shifted from blanket denial to disputing the death toll to blaming the massacres on Kurdish bandits and a few rogue officials to claiming the Armenians who died were enemy combatants in a civil war.

Turkey began intervening in the U.S. on behalf of denying the genocide in the 1930s, when Turkish leaders convinced the U.S. State Department to prevent MGM studios from making a movie based on the book *The Forty Days of the Musa Dagh* because it depicted aspects of the Armenian genocide.

In 1982, the government of Turkey donated \$3 million to create the Institute for Turkish Studies, a nonprofit organization housed at Georgetown University that pushes a pro-Turkey agenda, including denial of the Armenian genocide. Three years later, in 1985, Turkey bought full-page advertisements in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Washington Times* to publish a letter questioning the Armenian genocide that was signed by 69 American scholars. All 69 had received funding that year from the Institute for Turkish Studies or another of Turkey's surrogates like the Ankara Chamber of Commerce, a quasi-governmental agency in Turkey's capital city.

The Institute for Turkish Studies has since received sizable donations from American defense contractors that sell arms to Turkey, including General Dynamics and Westinghouse. Turkey continues to provide an annual subsidy to support the institute. In 2006, the most recent year for which tax records are available, the institute awarded \$85,000 in grants to scholars. Its chairman is the current Turkish ambassador to the U.S., Nabi Sensoy.

The first unassailable evidence of the extent of the Armenian genocide denial industry's reach in academic circles arrived in 1990 in an envelope addressed to Robert Jay Lifton, a professor of psychology and psychiatry at the City University of New York's Graduate Center and John Jay College. It contained a letter signed by Nuzhet Kandemir, who was then Turkey's ambassador to the United States, protesting Lifton's inclusion of several passing references to the Armenian genocide in his prize-winning book *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide*.

"It is particularly disturbing to see a major scholar on the holocaust, a tragedy whose enormity and barbarity must never be forgotten, so careless in his references to a field outside his own area of expertise," Kandemir wrote. "To compare a tragic civil war perpetrated by misguided Armenian nationalists, and the human suffering it wrought on both Muslim and Christian populations, with the horrors of a premeditated attempt to systematically eradicate a people is, to anyone familiar with the history in question, simply ludicrous."

There was nothing out of the ordinary about Kandemir's letter. Academics who write about the Armenian genocide were then and still are routinely castigated by Turkish authorities.

What Lifton found intriguing, however, was a second letter in the envelope, which the Turkish ambassador had included quite by accident. It was a memo to Kandemir from Near East historian Heath Lowry, in which Lowry provided Kandemir with a point-by-point cheat sheet on how to attack Lifton's book, which Lowry chummily referred to as "our problem."

Lowry at the time was the founding director of the Institute for Turkish Studies. He resigned that position in 1996 when he was selected from a field of 20 candidates to fill the Atatürk Chair of Turkish Studies at Princeton University, a new position in the Near Eastern Studies department that was created with a \$750,000 matching grant from the government of Turkey.

Prior to joining the Princeton faculty, Lowry had never held a full-time teaching position and had not published a single work of scholarship through a major publishing house. As a result of that and of what *The Boston Globe* described in 1995 as his work as "a long-time lobbyist for the Turkish government," his appointment sparked a firestorm of controversy. A protest group called Princeton Alumni for Credibility published a petition decrying Lowry's appointment that was signed by more than 80 leading scholars and writers, including Kurt Vonnegut, Arthur Miller, Cornel West, Joyce Carol Oates and many historians and experts in genocide.

Peter Balakian, the director of Colgate University's Center for the Study of Ethics and World Societies and the author of *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response*, called Lowry "a propagandist for a foreign government."

Speaking at a 2005 symposium at Princeton commemorating the 90th anniversary of the Armenian genocide, Balakian posed a rhetorical question: "Would a university want someone who worked with a neo-Nazi group to cover up the Holocaust on their faculty?"

The relationship of Turkey to U.S. scholars promoting Armenian genocide denial is similar to that of the oil industry to fringe climatologists who dispute the reality of global warming. The cause and effect relationship is murky. It's impossible to know for sure if they're making the claims to get the money or getting the money because they make the claims. And many of those who receive money from the Institute of Turkish Studies do little or nothing to support the government's version of what happened to its Armenian minority.

But a number of them certainly seem to, including Justin A. McCarthy, a professor of history at the University of Louisville. McCarthy claims that death tolls attributed to what he calls "this imaginary Turkish plan" are grossly exaggerated and resulted from justifiable wartime self-defense actions triggered by traitorous Armenians conspiring with Turkey's enemies.

McCarthy also points out that Armenians massacred Turks on at least one occasion before the "so-called Armenian genocide." In other words, they had it coming. "The question of who started the conflicts is important, both historically and morally important," McCarthy declared in a 2005 speech before the Turkish Grand National Assembly. "In more than 100 years of warfare, Turks and Armenians killed each other. The question of who began the killing must be understood, because it is seldom justifiable to be the aggressor, but is always justifiable to defend yourself."

He continued: "If those who defend themselves go beyond defense and exact revenge, as always happens in war, they should be identified and criticized. But those who should be most blamed are those who began the wars, those who committed the first evil deeds, and those who caused the bloodshed. Those who began the conflict were the Armenian nationalists, the Armenian revolutionaries. The guilt is on their heads."

Enforcing the Turkish View

In France and Switzerland, it's a crime to deny the Armenian genocide. In Turkey, it's a crime to affirm it.

Enacted in 2005, Article 301 of the Turkish penal code makes it illegal for any citizen or resident of Turkey to give credence to the Armenian genocide. Numerous journalists and scholars have been

prosecuted for "denigrating Turkishness" under that statute, beginning with Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk, who was charged for stating, "A million Armenians were killed in these lands." Turkish-Armenian newspaper editor Hrant Dink was prosecuted three times for criticizing the Turkish government's longstanding policy of denying the Armenian genocide.

Where the law failed to silence Dink, bullets succeeded. He was gunned down in front of his central Istanbul office last January by a Turkish ultranationalist. Footage and photos later surfaced of the assassin celebrating in front of a Turkish flag with grinning policemen.



The assassination last year of Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink (above), an outspoken critic of Armenian genocide denial, sparked protests throughout Turkey.

(Corbis)

Dink's friend and ideological ally Taner Akçam, a distinguished Turkish historian and sociologist on the faculty of the University of Minnesota's Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, attended Dink's funeral in Turkey, despite the considerable risk to his own life. Akçam, a leading international authority on the Armenian genocide, was marked for death by Turkish ultranationalists following the November 2006 publication of his book, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and The Question of Turkish Responsibility*. The book is a definitive history based in large part on official documents from Turkish government archives.

"It would be better for world peace and truth if sewer germs like you were taken off the planet," went one of the dozens of anonymous threats Akçam continues to receive in Minnesota. "Pray that the devil takes you away soon because otherwise you'll be living a hell on earth. ... Who am I? You're going to find out, Taner, you're going to find out."

Turkish ultranationalists have, in effect, targeted many other people who, like Akçam, affirm the genocide. Several of their [websites](#) include home addresses, phone numbers and photos of these scholars.

Genocide deniers often disrupt Akçam's lectures. In November 2006, a gang of Turkish ultranationalists attacked him at a book signing at City University of New York.

"Denial of the Armenian genocide has developed over the decades to become a complex and far-reaching machine that rivals the Nazi Germany propaganda ministry," says Akçam. "This machine runs on academic dishonesty, fabricated information, political pressure, intimidation and threats, all funded or supported, directly or indirectly, by the Turkish state. It has become a huge industry."

Convincing Congress

Academia is one of two major American fronts in Turkey's campaign to kill the memory of the Armenian genocide. The other is Congress.

As the only Muslim-dominated country in a troubled region to call the U.S. and Israel its allies, Turkey wields significant political influence that it uses to prevent the U.S. from joining 22 other nations in officially recognizing the Armenian genocide as a historical fact.

In 1989, the U.S. State Department released archived eyewitness accounts that, according to State Department officials, showed that "thousands and thousands of Armenians, mostly innocent and helpless women and children, were butchered." That same year, a bill commemorating the genocide was introduced in the U.S. Senate. But Turkey responded by blocking U.S. Navy ships from entering strategically important Turkish waters and by declaring a ban on all U.S. military training operations on Turkish territory. The bill quickly evaporated.

Last September, the matter came up again. The U.S. House Foreign Relations Committee approved and moved to bring to the floor of Congress a nonbinding resolution condemning the mass murder of Armenians by Ottoman Turks, placing the death toll at 1.5 million, and labeling the killing a "genocide."

This time, Turkey responded by recalling its ambassador to the United States and forecasting dire repercussions. "In the case that Armenian allegations are accepted, there will be problems in the relations between the two countries," warned Turkish President Abdullah Gul.

"Yesterday, some in Congress wanted to play hardball," said Egmen Bagis, foreign policy advisor to Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. "I can assure you, Turkey knows how to play hardball."



Richard Gephardt

The next day, State Department spokesman Sean McCormack apologized to Turkey on behalf of the United States by issuing a statement expressing "regret" for the committee's actions, which, he cautioned, "may do grave harm to U.S.-Turkish relations and to U.S. interests in Europe and the Middle East."



Bob Livingston

Defense Secretary Robert Gates added his opposition to the resolution and pointed out that 70% of the air cargo sent to U.S. forces in Iraq and 30% of the fuel consumed by those forces is delivered via Turkey. President Bush, perhaps forgetting his campaign promise in 2000 to push for official recognition of the Armenian genocide if elected president, also came out against the resolution.

While Turkish officials made threats, lobbyists paid by Turkey delivered money to congressmen in the form of campaign and political action committee donations. Louisiana representative Bobby Jindal (a Republican who's now Louisiana's governor) and Mississippi representative Roger Wicker (now a Republican senator representing that state) both dropped their sponsorship of the resolution and began speaking against it — but only after receiving around \$20,000 each from former congressmen Bob Livingston, a Republican, and Richard Gephardt, a Democrat, who now work for lobbying firms contracted by Turkey to oppose any recognition of the Armenian genocide.

In 2000, while still in office, Gephardt had declared that he was "committed to obtaining official U.S. government recognition of the Armenian genocide." In 2003, he co-sponsored a resolution placing "the Armenian genocide" in the company of the World War II Holocaust and mass deaths in Cambodia and Rwanda that was voted down after a Turkish lobbying blitzkrieg.

Since leaving office and accepting a \$1.2 million-a-year contract to lobby for Turkey, the former House majority leader has experienced a profound change of heart. "Alienating Turkey through the passage of the resolution could undermine our efforts to promote stability in the theater of [Middle East] operations, if not exacerbate the situation further," he wrote in an E-mail to the *International Herald Tribune*. Last fall, as part of his efforts to help torpedo the symbolic Armenian genocide resolution, Gephardt escorted Turkish Ambassador Nabi Sensoy to meetings with Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and other Democratic leaders.

Bob Livingston, whose firm has been paid more than \$12 million by the Turkish government since 1999, also pitched in. As part of the lobbying effort last fall that U.S. Rep. Adam Schiff (D-Calif.), one of the sponsors of the resolution, called "the most intense I've ever seen," Livingston shepherded Turkish dignitaries from office to office on Capitol Hill.

As another part of that campaign, the government of Turkey took out full-page advertisements in major American newspapers calling upon the members of Congress to "support efforts to examine history, not legislate it." The ads featured a testimonial from Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice — "These historical circumstances require a very detailed and sober look from historians" — that implied that historians have yet to seriously study the Armenian genocide.

More than 20 stated backers of the resolution withdrew their support, and H.R. 106 never made it to the floor for a full vote.

The government of Turkey has since continued to call for a "historian's commission" of scholars to "study the facts of what happened in 1915-1923." The proposed committee is marketed as a high-minded quest for truth and reconciliation, a long overdue arbitration of disputed history, and a chance to finally give equal weight to both sides of the story.

But as the saying goes, a lie isn't the other side of any story. It's just a lie.

"When it comes to the historical reality of the Armenian genocide, there is no 'Armenian' or 'Turkish' side of the question, any more than there is a 'Jewish' or 'German' side of the historical reality of the Holocaust," writes Torben Jorgensen, of the Danish Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies.

"There is a scientific side and an unscientific side — acknowledgement or denial."