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## *Turkish Denial of the Armenian Genocide*

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*In an editorial published in the December-January 1996 issue of the Centre for Comparative Genocide Studies "Newsletter", Professor Colin Tatz, Director of the Centre for Comparative Genocide Studies at Macquarie University, has commented on the recent and ongoing process of Turkish denial of the Armenian Genocide. The text of the article is as follows:*

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The American Congress has yet to muster the majority required to pass an Armenian Genocide Resolution. On 2 February this year, America's leading literary figures and genocide scholars signed a petition - initiated by Professor Balakian and published in the leading publication the "Chronicle of Higher Education" - which urged Congress to pass the (much-lobbied against) Resolution and which opposed the Turkish government's persistent campaign to deny the events of 1915-23. Yehuda Bauer, Israel Charny, Helen Fein, Norman Mailer, Susan Sontag, John Updike and Kurt Vonnegut were some of the petitioners.

The Armenian National Committee Eastern Region went further: it called on Princeton to end its association with Professor Heath Lowry, holder of the Atatürk Chair of Near Eastern Studies, because of his "record of conspiring with the Turkish government to discredit legitimate scholarship on the Armenian Genocide."

The Turkish denial is probably the foremost example of historical perversion. With a mix of academic sophistication and diplomatic thuggery - of which we at Macquarie University have been the targets - the Turks have put both memory and history into reverse gear. Pierre Vidal-Naquet's preface to the record of the Permanent People's Tribunal<sup>1</sup> (1985) is eloquent:

Let us imagine then what Armenian minorities can feel. Let us imagine Faurisson (the leading French [Holocaust]

revisionist) as minister, Faurisson as president, Faurisson as general, Faurisson as president of the Turkish Historic Commission, Faurisson as a member of the university senate in Istanbul. Faurisson as an influential member of the United Nations. Faurisson responding in the press every time there is mention of the Jewish genocide. In brief, a state Faurisson coupled with an international Faurisson and, on top of that, Talat-Himmler enjoying since 1943 a formal mausoleum in the capital.

In Volume Two, Number 1 of this "Newsletter", Darren O'Brien and Richard Tidyman published an article, "Documenting Genocide". They made the point that Hitler's clerks of malice (Yacov Lozowick's phrase) were at the centre of the Holocaust: they acted as a team, originating, initiating, innovating, orchestrating death. Whether Himmler or Heydrich or Eichmann signed [the orders] is not as important as the machinations of the middle echelon of bureaucrats. Documents, especially trial documents, have long seemed to me to be the obvious, and the irrefutable counter to denialism.

An extraordinary Court Martial was instituted in Turkey in March 1919. It was meant to try 112 people - the 'Big Seven', the leaders of the Ittihad ve Terakki Party, including Talat Pasha, Enver Pasha, Cemal Pasha, the medical killers Nazim and Sakir, members of two wartime cabinets, provincial governors and high ranking military and political officers. The principal charges were 'massacres and unlawful, personal profiteering' therefrom. The trial was interrupted

when the British insisted on removing 64 of the accused to Malta. Very little happened to them. Of the 48 remaining, the 'execution of the crime of massacre' was proven against 36: several were sentenced to death in absentia; others received 15 years and few were acquitted. Only three, all relatively minor officials, were executed. By January 1921 the courts martial were abolished. Many of the accused escaped or were set free and it was left to Armenian 'avengers' to assassinate Talat, Sakir, Cemal, and Enver.

Nevertheless these courts martial were, in my view - as a Turkish newspaper editorial said in April 1919 - 'the most important trial in the six-hundred year history of the Ottoman Empire.'

The "Takvimi Vekayi", the official gazette of the Ottoman government, recorded the trials. And even if Ankara removed the gazette from circulation soon after its publication, the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem has a copy which reminds us in perpetuity that the Turks themselves proved the perpetration of the Armenian Genocide.

Such has been the juggernaut of Turkish denial since then that the Permanent People's Tribunal, founded by the Italian jurist Lelio Basso in 1976, was asked to sit in session in Paris 1984 to determine whether Armenians were in fact victims of deportations and massacres in the Ottoman Empire, whether this constituted genocide, and if so, what were the

consequences for the international community and the parties concerned. The genocide by the Young Turks was confirmed and it was determined that present day Turkey must 'assume responsibility without using the pretext of any discontinuity in the existence of the state to elude that responsibility'. Here then, some sixty or more years after the events, was a re-trial, in effect a supplication to acknowledge, let alone remember, that something terrible had happened.

Trials are much more than punitive prison sentences for Klaus Barbies. Irrespective of outcome, they posit a 'prima facie' case that certain events were undertaken by individuals on behalf of specific nations. They establish who were victims and who were perpetrators.

Trials produce contemporaneous documents, with an authenticity sometimes lacking in post-event materials. Trials produce eye-witnesses from amongst victims, the perpetrators and third parties, that is 'the associates' and bystanders. Trial records are, in my opinion, infinitely more powerful educative tools about contemporary social political history than the passive voice and the indirect speech of history texts.

Given that organized forgetting and/or calculated denialism are rampant, these trials tell us that something did happen, quite apart from guilt or innocence. Trial records last in archives longer than superceded textbooks in libraries. Trial records are, I believe, more effective than rhetoric. Why not use them?

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<sup>i</sup> The Permanent People's Tribunal was founded by Italian Senator and jurist the late Lelio Basso. Its President is Professor François Rigaux of the Faculty of Law, Catholic University of Louvain. Its Vice-Presidents are: Ruth First (South Africa); Makoto Oda (Japan); Armando Uribe (Chile); George Wald (United States); its Secretary-General is Gianni Tognoni (Italy). The Tribunal was convened April 13-16<sup>th</sup>, 1984 in Paris to review evidence and decide whether the Armenian people were victims of massacres in the Ottoman Empire, whether those acts constitute genocide, and what the legal consequences are for the international community today and the parties concerned. [From *A Crime of Silence, The Armenian Genocide, Permanent Peoples' Tribunal*; Zed, London, 1985].