

Why has recognising the Armenian genocide proved controversial?

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Between 1915 and 1923, the systematic deportation of Armenians from Anatolian Turkey in the Ottoman Empire resulted in the deaths of more than 1.5 million Armenians.¹ The events that took place in this period were a cumulation of decades worth of Muslim-Christian tension, Turkish ultranationalism, and xenophobic rhetoric in the region. By 1923, the Armenian population in Turkey nearly ceased to exist.² In the decades following the coining of the term “genocide” in 1944, there has been an increase in attention to the Armenian genocide. However, more than one hundred years after the end of these victims’ lives, acknowledging these events as “genocide” has remained polarising. In order to gain a more precise understanding of the controversy surrounding the recognition of the Armenian genocide, it is advantageous to look at how different countries have either acknowledged or rejected it, along with the reasons for their respective positions. By looking at patterns within the positions of states such as Turkey, Israel, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, and Latvia, the conclusion can be made that recognising the Armenian genocide has proved controversial due to concerns related to the complicated balance between national identity, ideology, and diplomatic affiliations, and, separately, proving intent to commit genocide in the face of outright denial.

The historiography of the Armenian genocide is multifaceted. One of the most significant contributors to the field is Daniel Fittante, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Helsinki.³ Fittante has written extensively on the Armenian genocide, with articles on the Armenian diaspora in the United States,⁴ ways that various countries have

¹ “Armenian Genocide (1915-1923)” *armeniangenocide.org*, *Armenian National Institute*, Accessed Feb 9 2025, <https://www.armenian-genocide.org/genocide.html>.

² “Armenian Genocide (1915-1923).”

³ “Daniel Fittante,” *researchgate.net*, Accessed February 8, 2025, <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Daniel-Fittante>.

⁴ Daniel Fittante, Bryan Wilcox-Archuleta, “The Armenians of Los Angeles: Rethinking ‘Americanization,’” *Nationalism & Ethnic Politics* 26, no. 3 (2020): 221-39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537113.2020.1767444>.

recognised or denied the Armenian genocide,⁵ and the role of memory in genocide recognition in the context of the Armenian genocide.⁶

Another significant player in the study of the Armenian genocide is Turkish historian and sociologist Taner Akçam.⁷ Akçam has focused primarily on Turkish responsibility in the Armenian genocide. Akçam has taken the position that, based on all of the available evidence, the genocidal intent of the Turks was clear.⁸ The consensus within genocide studies has been that the actions carried out against the Armenians between 1915-1923 were indeed acts of genocide. Moreover, many scholars agree that the Armenian genocide and subsequent denial of it have been essential building blocks of the Turkish national identity.⁹

Turkish nationalism and identity have been wrapped up in the Armenian genocide and its outcomes since the events took place. As denial serves as a safeguard to protecting the values that Turkey was founded on, denial of the genocide has been entrenched in Turkish institutions in many ways, consequently leading to a narrative that the recognising of the Armenian genocide is a threat to Turkish national identity. As a result, testimonies regarding the genocide have been silenced and, in more extreme cases, criminalised, in a phenomenon often called testimonial injustice.¹⁰ Social prejudice in Turkey concerning Armenians as a minority group has led to Armenian and Armenian-adjacent credibility being diminished.¹¹

Furthermore, institutionalised denial begins in the education system. Armenian children in minority schools are not allowed to learn about the genocide. At the same time, the more dominant Turkish public education system relies on testimonial injustice to prevent

⁵ Daniel Fittante, Memory Laws, Armenian Genocide Recognition, and Diplomatic Agency," *International Political Sociology* 18, no. 2 (2024): <https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olae003>.

⁶ Daniel Fittante, "Memory Entrepreneurship: Armenian Genocide Recognition in Europe," *International Studies Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (2023): pg number, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqad100>.

⁷ "Taner Akçam," *Clark University website*, Accessed February 8, 2025, <https://www.clarku.edu/faculty/profiles/taner-akcam/>.

⁸ Taner Akçam, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility*, 13, (New York: Metropolitan Books 2006).

⁹ Imge Oranlı, "Epistemic Injustice from Afar: Rethinking the Denial of Armenian Genocide," *Social Epistemology* 35, no. 2 (2021): 121, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2020.1839593>.

¹⁰ Oranlı, "Epistemic Injustice from Afar," 122.

¹¹ Oranlı, "Epistemic Injustice from Afar," 122.

Armenian history from entering their textbooks. These actions prevent Turkish children from learning about the atrocities that the Armenians faced.¹²

Without proper education, Armenians have been represented as ‘treacherous’ in the Turkish social imagination.¹³ This idea is rooted in the Social-Darwinist Turkish ideology known as Turkism.¹⁴ Within Turkism exists an idea about the superiority of Muslim Turks over “foreigners”. When looking at the “struggle for survival” found in publications published by the Young Turk elite in and around World War I, the origins of this rationalisation of racial domination are clear.¹⁵

However, in the modern world, it could be hinted that the Turkish population has the resources available to educate themselves. Unfortunately, with the existing collective resistance to Armenian testimonies, a close-mindedness of the privileged class in Turkey has been fostered.¹⁶ The Turkish upper class has the luxury of being ignorant of the genocide, and allowing non-Turkish viewpoints to be communicated has been considered to be a threat to the privileged class’ status as many elite Turkish people benefitted and continue to benefit both socially and economically from the consequences of the genocide.¹⁷ This close-mindedness has led to the active ignorance of the Turkish population about Armenia and Armenian history, including the genocide.¹⁸ This repression from the public memory has also been called “silent denialism.”¹⁹

In an effort to prevent recognition of the genocide, there has been evidence of outright, aggressive denial and victim-shaming within Turkey. Some people in Turkey blame Armenians for the genocide, highlighting that the Armenians provoked the Ottoman

¹² Oranlı, “Epistemic Injustice from Afar,” 123.

¹³ Oranlı, “Epistemic Injustice from Afar,” 122.

¹⁴ Oranlı, “Epistemic Injustice from Afar,” 125.

¹⁵ Oranlı, “Epistemic Injustice from Afar,” 125.

¹⁶ Oranlı, “Epistemic Injustice from Afar,” 127.

¹⁷ Oranlı, “Epistemic Injustice from Afar,” 127.

¹⁸ Oranlı, “Epistemic Injustice from Afar,” 122.

¹⁹ Senem B. Cevik, “Turkey’s ‘Apology’ and Image Repair on the Centennial of the Armenian Genocide,” *Nationalities Papers* 52, no. 1 (2024): 168, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2022.28>.

government by rising against them and committing atrocities against the Turks.²⁰ These could be viewed as vigorous defence mechanisms to protect Turkish nationalism and the established Turkish identity.

Turkey's strong international position has made their denial even more diplomatically permissible. During the Cold War, Turkey was able to avoid calls to reverse its position of denial due to its important position in Western political and economic spheres.²¹ This position had to shift slightly as the centennial of the genocide came in 2015. Turkey, with their application to become a member of the European Union that has been active since the end of the twentieth century, had to take a more neutral stance in regard to the Armenian genocide.²²

The EU called for Turkey to build a more open society and engage in more discourse on the past and the Turkish-Armenian situation.²³ With this increase in international pressure, Turkey began an image-repair scheme, but, as scholar Senem B. Cevik claims, this was only to further their objectives of respecting global influence.²⁴ Turkey's position remains essentially unchanged, just in a more palatable packaging for the international community.

When discussing diplomatic concerns in the context of the recognition of the Armenian genocide, much of the discourse surrounds diplomacy in relation to Turkey. Many countries who deny or conveniently do not recognise the genocide do so in order to keep a healthy diplomatic relationship with Turkey. Occasionally, national identity and diplomacy will meet at a happy middle ground. Still, more often, there is tension between what many countries view as morally correct and what they choose to do diplomatically.

Another country that denies the Armenian genocide is Israel. This denial is intriguing when considered in the context of the Holocaust and the fate of many Jews during World War II. Moreover, Israel recognises almost all other twentieth-century genocides, including the

²⁰ Cevik, "Turkey's 'Apology'," 168-72.

²¹ Cevik, "Turkey's 'Apology'," 169.

²² Cevik, "Turkey's 'Apology'," 169.

²³ Cevik, "Turkey's 'Apology'," 169.

²⁴ Cevik, "Turkey's 'Apology'," 169.

Rwandan genocide, the Cambodian genocide, and the Bosnian genocide.²⁵ However, when one looks deeper, it can be concluded that there have been concerns in Israel that recognising the Armenian genocide could have ideological and diplomatic conflicts for Israel.

The Holocaust has played a massive role in the formation of Israeli Jewish identity.²⁶ There exists an idea that recognising the Armenian genocide could offend the special status that the Holocaust holds in the Jewish state.²⁷ A concept of the uniqueness of the Holocaust can be found in Israel and Holocaust studies. Those who defend this position state that no other event in history compares to the extermination of the Jewish population in Nazi-occupied Europe.²⁸ This group tends to be very nationalist in nature, and some claim that this nationalist group stunts the field of genocide studies as a whole.²⁹

Those who disagree with the notion that the Holocaust is unique claim that a term needed to be created to describe the sort of mass violence that was seen during the Holocaust, even if the Holocaust did not happen at all. They claim that this violence had been seen before and would have occurred again.³⁰ Like the Holocaust, the politicisation of genocide in order to suit a national identity narrative is not unique.

When one looks at Israel and Turkey's diplomatic relationship, the reasons for Israel's denial become more evident. The relationship between these two countries has been long-standing, as Turkey was the first Muslim country to recognise Israel as a legitimate state in 1950.³¹ Furthermore, Israel's isolated location in a very Muslim part of the world initially made it difficult to have healthy diplomatic relationships with any of its neighbours, making its connection with Turkey even more essential.³²

²⁵ Ben Aharon, "A Unique Denial," 639.

²⁶ Ben Aharon, "A Unique Denial," 640.

²⁷ Eldad Ben Aharon, "A Unique Denial: Israel's Foreign Policy and the Armenian Genocide," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 4 (2015): 639, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2015.1043514>.

²⁸ Ben Aharon, "A Unique Denial," 640.

²⁹ Ben Aharon, "A Unique Denial," 640.

³⁰ Ben Aharon, "A Unique Denial," 640.

³¹ Ben Aharon, "A Unique Denial," 644.

³² Ben Aharon, "A Unique Denial," 644.

On a national security level, having a relationship with Turkey is important as well. Turkey occupies a strategic location for the safe passage of Jewish people fleeing countries like Syria and Iran, as well as their democratic nature which makes them a safeguard for these refugees.³³ Israel and Turkey's militaries also work in cahoots, sharing vital intelligence and undergoing training with each other.³⁴

A massive part of Israel's foreign policy surrounds protecting Jewish lives around the world. This motivates much of their international activity and can surmount other human rights issues.³⁵ There has been a pattern with Israel of favouring military and commercial interests over human rights, particularly establishing diplomatic ties with dictatorial regimes in the name of national security and the safeguarding of Jewish people.³⁶ An example, besides their continued denial of the Armenian genocide, is their supplying of arms to Argentina to keep Argentinian Jews safe.³⁷

Israeli official denial of the Armenian genocide can be traced back to 1982 when Turkey put pressure on Israel to cancel a Holocaust and genocide conference that was set to discuss the Armenian genocide.³⁸ Turkey, being a safe passage for Middle Eastern Jewish people, took advantage of Israel's vulnerability. Israel complied and urged organisers to avoid the topic of the Armenian genocide.³⁹ Overall, maintaining a healthy diplomatic relationship with Turkey has been essential for protecting Israeli interests, identity, and nationalism despite international pressure.

In Bulgaria, the Armenian genocide has not been recognised either; however, there is more of a gap between Bulgarian identity and diplomatic concerns. Bulgaria's ideological interests centre around Europeanisation, being seen as a legitimate "Western" country.⁴⁰

³³ Ben Aharon, "A Unique Denial," 639.

³⁴ Ben Aharon, "A Unique Denial," 639.

³⁵ Ben Aharon, "A Unique Denial," 643.

³⁶ Ben Aharon, "A Unique Denial," 642.

³⁷ Ben Aharon, "A Unique Denial," 642-3.

³⁸ Ben Aharon, "A Unique Denial," 639.

³⁹ Ben Aharon, "A Unique Denial," 639.

⁴⁰ Fittante, "'Out-Europeanising' the Competition," 1896.

Bulgarians share historical narratives with Armenians, as both groups were subjugated by the Ottomans.⁴¹ Bulgarians also experienced similar domination by the Soviets, and combined with a need to distance themselves from Ottoman influence, they pushed further for Europeanisation.

Europeanisation can be defined as the ways that EU members and politics are influenced by EU policy.⁴² It is the perceived “suitable” behaviour of member nations, in line with the majority of other member nations. Overall, the EU has been pushing for the recognition of the Armenian genocide.⁴³ Bulgaria has tended to straddle the line between recognition and denial due to their relationships with both the EU and Turkey.⁴⁴ They want to keep Turkey diplomatically happy while still being perceived as a proper European nation.

A country that ultimately has recognised the Armenian genocide yet had a rough time achieving this conclusion is the Czech Republic. There have been issues, in particular with the recognition of the Armenian genocide due to the nature of the perpetrators and victims. Since the perpetrators of the genocide were Muslim and the victims were Christian, it has opened up the floor for those who identify as having a far-right political ideology to be openly Islamophobic.

It has been common for far-right political actors to appropriate the Armenian genocide and its recognition to use as a discriminatory tool to attack Muslims and Turkish people, even if there is no historical basis to their actions.⁴⁵ In the early 2010s, there was an influx of anti-Muslim protests in the Czech Republic.⁴⁶ This is primarily related to “European” identity and the appropriate values that a European country has to hold.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Daniel Fittante, “‘Out-Europeanising’ the Competition: Armenian Genocide Recognition in Bulgaria,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 74, no. 10 (2022): 1896, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2022.2050678>.

⁴² Cosmina Tanasoiu, “Europeanization Post-Accession: Rule Adoption and National Political Elites in Romania and Bulgaria,” *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 12, no. 1 (2012): 174., <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2012.661226>.

⁴³ Fittante, “‘Out-Europeanising’ the Competition,” 1896.

⁴⁴ Fittante, “‘Out-Europeanising’ the Competition,” 1905.

⁴⁵ Fittante, “Memory Entrepreneurship,” 7.

⁴⁶ Fittante, “Memory Entrepreneurship,” 8.

⁴⁷ Fittante, “Memory Entrepreneurship,” 8.

When the Action of Dissatisfied Citizens Party (ANO) won 30 per cent of seats in the Czech parliament in 2017, it formed a coalition government with the Party of Civic Rights.⁴⁸ Members of Parliament belonging to the ANO, along with President Zeman of the Party of Civic Rights, had blatant anti-immigrant positions. They also used the Armenian genocide to criticise Turkey, calling for recognition to ‘send a message’ to them.⁴⁹ This can prove counterproductive as they positioned themselves as supporting human rights, yet faithful supporters of human rights do not align with these anti-immigrant views.

The idea is that Turkey does not line up with typical European values and, therefore, should be isolated from the European sphere and NATO in any way possible, including genocide recognition.⁵⁰ This concept goes further to suggest that Muslims do not belong in Europe at all, as their religion and identity is seen as automatically radical and subversive.⁵¹ While these ideas are extreme, official recognition in the Czech Republic happened due to the actions of the Armenian diaspora, not openly Islamophobic actors.⁵²

Finally, Latvia is a country that, in line with its identity and national beliefs, has recognised the Armenian genocide. There is a small Russian-speaking Armenian population in Latvia. Russians and Armenians have had a long-standing relationship since before World War I.⁵³ In the pre-war period, Russia was a hotspot for Turkish-Armenian political activity.⁵⁴ Due to Armenians’ language and history, they have been heavily associated with Russia.⁵⁵ This was a difficult situation for Latvians as they have a dark, violent history with the Soviets.⁵⁶

⁴⁸ Fittante, “Memory Entrepreneurship,” 8.

⁴⁹ Fittante, “Memory Entrepreneurship,” 8.

⁵⁰ Fittante, “Memory Entrepreneurship,” 8.

⁵¹ Fittante, “Memory Entrepreneurship,” 10.

⁵² Fittante, “Memory Entrepreneurship,” 3.

⁵³ Akçam, *A Shameful Act*, 99.

⁵⁴ Akçam, *A Shameful Act*, 99.

⁵⁵ Daniel Fittante, “Constructivist Memory Politics: Armenian Genocide Recognition in Latvia,” *International Affairs (London)* 99, no. 2 (2023): 805, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iad022>.

⁵⁶ Daniel Fittante, “Memory Entrepreneurship: Armenian Genocide Recognition in Europe,” *International Studies Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (2023): 6, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqad100>.

However, with the 2018 parliamentary elections, there was a shift in the Latvian political identity from more right-leaning to more left-leaning.⁵⁷ This shift led to more human rights-focused legislation. In addition to this legislation, the recognition of the Armenian genocide was increasingly associated with the new political views of Latvian political actors instead of more Russian political actors.⁵⁸

Similarly to Bulgaria, one can find parallels between Latvian history and Armenian history along the lines of genocide. Latvians have a history of suffering at the hands of the Soviets, as the Soviets carried out deportations of Latvians just as the Ottomans deported Armenians.⁵⁹ Recognising violence that another group has faced is a sign of solidarity between groups that have faced similar oppression.

In addition to a liberal shift and aspects of shared Armenian history in Latvia, Latvians also maintained a strong relationship with the United States. In 2021, President Joe Biden officially recognised the Armenian genocide on behalf of the United States. Latvia's diplomatic orientation with respect to the USA was a driving factor for many Latvian Members of Parliament to vote in favour of recognition as well.⁶⁰ While there were concerns that recognising the Armenian genocide would potentially antagonise their fellow NATO member, Turkey, the Latvian government still decided to recognise the Armenian genocide in 2021, officially.⁶¹

The final aspect that has made recognising the Armenian genocide controversial has been arguably the most challenging part about recognising any genocide: proving intent. The official and current Turkish policy defends the Armenian deportations during World War I as

⁵⁷ Fittante, "Constructivist Memory Politics," 818.

⁵⁸ Fittante, "Constructivist Memory Politics," 818.

⁵⁹ Fittante, "Constructivist Memory Politics," 821.

⁶⁰ Fittante, "Constructivist Memory Politics," 820.

⁶¹ Fittante, "Constructivist Memory Politics," 814-7.

necessary for national security in a time of war.⁶² However, much evidence exists that the Turkish population intended to exterminate the Armenians.

There are a variety of primary sources from the time that undoubtedly display how the government had a plan to get rid of the Armenians. One such source, a July 12 1915 telegram from Talât Paşa to the governor-general of the province of Diyarbakır, described plans to eradicate the group by excluding them from other Christian groups.⁶³ The Ottomans dehumanised non-Muslims by describing them as “internal tumours” and insinuating they had to be removed.⁶⁴ Based on available evidence and literature, it is clear that the primary goal of Turkish nationalism at the time of the genocide was to get rid of non-Muslim populations in its empire, as nationalists saw foreign people as dangerous to Turkish-Muslim ideals and territories.⁶⁵

The evidence goes directly against what Turkey claims. Turkish narrative has argued that the Armenian genocide was not genocide at all and that these events and deaths took place during a civil war and World War I.⁶⁶ They say that Muslims and Christians both died and that this was the result of normal war conditions, issues concerning national security, and necessary precautions taken in wartime.⁶⁷ One of the most contentious points when looking at the recognition of the Armenian genocide can be found at the crossroads between Turkey’s firm denial of the genocide due to nationalistic and ideological areas of interest and their diplomatic power.

After looking at all of the factors, recognising the Armenian genocide proves controversial due to the complex entanglement of national identities, diplomatic relationships, and political strategy. Countries like Israel, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, and Latvia have

⁶² Taner Akçam, *A Shameful Act*, 9.

⁶³ Taner Akçam, *A Shameful Act*, 10.

⁶⁴ Taner Akçam, *A Shameful Act*, 92.

⁶⁵ Taner Akçam, *A Shameful Act*, 92.

⁶⁶ Cevik, “Turkey’s ‘Apology’,” 169.

⁶⁷ Cevik, “Turkey’s ‘Apology’,” 169.

had to find a balance between national interests, diplomatic relations, and historical truth, which sometimes underscores recognition and human rights. This is not an issue that will go away; as global awareness grows, so will calls for recognition.

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