

A Sorry State of Affairs

Written by Jennifer Lind

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JENNIFER LIND, JUL 8 2008

Last year, the U.S. House International Relations Committee voted to approve a resolution describing Turkey's mass killing of Armenians as a genocide. The move sparked a furor from people concerned that pressuring Turkey was politically unwise and would lead Ankara to cease its support for the U.S. war in Iraq. Although the debate appeared intensely controversial, there was actually broad agreement on many points. Even opponents of the resolution - though they tiptoed around the word "genocide" - agreed that the predecessor to the modern Turkish state forcibly expelled its Armenian population after 1915, killing hundreds of thousands of people through murder, starvation, exhaustion, and disease. Furthermore, opponents and supporters alike agreed that recognizing this event as a genocide would damage relations between the U.S. and Turkey, possibly jeopardizing the U.S. war in Iraq.

The most interesting question that emerged from this debate was the broader one of whether or not it makes sense for national governments to be in the business of pressuring other countries to acknowledge human rights abuses. The historical record suggests that such pressure is counterproductive. It tends to prompt divisive domestic backlash, and tends to worsen, rather than soothe, a country's relations with its former victims.

Around the world, even domestic calls to acknowledge past atrocities have triggered backlash from nationalists. In Japan, many political and intellectual leaders advocated greater contrition toward the country's World War II victims, but efforts to apologize galvanized conservatives to justify, deny, or even glorify the events in question. This backlash did not come from Japan's political fringe, but from cabinet officials, prominent politicians and intellectuals. Their outcry made Japan appear less, not more, repentant; angering former victims and alarming neighbors that Tokyo has not renounced aggressive policies.

Elsewhere, proposed British apologies for the country's role in the slave trade has angered many Britons, who argue that the British should be praised for their leadership in *ending* the slave trade. In Austria, the far right denounced efforts to raise the national consciousness about Austrian complicity in World War II. French President Jacques Chirac's apology for the crimes of Vichy France sparked tremendous domestic debate. In the U.S., a proposed

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Smithsonian museum exhibition detailing the horrors of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima touched off a backlash among veterans and congressional leaders; the U.S. Senate voted unanimously to condemn the exhibition as “revisionist and offensive.” Around the world, leaders who urge greater acknowledgment of past atrocities face large constituencies of people who are equally passionate about honoring their country’s veterans and war dead, and about promoting a patriotic sense of national identity through the teaching of positive history.

The only country where self-reflection did not spark a nationalist backlash is West Germany after World War II. There were indeed Germans who preferred to “draw a line under the past” and look forward rather than back. But German conservatives faced an overwhelming political incentive to convince the NATO allies that Germans had repudiated their past violence and were thus worthy of reunification and protection from the Soviet threat. Justifying or denying Nazi crimes would have worked against this. Germany’s unique circumstances after World War II silenced nationalists, who in most cases have every political incentive to speak out.

One might argue that triggering a national debate about past violence is not necessarily a bad thing: that this is part of a useful process of coming to terms with the past. Indeed, many countries have conducted lengthy and productive debates about their past behavior; some of these debates (e.g., the U.S. decision to pay reparations to Japanese-Americans interned in camps during World War II) have led to greater awareness about the crime in question, and to some measure of justice for victims. But elsewhere, debates about the past have had serious domestic political implications. The case of Austria shows how pressure to confront the past can push a country toward the right: while some Austrians were calling upon their countrymen to admit the country’s complicity with Nazi crimes, others preferred a rosier view of the past. Through their platform of honoring—rather than condemning—Austrian war criminals, the Austrian far right was catapulted from obscurity into a coalition government. In the current situation, although Washington should indeed be concerned about Ankara’s retaliatory policies vis-à-vis its support for the Iraq war, it should also be aware of the risk of inflaming nationalism in a strategically significant country that is making tentative strides toward greater liberalism, while teetering precariously between military-led sectarianism and Islamic rule.

The U.S. strategy toward Turkey is even more dubious because it will be all the more inflammatory. Given that even domestic calls for atonement cause intense controversy, *foreign* pressure will be denounced as meddlesome and—given the U.S. record on coming to terms with its genocide of Native Americans—hypocritical. In response to such pressure, Turkish nationalists and deniers will garner domestic sympathy as the defenders of national honor. Thus U.S. Congressional pressure is likely to empower domestic nationalists, and to make moderates who favor greater truth and atonement vulnerable to charges of being American lackeys.

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American pressure may also have the perverse effect of promoting less, rather than more, acknowledgment of the Armenian genocide. Last summer, Congress passed a resolution urging Tokyo to apologize to the women brutalized as sex slaves by Japan's Imperial Army in World War II. Debates over the resolution led Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to comment that there is no evidence showing that women were coerced to be sex slaves: a significant backtrack from Tokyo's previous position. The episode further wounded survivors and inflamed relations with Japan's already suspicious neighbors.

This does not mean that Washington and other governments should surrender to the deniers by keeping mum. The United States in particular has many resources at its disposal: it can, and should, strive to be a moral leader on the issue of human rights. But if Washington wants to encourage awareness about human rights violations, a better approach than a Congressional scolding is a multilateral strategy. International institutions that have had great success in the past on such matters (i.e., UNESCO) can hold forums on issues related to human rights that broaden the focus beyond Turkey, and beyond the specific genocide of Armenians. Although Turkish participation in such forums would still be difficult and highly controversial, this setting provides at least some political cover to moderate Turkish leaders who support greater acknowledgment, and reduces the ammunition that nationalists might use against them.

Such strategies have already produced progress in Turkey. In 2005, the Turkish government repeatedly attempted to ban an academic conference held to discuss the genocide. Shut down at two universities, it was eventually held at a third, and yielded voluminous national news coverage, commentary, and analysis. If Washington and other governments want to encourage greater awareness and acknowledgement of the Turkish genocide of Armenians, then governments, scholars, and charitable foundations should support such domestic efforts in Turkey, and should encourage similar multilateral efforts. Pointing fingers will do more harm than good.

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