



The Burning Tigris

By Peter Balakian
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Introduction

The Burning Tigris tells the story of Turkey's attempt to destroy the Armenian people, the 20th century's first genocide, and America's response to it -- this country's first entry into the arena of international human rights. Balakian's beautifully researched narrative guides the reader through eyewitness accounts, documentation, and the Turkish government's continued denial of historical fact. The book allows the reader an in-depth look into the truth of history and human nature at its best and worst. Balakian's restrained and eloquent prose reminds us that by looking accurately into history we can change the present and the future.

Armenia is one of the oldest Christian civilizations in the world, and its people had lived in what became the Turkish Ottoman Empire long before the Ottoman Turks arrived. By the end of the 19th century, the Armenians were a thriving and complex society of professionals; artists, writers, farmers, and craftspeople, and were adapting to a modern and cosmopolitan worldview. But as a minority in the Ottoman Empire, the Armenians endured years of discrimination. One of the most important themes in *The Burning Tigris* is the examination of the subtle ways in which years of cultural and religious prejudice, unchecked and unexamined, laid the ground for genocide. A lethal combination of political and religious fanaticism became the basis for an ideology that made it not only acceptable -- but practically mandatory -- to torture, massacre, and finally attempt to completely annihilate an entire people. Balakian's detailed and unflinching presentation of the story shows the many results of xenophobia taken to its most shocking extreme.

The "Young Turk" regime in 1915 initiated a systematic program to exterminate the Armenian people, and word of the horrors reached the United States. The response of leaders such as Henry Morgenthau, American Ambassador to Turkey, and many humanitarians in the U.S. was powerful and immediate. The result was an unprecedented grassroots campaign involving everyone from ordinary Americans to missionaries to the wealthiest business moguls and several Presidents, all of whom cared greatly and wanted to help. The movement to save the Armenians was defeated by the growing U.S. dependence on oil and what Balakian calls "dollar diplomacy." This, combined with the ongoing denials by the Turkish government, led to the failure of the relief effort to result in justice for the Armenians after World War I and to the cultural amnesia that persists today. Where once the plight of the "starving Armenians" was familiar to every schoolchild in America, today few of us even realize that genocide was committed before the attempted extermination of the Jews in Hitler's Germany. This erasure is, as this book powerfully demonstrates, the final step in genocide. Hitler himself was inspired by what happened in Turkey, and asked, eight days before the Nazis invaded Poland, "Who today, after all, speaks of the annihilation of the Armenians?"

Although Balakian's book is a story of enormous human suffering, it is also an important testimony to the power of truth, to the human will to survive against great odds. In exploring the danger of fanaticism in all forms, it is -- an important book written on how ideology can result in unthinkable crimes against humanity.

Questions for Discussion

1. The Armenian Genocide raises a question about how Turkish society used Islamic religious ideology for the purpose of committing massacre and then genocide against the Armenians. Was this use of violence -- torture, rape and murder -- part of the Islamic belief system, or was Islam distorted and put in contradiction with its own teachings? Discuss the ways in which religion is made an ally of politics, throughout history and today.
2. How did American feminism of the 19th century lay a foundation for a larger commitment to human rights? What means did these women use to get their message across? In what ways were their efforts both effective and ineffective?
3. Discuss the concept and consequences of nationalism, as it figured in the Armenian genocide, and as it might have figured in other such extreme episodes of race killing in modern history, right down to today. What ways of thinking might lead the government of a given country to decide that "ethnic purity" is a necessary element of nationalism? Why do countries that are undergoing hard times and crises of national self-esteem tend to scapegoat an ethnic minority? What other examples in history can you think of?
4. "The movement brought together Democrats and Republicans, conservatives and liberals, Christians and Jews -- all believing in their own Victorian American way that each individual could make a difference; each person could be -- as Ralph Waldo Emerson put it -- a vehicle for 'the triumph of principles'" (Page 69). Has this belief in the power of the individual changed since then? If so, why? Did it turn out to be effective in American efforts to help the Armenians?
5. In 1896, British Prime Minister Gladstone saw the Turkish massacres a "betrayal of civilization itself" (Page 123). He criticized what he saw as their inability to learn, saying, "The very least that can be expected is that the conquerors should be able to learn civilization from the conquered as the Romans from the Greeks" (Page 122). What might Gladstone mean by "learning civilization"? What might the Turks have learned from the Greeks and the Armenians? When such learning does not take place, what is the effect on the conquerors?
6. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who in 1903 founded the journal *Armenia*, believed that individual sympathy for the Armenian cause was not enough, and that "National crimes demand international law, to restrain, prohibit, punish, and best of all, to prevent" (Page 131). In her inaugural essay, she discussed the behavior of a nation as if it were an individual and a member of a family or community. "If a nation is bankrupt, it should be put in the hands of a receiver and forcibly improved. If it is frankly criminal, it should be restrained. If it is simply ignorant, it should have compulsory education, and if it has senile dementia it should be confined under treatment, and the estate administered in the interests of the heirs" (Page 132). Discuss how this statement might have forecast some of our modern ideas of international human rights? Do you think the United Nations meets such a need today? In 1915, were other nations, such as the U.S., complicit in the Armenian genocide because of their refusal to go to war with Turkey? Is the concept of an international policing system viable today? Do the recent genocides in Rwanda and now in the Sudan dramatize this dilemma?
7. Richard Rubenstein described the Armenian Genocide "as the first full fledged attempt by a modern state to practice disciplined,

methodically organized genocide" (Page 180). Discuss the ways that the Young Turk government organized and implemented its plan to exterminate the Armenian population. How was World War I a factor in this plan? What comparisons can you make with how the Nazis exterminated the Jews and how World War II was a factor in their plan?

8. Why was President Wilson unable to convince the Senate to accept the American Mandate for Armenia after World War I? Why did the new Republican leadership in 1919-1920 turn its back on Armenia after Americans had fought so hard to help Armenia for decades? How has the pursuit of oil diplomacy in the Middle East become a pattern in U.S. foreign policy ever since?

9. In 1919-1920 in Constantinople, after World War I, the Turks were compelled by the British to put on war crimes tribunals in order to bring to justice those who had abused prisoners of war and those who had carried out the massacres of the Armenians. What did these trials tell us about the Armenian Genocide? Why did the trials fall apart? Why is the implementation of justice so important after such crimes against humanity? What did the Nuremberg Trials do after WWII that the Constantinople Trials of 1920 failed to do?

10. The Armenian Genocide has been called a landmark in the modern history of international human rights. It spawned the term "crimes against humanity," it contributed to Raphael Lemkin's pioneering coinage of the term and concept "genocide," and it helped to define World War I, and it gave rise to America's first international human rights movement. Discuss.

11. Balakian closes his narrative by retelling the many failed attempts of a Congressional resolution to recognize the Armenian Genocide as fact. The Turkish government continues to threaten any government that wants to pass such a resolution, and Presidents Carter and Clinton were forced to comply. France, however, passed a resolution in 2001. Why is the Turkish government still unwilling to admit what happened? Why do you think the U.S. government gives in to this kind of pressure?

About the Author

Peter Balakian is the author of *Black Dog of Fate*, winner of the PEN/Martha Albrand Prize for Memoir and a *New York Times* Notable Book, and *June-tree: New and Selected Poems 1974-2000*. He is the recipient of many awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship. He holds a Ph.D. in American Civilization from Brown University and teaches at Colgate University, where he is Donald M. and Constance H. Rebar Professor of the Humanities.