

Cody Fuelling

Title: “Buried in the Sands of Time: The Armenian Genocide and the Turkish State of Denial”

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Ann Livschiz

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Cody Fuelling is in his fourth year at IPFW, pursuing majors in History and Political Science, an Honors Certificate, a Certificate in International Studies, and a Minor in Psychology. He has been a research assistant for two professors in the Department of History and currently works as a teaching assistant in the Department of Political Science. He presented at the 7th and 8th Annual History Conferences, has received two scholarships from the Honors Program, and works as an Assistant Book Review Editor for *Enterprise and Society*.

Abstract

For millennia atrocities have been forgotten, buried beneath the sands of time as the gap between the past and present grows wider. Such has been the case with the genocide of 1915 in which as many as 1.5 million Armenians were marched out of their ancestral homeland of 2,500 years and into the deserts of present-day Iraq and Syria in a mass execution orchestrated by members of the failing Ottoman Empire. In the 100 years since these events, the Republic of Turkey—the Empire’s successor state—has devoted resources and manpower to a denialism campaign, employing vaguely-worded legislation on nationalism to silence domestic dissidence while simultaneously funding scholars and lobbyists in the United States to espouse the Turkish official narrative and cast doubt on the veracity of the “Armenian question” abroad. Through these and other elaborate efforts, Turkey has thus far found success in its approach.

With Istanbul’s control over the Strait of Bosphorus, Russia’s new warm water ports in Crimea offer limited benefit, and with the rise of ISIL in Iraq and Syria and a still-tense U.S.-Iranian relationship, Turkey’s placement as a bridge between Europe and Asia maintains importance well-past the Cold War, and the Republic knows this. Despite overwhelming evidence and expert consensus, the work of Turkey and its associates abroad has muddied the waters of scholarship and convinced the United States and other countries that official recognition and use of the word “genocide” to describe the events of 1915 is untenable with respect to the Western geopolitical strategies in the Middle East and Black Sea, as Turkey’s threats to impair these interests have been backed up with real action, including ending multi-million dollar military contracts, withdrawing ambassadors, shutting down military access, and threatening to prevent the United States from entering its airspace.

Scholars and policymakers continue to debate whether U.S. recognition of the events as “genocide” is worth the geopolitical losses; such recognition, as everyone knows, cannot bring victims back, but it may help establish a no-tolerance precedent of genocide where no country has impunity. Such a precedent, it is believed, may deter future atrocities. Others, however, hold that the political capital the U.S. would lose from recognition would make it less situated to address the ongoing massacres of today, specifically those that have generated millions of refugees from the same countries where the Armenians were death-marched a century ago.

Bibliographical Note

This essay focuses on Turkey's denial of the Armenian genocide in the post-Cold War Era, interrogating which scholars contribute to the controversy and how the U.S. and Turkish nations view recognition of the events as "genocide." Among the primary sources consulted were collaborative letters vying for official recognition of the "genocide" by the United States, works of Armenian genocide denialists, and advertisements and websites from FactCheckArmenia.com, which many have held to be anti-recognition propaganda. For secondary sources, I used various works by experts Taner Akçam, David Holthouse, and Samantha Power, among others. In 2016, because of the centennial of the Armenian genocide, commemorations among world leaders took place and new examples of Turkish state-level denialism came about; these were incorporated into the essay as well.