

# **SENTINEL OF TRUTH**

**GOURGEN YANIKIAN**

AND THE STRUGGLE AGAINST THE DENIAL  
OF THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

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*To my grandparents Roupen and Marie Kalaydjian  
whose triumph over adversity  
illuminates my life*

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# **SENTINEL OF TRUTH**

# PROLOGUE

*Truth never dies, but it lives a wretched life*

I have always been intensely fascinated by my grandfather's generation, that distinctive brood of men born at the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century who were destined to live in history's most enthralling but blood-soaked epoch and experience its luster and heart-wrenching tumult in the prime of their lives. Merely being alive during a time of such colossal upheaval and surviving the unprecedented calamities that befell the world in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century makes the lives of so many people of my grandparents' generation worth writing about, and it is the sheer number of tantalising life stories from that period that has created in me a most special and peculiar bond with that era.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century has often been characterised as 'the people's century', a time of exceptional socio-economic, political and cultural change, an age of reform, of new forms of government and international discourse, where for the first time great masses of humanity acquired a voice, a vote, and the opportunity to lift themselves up the ladder of human development. While the second half of the century was marked by widespread improvements in education, health and social protection, it is without doubt the first half that was the dramatic and turbulent one, a veritable helter-skelter in which even ordinary people got swept up in events they could hardly imagine. It was also indelibly scarred not only by two world conflicts but by two catastrophes on a scale unseen in human history – the genocides of the Armenians and Jews. It was these aspects of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that in no small measure moulded and shaped the men and women who formed my grandfather's generation, a truly unique generation if ever there was one.

As an Armenian growing up in Cyprus in the 1970s and 1980s, I was acutely aware of the reasons behind the existence of an Armenian Diaspora, and that I formed an inalienable part of it. My grandparents were both genocide survivors, and their experiences of unfathomable horror and grief, followed by rebuilding and regeneration, defined my family's identity for years to come. They also ingrained in me a passion for history and a yearning to learn what effects such calamitous and terrible events can have on the psyche, outlook and life priorities of people who live through them.

Given my family circumstances, upbringing and penchant for history, the Armenian Genocide of 1915-1923 was not a subject I could ever escape or ignore. Nor was it ever an issue I could detach and separate from my existence as an Armenian in the Diaspora, who despite enjoying a comfortable life on a beautiful island was nonetheless racked with a burning inquisitiveness about what the murder and dispossession of one of the world's most ancient peoples meant, both for the Armenians themselves and for the world as a whole.

In studying the great crime committed against the Armenians, I felt the same degree of revulsion and disgust at the world's callous indifference to the Genocide and its consequences as I did when reading about the gruesome details of murder, mutilation, torture, rape and abduction. And in learning about the origins of the official campaign of denial that Turkey has waged for almost a century, and about the convenient volte-face of the world's major powers which at the time had issued a solemn pledge to hold the perpetrators of the atrocities accountable<sup>1</sup> but had subsequently reneged on it, I was incensed at the cynicism and hypocrisy of Western governments whose policies pointed to a willingness to consign a crime of monumental proportions to oblivion. As the Genocide was being executed, governments and citizens across Europe and the Americas were being bombarded almost on a daily basis by horrifying accounts and reports, describing in excruciating detail the extent and brutality of the catastrophe taking place in Ottoman Turkey. People of all ages were deeply familiar with a place called Armenia and with the "starving Armenians" who were being subjected to extermination.<sup>2</sup> However, just a few decades after its committal, the Armenian Genocide had become a completely forgotten or ignored tragedy, one that did not feature in any films or mainstream publications. It was not discussed in international conferences, nor was it recalled at World War I commemorations. There were no museums or research centres to provide information on it. In fact as the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary

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<sup>1</sup> On the 24<sup>th</sup> of May 1915, the United Kingdom, France and Russia issued a joint declaration that "[i]n view of these new crimes of Turkey against humanity and civilisation, the Allied governments announce publicly ... that they will hold personally responsible ... all members of the Ottoman government and those of their agents who are implicated in such massacres [of Armenians]". (*The New York Times*, 24 May 1915)

<sup>2</sup> US President Herbert Hoover wrote in his memoirs that in 1919 "[p]robably Armenia was known to the American school child ... only a little less than England". (Michael Bobelian, *Children of Armenia, A forgotten genocide and the century-long struggle for justice*, Simon & Schuster, 2009, p. 107)

of the Genocide drew near in the mid-1960s, hardly anybody except the survivors and their children knew much about it, with some even resigning themselves to the fact that the wall of silence that had been craftily raised around the Armenian Genocide could never be shattered.

And yet, growing up I was aware that a number of governments had acknowledged the Genocide, and several imposing monuments had been erected around the world in memory of the victims of the massacres. Moreover, international organisations including the United Nations had eventually come round to recognising the unparalleled catastrophe, and new panels such as *the International Association of Genocide Scholars* and the *International Centre for Transitional Justice* had provided authoritative and irrefutable affirmations of the crime. Even national courts had issued rulings confirming the veracity of the Genocide,<sup>3</sup> and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen a series of high-profile class-action lawsuits brought against Turkey by Armenian activists determined to bring about a full world-wide recognition and a start to the long-overdue process of restitution and compensation. And world leaders and parliamentarians visiting Armenia almost invariably pay tribute to the victims by laying a wreath at the *Tsitsemakaberd* Memorial in Yerevan.

Clearly the wall of silence surrounding the Armenian Genocide had at some point been successfully breached and a modest headway in the fight for justice had been made. My growing curiosity revolved around this specific aspect of the Genocide recognition saga – the turnaround from failure and irrelevance to a near-absolute consensus regarding its authenticity and the beginning of a process of debate about how to alleviate the consequences of the colossal tragedy. I wanted to know the timeline of events that had accompanied this gradual and almost imperceptible end of outright silence on the matter. How and why had calls for justice by Armenians become audible after so many decades? What lay at the root of the brief but bloody campaign of violence that groups such as ASALA waged in the late-1970s and early-1980s? What had prompted an indifferent and self-absorbed world to finally listen to Armenians' distressed appeals when they had routinely ignored them for so long? In my search for answers, one name kept cropping up – Gourgen Yanikian.

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<sup>3</sup> In April 2011 an Argentine federal judge issued a ruling stating that “[t]he Turkish state was implementing a systematic programme aimed at the extermination of the Armenian nation from 1915 to 1923”. (*Fox News*, 1 April 2011)

My inquest into the past pointed up the many sides of this complex and enigmatic man – engineer, writer, researcher, thinker, polyglot, inventor, benefactor, humanist, *assassin*. Obviously this was no ordinary personage, and there was plainly an intriguing human drama to tell and deeply troubled antecedents to analyse. In particular, how had this elderly immigrant become—through one fateful act in January 1973—the focal point of the worldwide Armenian struggle for recognition of and justice for the crime against humanity perpetrated by Turkey? What had made an intelligent, erudite man take upon himself, at the advanced age of seventy-seven, the colossal task of opening an ignorant and apathetic world's eyes to what really happened in 1915, and choose violence in order to do so?

Born during the *Hamidian massacres*<sup>4</sup> of 1894-96, here was an individual whose life was forever shaped by the Armenian Genocide. From his prison cell he pronounced that he was a victim of the gross injustice done against the Armenian people which he could no longer be silent about, and expressed the hope that “perhaps my act will awaken many”. The need to comprehend what drove and motivated the man and what impact his murderous act had on Armenians in the Diaspora and in Armenia itself led me to a host of viewpoints and perspectives on the matter. Furthermore, it was imperative to look into the relevance of his actions in the run up to the centenary of the Genocide in 2015, and to see whether any more lessons could be learnt from the whole episode, given that the Armenian struggle for restitution has not yet been won.

Yanikian's first and foremost priority in life was to end the indifference towards and denial of the extermination plan implemented by the Turkish government in 1915. In the 1950s and 1960s few people spoke out against the denial of the Armenian Genocide, and fewer still understood the grave consequences of such negations. It has taken several decades since then to turn the tide of denial and create an environment where historians and policy-makers alike can be unequivocal about the obscenity and perils that are inherent in such practices. The world-renowned genocide expert Dr. Israel Charny, the executive director of the *Institute on the Holocaust and Genocide* in Jerusalem and former president of the *International Association of Genocide Scholars*, has been particularly vocal about the dan-

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<sup>4</sup> The mass killings of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey in 1894-96 are referred to as the *Hamidian massacres* because of the central role played by Sultan Abdul Hamid II, who instigated and oversaw the atrocities.



gers of genocide denial, rebuking even senior government officials for their deplorable positions on the Armenian Genocide. When in May 2011 he was awarded a presidential prize by the Armenian government for his tireless efforts in raising awareness of the human rights disaster of 1915, he issued the following statement:

Denials of genocide are very unfair, unjust and ugly. They are also extremely dangerous not only to the victim people, but to our human civilisation. Denials of genocide are disgusting attempts to humiliate the victim people once more... Denials of genocide are also loud and clear affirmations of the legitimacy of violence, they are retroactive justifications of the specific violent killing that was done in the genocide, and they are warnings and calls for renewal of violence – whether towards the same victim people or to other peoples. In fact, it has become clear that denials of genocide often are messages from the deniers that they are already engaged in or preparing to be violent once again.<sup>5</sup>

Denials of crime are in fact as old as crime itself, and a lot can be deduced about the principles of prominent policy-makers and governments from the fact that it took a shocking series of armed attacks against Turkish targets in Europe and America—instigated by a brazen double murder committed by an aggrieved septuagenarian—for them to moderate their denials and review their policies, not the deluge of anguished appeals by the Genocide's survivors and eyewitnesses over many decades or the overwhelming historical evidence of the great crime. Sadly, the genuine distress felt at the time of the Genocide by millions of ordinary people across the world who read about the atrocities almost on a daily basis, and the mass of firsthand reports concerning the massacres were conveniently swept aside after the First World War, and the perpetrator of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's first genocide was left to enjoy the fruits of its crime without any sanctions or commitment to redress. Alas, more than half a century had to pass and a new assertive approach to the struggle for recognition had to be adopted for there to be a general realisation by Western governments that the complete negation or suppression of the truth was an un-

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<sup>5</sup> *The Armenian Weekly*, 4 October 2011.

tenable policy that exposed them to considerable ridicule, embarrassment and condemnation.

With the one hundredth anniversary of the Genocide fast approaching, and proper restitution still eluding the victims and their descendents, it is indisputable that few campaigns for justice have spanned so many years and impacted so many countries around the globe as that which the Armenians have fought with so much determination for more than nine decades now. And though one must be careful not to give too much credit to Yanikian's actions for whatever successes that campaign has enjoyed thus far, or indeed to link those successes to criminal actions in general, it cannot be denied that no single act ever did so much to galvanise a movement and stir a scattered and divided nation into concerted action as that which Yanikian carried out on a tepid Saturday morning in January 1973.