



Introduction

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Taner Akçam, while born in Turkey, is a citizen of the world due to his long engagement with the history of genocide and mass violence that has put him at odds with the government of his birth country. Politically brave and academically outspoken, he has defied death threats and defamation as a traitor in order to enlighten Turkish society about its violent past. An advocate of democracy and free expression since his student days at Middle East Technical University (METU) in Ankara, he is a prolific scholar and internationally renowned human rights activist. Above all, Akçam is widely praised as the first Turkish intellectual to acknowledge and research the Armenian Genocide.

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THE LIFE OF A SCHOLAR ACTIVIST

Taner Akçam was born in 1953 into a family of limited means in the Ardahan province of eastern Turkey, where his father worked as a teacher in their village.¹ A socialist and a believer in the secular ideology of Kemalism, his father became a trade union activist and remained close to the Turkish Republican Peoples Party (CHP), only to be arrested and imprisoned for six months in 1971, at the time of the second military intervention in the Republic of Turkey. Akçam grew up in a social milieu that was shaped by political debates, fights against authoritarian governments, and socialist visions that imagined a better future for Turkey. The military coup of 1971 led to the persecution of the political left in Turkey but did not crush it.

As a student at the Middle East Technical University (METU), Akçam was deeply engaged in student activism. In 1975, he became the editor-in-chief of a new journal, *Devrimci Gençlik* (Revolutionary Youth), which made him a prominent figure of Turkish leftwing activism and a target for arrest. He was arrested, not for the first time, on March 10, 1976, shortly after graduating from METU. This time he received a ten-year sentence for spreading Kurdish and communist propaganda.

Jailed for a year, Akçam managed to escape from Ankara Central Prison, together with other inmates. After hiding for some months in Ankara, he decided to seek political asylum in West Germany by crossing the Syrian border and flying to Munich.² It wasn't an easy transfer. Afraid of being returned to the Turkish authorities, Akçam initially hesitated to reveal his identity and was considered an illegal immigrant in Germany. He was arrested again and spent weeks in a Munich prison, which, as he later joked, was at least better than the one he had fled in Turkey. Amnesty International had already adopted him as a "prisoner of conscience" while he was jailed in Turkey and the German government eventually granted him asylum. Akçam, by now a prominent figure of the exiled Turkish left and one of the leading members of the movement known as Devrimci Yol (Revolutionary Path), started working to help friends escape Turkey, especially after another military coup in September 1980. Shortly after, he traveled to Syria and Lebanon to organize a resistance movement against the Turkish

¹The following paragraphs are based on Vicken Cheterian, *Open Wounds. Armenians, Turks and Century of Genocide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 143–156, and on interviews conducted by Mary Jane Rein in September 2015.

²Elizabeth Kolbert, "Dead Reckoning: The Armenian Genocide and the Politics of Silence," *The New Yorker*, November 6, 2006.

dictatorship, in conjunction with leaders of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and supported by other Turkish and Kurdish political organizations.

The many years of his life as a militant, of political persecution, and of hiding, took a toll on him. Moreover, by 1982, doubts about the effectiveness of armed resistance against the Turkish military authorities caused Akçam to part ways with the PKK, which targeted him for assassination. Indeed, after the assassination of two friends, Akçam turned away from political activity. By 1988, Akçam decided to dedicate himself to his scholarly ambitions and enrolled at Hamburg University.³ While conducting research on the history of torture in the Ottoman Empire and Turkish Republic at the Hamburg Institute for Social Research, he recognized that the democratic development of modern Turkey was tied to confronting its “original sin,” the persecution of the Armenian and other Christian minorities.⁴ He began publishing articles that led him to write a doctoral dissertation at Hannover University. In 1991, he organized a workshop on the 1919–1920 Istanbul Trials that brought court martial cases against the main perpetrators of war-time atrocities. Having published a 1992 book in Turkish that described the Armenian massacres,⁵ his dissertation put the trials in the larger context of Turkish-Armenian relations. With a thesis entitled *Turkish Nationalism and the Armenian Genocide: On the Background of the Military Tribunals in Istanbul between 1919 and 1922*, he earned a doctorate from the Sociology Department of Hannover University in 1995.⁶

Akçam's public persona as an advocate for facing Turkey's painful history coincides with his participation in a conference in Yerevan, where he declared, on the 80th anniversary, that “1915 was genocide,” the first public acknowledgment by a Turkish academic. By then, he was permitted to visit Turkey after the Turkish penal code was reformed in 1991 and the statute of limitations on his prison escape expired. He moved to Turkey in 1993 in order to establish a research and documentation center in Istanbul. Bilgi University accepted his proposal in 1995 but canceled soon

³ Cheterian, *Open Wounds*, p. 150.

⁴ Cheterian, *Open Wounds*, pp. 153–154.

⁵ Taner Akçam, *The Armenian Question and Turkish National Identity* (Türk Ulusal Kimliği ve Ermeni Sorunu). İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1992 (original in Turkish; Russian edition in 1995, Armenian in 1996, and Arabic in 1997).

⁶ Taner Akçam, *Armenien und die Völkermord. Die Istanbul Prozesse und die türkische Nationalbewegung* (Hamburg: Verlag Hamburger Edition, 1996).

afterwards because of pressure from the Turkish secret service. Turkish ultranationalists objected to his findings that implicated Turkey's founding fathers in the massacres of Armenians and to the idea that national heroes had benefited materially from the Genocide. A series of car bombings targeting intellectuals and a campaign of intimidation against him made clear that an academic career in Turkey was impossible.⁷ Akçam moved to the United States in 2000, with the help of his mentor Vahankn Dadrian, to teach at the University of Michigan and then accepted a visiting professorship at the University of Minnesota, thanks to the mediation of Eric D. Weitz (1953–2021).⁸

His first English language book, *From Empire to Republic*, was a partial translation of his first Turkish book but with additional material. In 2006, he published his most influential book to-date, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* with Metropolitan Books.⁹ Highly praised in major outlets such as *The New York Times*¹⁰ and now considered a classic, the book solidified his reputation as one of the leading North American scholars in the field. In 2008, Akçam joined Clark University as the Robert Aram and Marianne Kaloosdian and Stephen and Marian Mugar Professor and a core faculty member at the Strassler Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies.¹¹ Renowned for his efforts to identify archival sources confirming the role of the Ottoman government in perpetrating genocide and already the author of several books, his position at Clark University was his first tenure line position.¹²

⁷During interviews conducted in September 2015, Akçam described how, during the early 1990s, he was accustomed to check the undercarriage of his car and start the engine before his wife and child would join him.

⁸Taner Akçam, "Eric Weitz: A Very Personal Eulogy," *H-Diplo/ISSF Forum*, No. 30 (2021), pp. 4–6, <https://networks.h-net.org/node/9023945/pdf> (accessed March 6, 2022).

⁹Taner Akçam, *From Empire to Republic* (Zed Books, 2004); Taner Akçam, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006).

¹⁰Gary J. Bass, "Turkey's Killing Fields," *The New York Times*, December 17, 2006, (accessed March 6, 2022).

¹¹The professorship in Armenian Genocide Studies was established at Clark University in 2002 thanks to the efforts of Carolyn Mugar and alumnus Robert Aram Kaloosdian. Akçam was the second holder of the chair.

¹²David Abel, "Turkish historian to study genocide. Armenians praise appointment at Clark," *Boston Globe*, May 29, 2008, https://archive.boston.com/news/local/articles/2008/05/29/turkish_historian_to_study_genocide/ (accessed March 6, 2022).

Even in North America, Turkish intimidation and threats from ultranationalists continued to plague him. In reaction to a 2001 conference planned with the Turkish-German Union for Social Science and Humanities Exchange, the Turkish daily *Hürriyet* launched a smear campaign that included articles and editorial letters vilifying Akçam. On the last day of the conference, a group of ultranationalists overran the police barricades searching for him. Over the next years, extremists continued to disrupt Akçam's lectures and sent poison-pen letters to hosting universities. Following the publication of *A Shameful Act*, he was physically assaulted after lecturing at the City University of New York and could only leave the university under heavy police protection. In 2007, on his way to lecture in Montreal, Canadian authorities detained Akçam at the airport on the basis of false terrorism claims posted to his Wikipedia page.¹³ Such politically motivated attacks culminated with the 2008 discovery that a shadowy, deep state group within Turkey, Ergenekon, had included him on a hit list for assassination.¹⁴

These events unfolded against the backdrop of the 2007 assassination of Akçam's friend Hrant Dink, editor of the Armenian Turkish newspaper *Agos*. Akçam, a frequent contributor, had criticized the prosecution against Dink, under Article 301 of Turkey's penal code (which prohibited insulting Turkey or Turkishness), for using the word genocide. Charges against Akçam for the same criminal offense "against Turkey" were eventually dropped. Nonetheless, fearing prosecution under Article 301, Akçam filed a case in the European Court of Human Rights. In 2011, ruling in his favor, the court agreed with his claim that he faced the risk of prosecution despite amendments having been made to the Turkish law.¹⁵

As a student, Akçam had risked arrest and physical torments to bring attention to the rights of all Turks. Now an established academic holding the only named chair dedicated to research on the Armenian Genocide, he was well positioned to continue research aimed at the transformation of Turkish society. He deepened his commitment to shedding light on the

¹³Juan Cole, "Detained in Two Worlds Taner Akam Story," *Informed Comment*, April 7, 2007, <https://www.juancole.com/> (accessed February 25, 2022). Taner Akcam, "Turkey and history: shoot the messenger," *OpenDemocracy*, August 16, 2007, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/turkey_and_history_shoot_the_messenger/ (accessed March 6, 2022).

¹⁴Harut Sassunian, (May 14, 2010) "Turkish Scholar Taner Akcam Advocates Change in Policy of Genocide Denial," *Asbarez*, <https://asbarez.com/> (accessed February 25, 2022).

¹⁵Aisha Labi, "European Court Rules for American Scholar in Freedom-of-Expression Case," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 28, 2011.

legacy of genocide and mass violence carried out against minority Christians, including the Greeks and Assyrians, and Muslim populations, such as the Kurds and Dersim. Interested in political violence throughout late Ottoman and modern Turkish history, he was nevertheless primarily focused on the Armenian Genocide. Among the many dimensions of this subject, he examined forced conversions to Islam and the treatment of orphaned Armenian children who were assimilated into the Turkish majority. Long mentored by the Armenian-American sociologist Vahakn Dadrian (1926–2019), one of the first historians of the Armenian genocide,¹⁶ they published *Judgment at Istanbul: The Armenian Genocide Trials*.¹⁷ In 2015, he published *The Spirit of the Laws: The Plunder of Wealth in the Armenian Genocide*, co-authored with his doctoral student Ümit Kurt, which examined the expropriation of Armenian property and demands for reparations.¹⁸

In addition to advancing new scholarship, he dedicated himself to training future scholars in order to carry the field forward at institutions around the world. In 2016, Khatchig Mouradian, the initial student in a stream of talented PhD candidates under Akçam's supervision, graduated from Clark.¹⁹ Ümit Kurt,²⁰ Asya Darbinyan,²¹ and Anna Aleksanyan followed quickly after.

During his tenure as Kaloosdian Mugar Professor, Akçam taught his students to work with archival source materials and recruited their help with important initiatives documenting the Armenian Genocide. One of his most significant projects was to assemble an online archive of materials

¹⁶Paul R. Bartrop and Steven Leonard Jacobs, *Fifty Key Thinkers on the Holocaust and Genocide* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 79–85.

¹⁷Taner Akçam and with Vahakn Dadrian, *Judgment at Istanbul: The Armenian Genocide Trials* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011).

¹⁸Taner Akçam and Ümit Kurt, *The Spirit of the Laws: The Plunder of Wealth in the Armenian Genocide* (New York: Berghahn, 2015).

¹⁹Khatchig Mouradian, *Genocide and Humanitarian Resistance in Ottoman Syria, 1915–1917*, *phil. dissertation*, Clark University, 2016; *The Resistance Network: The Armenian Genocide and Humanitarianism in Ottoman Syria, 1915–1918* (Michigan State University Press, 2021).

²⁰Ümit Kurt, *The Making of the Aintab Elite: Social Support, Local Incentives and Provincial Motives Behind the Armenian Genocide (1890s–1920s)*, *phil. dissertation*, Clark University, 2016; *The Armenians of Aintab: The Economics of Genocide in an Ottoman Province* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2021).

²¹Asya Darbinyan, *Russian Humanitarian Response to Armenian Genocide*, *dissertation*, Clark University, 2019.

compiled by the Armenian Catholic priest Krikor Guerguerian, a Genocide survivor who preserved highly significant materials held by the Jerusalem Armenian Patriarchate, the Ottoman, British, German, American, and Austro-Hungarian state archives. Akçam assembled a team, including several of his doctoral advisees, to translate, catalogue, and index this vast collection of documents that were previously unknown or thought lost.²² And significant items from the collection became the focus of doctoral research as well as the basis for his 2018 book, *Killing Orders: Talat Pasha's Telegrams and the Armenian Genocide*.²³

The publication and careful analysis of materials from the Guerguerian Archive have strengthened the record regarding the premeditated and centrally organized effort of the Ottoman Turkish Government to annihilate Armenians and other Christians. With ready access to these documents, Turkish citizens gained the opportunity to assess their own history for the first time in more than a century. And Akçam has persuasively argued that facing this history offers the potential to transform Turkish society into a more open and democratic system where citizens hold their government to account. His relentless pursuit of the facts regarding events that transpired a century ago is grounded in his deep belief that when historic injustices are denied and concealed, they prevent the possibility for sustained peace.

TANER AKÇAM AND ARMENIAN GENOCIDE STUDIES

The past thirty years have witnessed the advancement of Armenian Genocide scholarship from a state of relative backwardness to where it stands today as one of the best documented occurrences of genocide or mass violence other than the Holocaust. It is not a coincidence that this thirty-year period coincides with Akçam's scholarly career. As a researcher, lecturer, and mentor to a new generation of scholars, including those he has trained and those for whom he has served as an inspiration, Akçam has led the effort to utilize previously unknown, ignored, or under-studied sources, whether in Turkish, Armenian, German, or other languages, thus

²²The digital *Krikor Guerguerian Archive* is now available online, <https://wordpress.clarku.edu/guerguerianarchive/> (accessed March 6, 2022). Cf. Bernhard Whitmore, "Professor Taner Akcam: The Quest for Truth," *Vitality. A Magazine for Active Adults*, Vol. 68 (February/March 2019), pp. 4–6.

²³Taner Akçam, *Killing Orders: Talat Pasha's Telegrams and the Armenian Genocide* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

immeasurably expanding the scholarly project of documenting and analyzing the Armenian Genocide.

While genocide studies as an academic discipline is a relatively new field, important works of documentation were published in Armenian in the immediate aftermath of the Armenian Genocide. By gathering documentation from the survivors, these works provided an important foundation for the study of the Armenian Genocide. For decades, non-academic researchers writing in Armenian dominated inquiries. Lacking institutional support and limited in their readership to those fluent in Armenian, these early researchers nevertheless conducted foundational work. One of them was Fr. Guerguerian, who devoted much of his adult life to researching the Armenian Genocide, traveling to important archival repositories, such as the Jerusalem Patriarchate and the Nubarian Library in Paris, where he photographed or copied crucial materials. Guerguerian's archives contain several unpublished book-length works, as well as vast quantities of notes and documents that he gathered for these projects and for others he was never fully able to realize that are now available electronically thanks to Akçam's initiative.

Vahakn Dadrian, together with Richard Hovannisian one of the pioneers of Armenian Genocide Studies, was deeply affected by the example of Fr. Guerguerian.²⁴ He recalled that his "actual initiation into research on the Armenian Genocide coincides with an encounter with [Fr. Guerguerian] in the Beirut, Lebanon, in the summer of 1965. ... For the first time, I became aware of the existence of authentic documents pertaining to the Armenian Genocide, as he became my guidepost at this initial stage of my involvement in genocide research."²⁵ Just as Guerguerian opened a door for Dadrian, so Dadrian performed a similar role for Akçam. Following the death of Dadrian in 2019, Akçam, stated: "Were it not for Dadrian, I would most likely neither have studied the Armenian Genocide nor have come to the United States. ... Dadrian did not hesitate to send

²⁴ Vahakn Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasus* (Providence, RI: Berghahn, 1995); Richard Hovannisian, *The Armenian Genocide in Perspective* (London: Routledge, 1986), and idem, *The Armenian Genocide: History, Politics, Ethics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).

²⁵ Vahakn N. Dadrian, "The Quest for Scholarship in My Pathos for the Armenian Tragedy and Its Victims," in Samuel Totten and Steven Leonard Jacobs, eds., *Pioneers of Genocide Studies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2002), p. 241.

me special documents that even he had not yet had a chance to analyze.”²⁶ There exists, therefore, an unbroken line of transmission from Guerguerian, a survivor and a pioneer of the pre-academic era of genocide research, to Dadrian, who was among the first to bring academic methods and standards to the study of genocide, to Akçam, and now through him to his students who have already begun to take their places in the scholarly world.

Unlike Richard Hovannisian and Vahakn Dadrian, however, Akçam is not so much a historian of the Armenians and their suffering from, and agency during, persecution since the late 19th century and then during the First World War than a historian of the Turks. Akçam’s peculiar contribution to Armenian genocide studies lies in the precise documentation of the conditions and decisions that led to the genocide and in the no less precise analysis of the motivations and intentions of the Turkish perpetrators and the Turkish perpetrator society. Intellectually and politically rooted in the fight for a democratic Turkey, he is convinced that a democratic society, built on human rights, cannot succeed without acknowledging past violations of these rights and of past injustices, especially when they have reached genocidal dimensions. “If you really want to establish a democratic society that respects human rights you have to face your own history. If you deny the historic injustices of the past, there is a potential that you will repeat them,” he says.²⁷ It is in this spirit that he wrote his first book on the impact of the eventually failed, early attempts in Turkey to work through the genocide of the Armenians and the effect of this failure on Turkish national identity in the 20th century.²⁸ And it is this impetus that has driven his many following books, most of all his now famous trilogy *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* (2006), *The Young Turks’ Crime Against Humanity: The Armenian Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire* (2012), and most recently *Killing Orders: Talat Pasha’s Telegrams and the Armenian Genocide* (2018).

²⁶ “Prof. Taner Akçam: We Have to Create Institutions that Carry the Legacy of Vahakn Dadrian,” text of talk given on September 15, 2019, to commemorate the forty-day anniversary of Dadrian’s death. See <https://hyetert.org/2019/09/17/prof-taner-akcam-we-have-to-create-institutions-that-carry-the-legacy-of-vahakn-dadrian/> (accessed March 11, 2022).

²⁷ Cited in Whitmore, “Professor Taner Akçam: The Quest for Truth,” p. 6.

²⁸ Taner Akçam, “Turkey and the Armenian Ghost,” *Armenian Weekly*, December 15, 2012, <https://armenianweekly.com/2012/12/15/akcam-turkey-and-the-armenian-ghost/> (accessed March 6, 2022).

None of these books are easy reads. Instead, they intrigue by the presentation of the sheer mass of often previously unknown archival sources, and by the “kind of forensic exercise” Akçam performs to defuse doubts of the authenticity of the documents collected to prove the genocidal character of the massacres of the Armenians.²⁹ That these massacres constitute the crime of genocide, has long been stated and occasionally even before Raphael Lemkin and the United Nations popularized the term. Before that, eyewitnesses and contemporary observers used equivalent concepts such as the German *Völkermord* (annihilation of nations or a nation). Denialists in and outside of Turkey, however, conveniently discarded such accounts by pointing to their Christian or otherwise foreign, supposedly biased background. Akçam’s genuine contribution to Armenian genocide studies and to the political debate on whether the plight of the Armenians constitutes genocide has therefore always been to employ Ottoman and other documents produced by the perpetrators, those who initiated, administered, and collaborated in the genocide on various levels of the political and military hierarchy, and to demonstrate clearly that these sources present the genocide as such just as clearly as western and Armenian sources. Especially *The Young Turks' Crime Against Humanity* has been praised for its author’s “mastery of sources in at least five languages” and his “proficiency in so many archives,” including American, British, Austrian” and German ones, and his ability to link them to “several Ottoman collections, notably the Prime Ministerial Archives.”³⁰ Taken together, these sources have left no doubt of the multilayered genocide of the Armenians in which resettlement policies, individual executions, wholesale massacres, mass rape, enforced conversion to and assimilations into Islam, in other words physical destruction and cultural genocide went hand in hand. Yet Akçam’s analysis has been reluctant to conceive of the genocide as the consequence of any pre-existing blueprint. Instead, Akçam acknowledges the Turkish leaders’ fears of uprisings and their desperation after a series of military failures at the beginning of the First World War. And yet there was no veritable danger from the Armenians, and thus the deliberate extermination cannot be justified as a military

²⁹Mark Mazower, “An Archive of Atrocities,” *The New York Review of Books*, April 4, 2019, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/04/04/talat-pasha-archive-atrocities-armenia/> (accessed March 6, 2022), on Akçam, *Killing Orders*.

³⁰Margaret Lavinia Anderson, “Shooting an elephant,” *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (2013), p. 465.

necessity, as Turkish and other denialists often have pretended. Instead, the chain of evidence that Akçam's research has forged has become ever tighter. In his 2012 book, by then arguably the most sophisticated documentation of the genocide, Akçam forecast somewhat pessimistically that thanks to the secretiveness of the major Ottoman operations and orders, "there is practically no chance of finding records of the plans for annihilation, the 'smoking gun.'" Six years later, after intense further research and the utilization of the Guerguerian Archive, *Killing Orders* (2018) provided exactly that "smoking gun," as Akçam asserted, finally proving the authenticity of the infamous killing orders signed by the Ottoman Minister of Interior Talat Pasha, previously denounced as forgeries by denialists.³¹

Akçam's impact has gone well beyond the academy. For many Armenians, their first exposure to Akçam was when he spoke at the Yerevan conference held to mark the 80th anniversary of the Genocide. Some years later, Richard Hovannisian, who was also a participant at the conference, recalled that "Taner Akçam was brave enough to come to Yerevan in 1995 to give a paper on the Armenian Question. What was disconcerting prior to that time (and which still remains largely the case) was that even left-wing Turkish scholars and intellectuals who struggled against the repressive measures of the Turkish state showed themselves to be extremely cautious and even reactionary when it came to Armenian issues."³²

It ought to have been clear at this point that Akçam was determined not only to make an impact on the scholarship on the Armenian Genocide but also to break down the "wall of silence" that existed between Turks and Armenians. Indeed, in the 1997 Dutch television documentary aptly titled *A Wall of Silence*, and which featured Akçam and his academic mentor Vahakn Dadrian, Akçam declares: "A mass murder took place. As long as [Turks and Armenians] refuse to communicate and talk about this issue they will remain enemies. It is my modest intention to bring this animosity to an end."³³

For a great many Armenians, Akçam became the first Turk they came to know; and although, especially at the beginning, his exceptional status

³¹ Akçam, *Killing Orders*, 75–121, and Tim Arango, "'Sherlock Holmes of Armenian Genocide' Uncovers Lost Evidence," *The New York Times* (April 22, 2017), for the quote.

³² Richard G. Hovannisian, "Reflections on Academic Dialogue: Impediments and Prospects," *Journal of Armenian Studies*, Vol. 9 (2010), p. 6.

³³ *A Wall of Silence: The Unspoken Fate of the Armenians*, produced and directed by Dorothee Forma (Hilversum, the Netherlands: Humanist Broadcasting Foundation, 1997).

was apparent, the very fact of his existence—a Turk who talks openly about the Armenian Genocide—held the promise that there were others. Akçam may not have brought animosity between Armenians and Turks to an end, but he made it impossible to refer to “the Turks” as a monolith. Indeed, many others have followed in his wake, scholars who may approach the history differently than Akçam but whose work has nevertheless been shaped by his example. The fact that it is no longer remarkable that Turkish scholars are among the leading researchers on the Armenian Genocide and that their numbers continue to grow is itself a measure of the sea-change effected by Akçam.

ESSAYS HONORING TANER AKÇAM

An international group of scholars readily agreed to contribute chapters to this volume, including senior academics from Europe, Israel, Turkey, and the United States and younger scholars from Armenia, Lebanon, and Turkey whom Akçam mentored. The diversity of authors is a fitting tribute to a scholar who has made his home on three continents and who has consistently worked in a transnational fashion. University educated in Turkey, trained in Germany, a professor in the United States, renowned and honored for his research and activism in Armenia, Europe, and the Americas, Akçam is an indefatigable lecturer who has traveled widely sharing his work with vast audiences through his books, lectures, opinion pieces, and media interviews.

This volume opens with a prefatory poem by the poet, memoirist, and scholar Peter Balakian that conjures a visit to Istanbul, where he encounters present-day violence as well as the trauma of returning to the city where his family had prospered before the Armenian Genocide.

Balakian continues with a personal reflection on the importance of Akçam’s efforts to push Turkish society to document and acknowledge the past. The chapters that follow respond to a broad theme that has animated Akçam’s scholarly achievements: documenting the Armenian Genocide through the discovery and analysis of primary sources. Organized in four parts, each is dedicated to a topic that has concerned him in his capacity as a scholar and public intellectual.

Part One, *Women and Girls*, is a subject of particular interest to Akçam, especially following a 2021 controversy regarding Armenian grievances against Kurds. In a Turkish media interview, he described how some Kurdish aghas in certain regions would demand the first night with

Armenian brides (otherwise known as *jus primae noctis* or *droit de seigneur*). In response to Kurdish intellectuals who politicized the discussion of this historic practice, Akçam identified the Russian, Armenian, English and Turkish sources that document the custom not as *de jure* but as praxis. Gendered violence is the subject of Anna Alexanyan's examination of the Black Sea city of Trabzon, which offers a case study in the treatment of women and girls during the Armenian Genocide. She draws on the perpetrator trials conducted in Istanbul to document the range of crimes committed against the female population of Trabzon and highlights individual women who bravely detailed their victimization by testifying in court. Lerna Ekmekçioğlu introduces readers to Vartouhie Calantar Nalbandian, a highly educated Armenian woman who served time as a political prisoner during the Genocide and published her prison memoirs in the feminist journal *Hay Gin (Armenian Woman)*. The life of this previously little known feminist is examined through her experiences on trial, her prison years, and her partnership with her husband analyzing Turkish threats to the Armenian people in a jointly authored study from 1926. Two silent films, the topic of Nazan Maksudyan's chapter, reveal a gendered perspective in the early efforts of the Near East Relief organization to represent the Armenian Genocide to American audiences. Each film features an orphan girl whose victimhood is exploited as part of a marketing strategy to promote humanitarianism.

The chapters in the part *Agency and Assistance* are written by three scholars, mentored by Akçam, who tap new sources to explore the help Armenians received as well as efforts at self-help. Asya Darbinyan utilizes Armenian, Georgian, and Russian archives to establish the nature of humanitarian assistance in response to the refugee crisis resulting from the deportations and war on the Caucasus front. She documents Russian Imperial efforts to aid refugees in the newly occupied areas of the Ottoman Empire—Erzincan, Bayburt, Erzurum—in summer 1916 and reflects on the nature of Armenian-Russian relations in this period. Likewise, Ümit Kurt identifies a new source for documenting the experience of an Armenian refugee from the city of Aintab. The diary of Krikor Bogharian details the struggles faced by deportees during their march to the desert and the choices and non-choices they made in their efforts to survive. Khatchig Mouradian challenges the stringent categorization of Armenian victims during the Genocide and proposes a new way of understanding medical personnel who do not fit neatly into established frameworks that view victims as stripped of agency. He shows how a fraction of Armenian

doctors, nurses, and others with skills deemed useful found means to survive by operating within the interstices of collaboration and resistance.

Trained as both a historian and a sociologist, Akçam is attuned to how unresolved injustices impede the development of communal bonds that are essential to a well-functioning society. In countless editorials, especially in the Turkish media, he has commented on how genocide and its denial impact society, a theme explored in *Genocide and Society*. Raymond Kévorkian examines the laws underlying the expropriation of Armenian communal property, such as churches and schools, as well as the seizure of individual assets that accompanied the physical destruction of the population. These material gains formed the foundation of the modern Turkish Republic and remain a powerful motivation for continued Genocide denial by the Turkish state and society. Hans Lukas Kieser investigates the tension between genocide and social contracts in so far as the former is destructive and the latter is constructive. He locates modern human rights and the idea of social contracts in Abrahamic beliefs that depend on a covenant between humans and God, a system that entails boundaries that leave some groups included and others excluded. Henry Theriault interrogates the role of the scholar and examines whether those who work on genocide have a responsibility to engage in activism, as Akçam has done so effectively throughout his career. In his contribution, Theriault develops an important distinction, within the sphere of engaged scholarship, between “objectivity” and “interest.”

As a human rights activist and scholar who has challenged accepted truths throughout his career, Akçam is no stranger to scholarly disputes. The contributions in the final part, *Consensus and Debate*, explore issues and arguments in the academic discourse. Hamit Bozarslan compares Akçam and the sociologist İsmail Beşikçi, whose careers both demonstrate a willingness to challenge official narratives that dominated Turkish universities and research centers. He shows how Akçam confronted taboos and questioned the academic historiography in which facts about the Armenian Genocide were not systematically denied, but were considered as necessary to national survival in light of western “imperialism.” Benny Morris and Dror Ze’evi challenge the predominant narrative regarding the periodization of the Armenian Genocide to argue that the Genocide lasted for thirty years and encompassed Armenians, Assyrians and Greeks. The destruction of these Christian communities was the deliberate policy of three successive Ottoman and Turkish governments—a policy that most Muslim inhabitants did not oppose, and many enthusiastically supported.

Ronald Suny provides an important overview of the historiography on the Armenian Genocide and identifies areas of consensus reached by leading academics. Yet, while the historical record has established a firm foundation for understanding the ethnic cleansing, forced assimilation, property confiscations, and mass killing of Armenians and Assyrians as a genocide, political and polemical campaigns against truth and accurate and evidenced historical knowledge continue in Turkey and elsewhere.

The future of Armenian Genocide research shines brightly, as Akçam has embarked on another chapter in his career. As the inaugural director of the Armenian Genocide Research Program of the Promise Armenian Institute at UCLA, he is well positioned to initiate new endeavors that will strengthen the field and add to the historical record.³⁴ With the 2023 centennial anniversary of the Turkish Republic, Akçam has undertaken to examine the premises that underlie its foundational myths as part of a conversation to construct a more peaceful and democratic future. A forthcoming book, *The Hundred Years of Apartheid* (published in Turkish in 2023 as *Yüz-Yıllık Apartheid*), examines the modern Turkish legal system that resulted in a stratified citizenry favoring Sunni Muslims. Other research projects will materialize as Akçam continues to identify sources that illuminate the historical record and inspire efforts to acknowledge past injustices that can lead to healing and reconciliation.

³⁴ “Promise Armenian Institute names Taner Akçam inaugural director of Armenian Genocide Research Program,” *Armenian Weekly*, February 16, 2022, <https://armenian-weekly.com/2022/02/16/promise-armenian-institute-names-taner-akcam-inaugural-director-of-armenian-genocide-research-program/> (accessed March 6, 2022).

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