

Armenia, Caucasus

Reconciliation and Recriminations

by **Barbara Frye**

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As their government makes overtures to an old foe, many Armenians still wait for an apology.

YEREVAN | Standing in a threadbare tweed blazer on a sunny day in late April, Zohrab Shahbazyan brushed a tear from his cheek as he watched goose-stepping soldiers carry a large wreath across a plaza. Their destination was Yerevan's hilltop memorial to 1.5 million Armenians killed or driven from their homes in Turkey nearly 100 years ago.

Shahbazyan, 75, had come here on 24 April, the day in 1915 that the Ottoman government arrested more than 200 Armenian intellectuals. Most were killed in the beginning of a campaign to drive Armenians out of eastern Turkey during World War I. Many who survived the massacres were marched into the deserts of Mesopotamia and Syria without food or water. Like most Armenians in the homeland and throughout the country's vast diaspora, Shahbazyan said he lost ancestors – 31 of 48 – in what his government and nearly two dozen others have termed a genocide. And like much of Yerevan, he had walked slowly up the hill today holding a single flower, which he would place on a ring around a flame at the center of the memorial.

“Genocide is not just killing people. They exterminated the whole nation,” he said. “One and a half million Armenians were not buried on their land.” In its rituals – prayers by golden-robed leaders of the Armenian Apostolic Church, a visit from the president, an endless procession of flower-bearing pilgrims – the day was like nearly every 24 April since the memorial opened in 1967.



President Serzh Sargsyan (left) and other dignitaries attend a commemoration ceremony on 24 April in Yerevan. Photo by Barbara Frye.

But it was also different. This year it took place days after the governments of Turkey and Armenia had announced plans to open the border between the two countries, which has been closed since 1993. It was the latest in a series of remarkable events over the past two years that have included an invitation from Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan to Turkish President Abdullah Gul to attend a soccer match between the two countries in Yerevan and a public apology from a group of Turkish intellectuals to the people of Armenia.

But Shahbazyan was ready to forgive only on condition that Turkey give up the territory that many Armenians (and Armenia's now-superseded 1990 declaration of independence) refer to as "western Armenia."

Michael Gulyar had also come to pay his respects. At 19, he is more than 50 years Shahbazyan's junior. His grandfather escaped the pogroms in Turkey, and of his family, he said, "They don't want to find terms with the Turks." But he has a different view. "Turkey has changed," he said. "Many Turkish have a European mentality." And while he condemns the killings and expulsions, he said he understands how complicated the idea of apologizing can be for Turkey. "Now it is difficult because when Turkey recognizes the genocide, they must give back land."

The question of reparations lingers, despite many officials' efforts to discourage such expectations. The Armenian Revolutionary Federation, a political party that just left the governing coalition over the deal with Turkey, still calls for land and property in Turkey to be returned to the descendants of its Armenian owners. Outside Armenia, many analysts and diplomats have welcomed the Turkish-Armenian thaw, but inside the country, it's clear that some are more ready than others.

"We're coming to the stage when we must speak more openly to the public about their neighbors," Edward Nalbandian, the Armenian foreign minister, said. "If you live somewhere and all your neighbors will not be [your] friends, how could you live?"

Armenia is largely isolated in its southern Caucasus neighborhood. In addition to the closed border with Turkey, movement and trade between it and its eastern neighbor, Azerbaijan, are frozen due to the conflict between the two countries over Nagorno-Karabakh, an enclave within Azerbaijan that is occupied by ethnic Armenians. The two sides fought a war over the land in the early 1990s and a sporadically broken cease fire is in place. Turkey closed its border with Armenia in 1993, in solidarity with its ally Azerbaijan after an advance by Armenian troops into Azerbaijani territory.

For years, Armenian officials have insisted that the border closures have not hampered progress, and there is some evidence for that. For more than a decade before the financial crisis hit last year, the country's economy grew annually by double digits and its poverty rate dropped. But, although Nalbandian said the diplomatic overtures began in May 2008, the August war between Georgia and Russia crimped Armenia's trade flows and lent some urgency to a rapprochement with its western neighbor.

Public opinion on the issue is difficult to gauge comprehensively. Some Armenian analysts caution against relying on opinion polls, but they note that Rule of Law, the political party most strongly against reconciliation, took just 7 percent of the votes in the most recent parliamentary elections.

But those numbers don't tell the whole story. The Armenian Revolutionary Federation took 13 percent of the vote. "Fifteen years of blockade have not produced the intended result," said Kiro Manoyan, an ARF official, saying that there have been neither deaths from starvation nor economic disaster and that Armenia does not urgently need trade with Turkey. "It hasn't been the end of us. We have managed to survive."

Manoyan said his party favors an open border, but without preconditions. Turkey has long demanded the withdrawal of Armenian forces from Azerbaijani territories ringing Nagorno-Karabakh, which Armenia deems a security zone for the enclave. Because Turkey has sent recent signals that it would not lift this condition, and because the governments have not released details of their agreement, Manoyan said he can only assume that the Armenian government is acceding to Istanbul's demands.

Like Manoyan, Stepan Safaryan, a member of parliament from the opposition Heritage Party, said, "The point is not whether we open the border. The point is how and at what price."

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

With deep-seated enmities, the passage of time and the emergence of a new generation typically helps to heal wounds. But in Yerevan, not all the signs point in one direction.

Adjacent to the genocide memorial sits a museum, opened in 1995. On commemoration day, parents led their children, some as young as 3 or 4, past old photos, enlarged to about 6 square meters, of Turkish soldiers posing proudly behind the decapitated heads of Armenian religious leaders, of an Armenian woman and her two young children who had starved to death and whose emaciated bodies had been left to bake in the desert sun, of white-coated Armenian doctors hanging from a gallows.

Suren Manukyan, the museum's deputy director, said, "We understand that it is very difficult for Turks to accept that their grandfathers were murderers. This museum is part of Turkish history, too. The recognition of

the Armenian genocide is not just a problem for Armenian society. It's a problem for Turkish society, too." Manukyan said he sees a change in Turkey. "The first step is a discussion. I think in Turkey now we have this discussion."

The 2007 murder of Turkish-Armenian journalist **Hrant Dink** in Istanbul by a Turkish nationalist provoked an outcry in Turkey, with tens of thousands of Turks attending his funeral. In December a group of Turkish intellectuals posted an online apology for the events of 1915-1917 in the form of a petition. It has been signed by nearly 30,000 people around the world. "Who could envision, just one year ago, two years ago, that 30,000 Turks could sign a petition to ask for [forgiveness] from the Armenian people?" Foreign Minister Nalbandian said.

Whether they will get it is an open question. Takoulte Moutoufian, 42, was among those parents bringing their children to the museum that day. Asked what she and her husband were teaching their two sons, ages 14 and 9, about Turks, she said, "That they are our enemy."

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