

First of all I'd like to thank the organizers of this commemorative event and express my appreciation to you all for being with us today.

Regardless of their age, social status or political preference, Armenians all over the world unite on this very day every year to pay solemn tribute to, and honor the memory of one and half million compatriots who fell victim to the first genocide of the 20th century, meticulously planned and executed by the government of the Ottoman Empire.

Our reasons for gathering are threefold. First, we gather to pay tribute to the memory of those who perished. Second, we gather to remind the world that "Never Again" ought not to be a rhetorical appeal by international organizations and celebrities, voiced at noble summits, but otherwise forgotten. Third, we gather to explore new ways of raising awareness about the Armenian Genocide and promoting its recognition worldwide.

Many leading countries have acknowledged this crime against humanity. Two weeks ago Italy became the 27th country to put aside the sensitivity of its bilateral relations with Turkey and by the decision of its parliament, recognized the crime of Genocide committed by the Ottoman Empire against the Armenian people. For that, we are grateful.

As we look forward into the future, our thoughts revert time and time again to the century-old events of 1915 and we keep asking: "Why?" Why did it happen to us? Why did the world keep silent when all the signs of the looming tragedy were there? Why did the great powers of the time turn a blind eye when atrocities were being carried out in broad daylight? Did the world learn from the tragedy of Armenians?

During the Armenian genocide, the military and political establishments of states dictating the global order allowed murder to take place. In his memoirs the then US Ambassador to Turkey, Henry Morgenthau notes: "My failure to stop the destruction of the Armenians made Turkey for me a place of horror, and I found intolerable my further daily association with men who ... were still reeking with the blood of nearly a million human beings." Since then, ethnic cleansing became part of the political culture, an "acceptable" way for solving interethnic problems.

Presumably, one may contend that the world has changed today. Indeed, in 1948 the international community adopted the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide "to prevent from happening again that what had happened to Armenians during World War I and to Jews during WW II", as Rafael Lemkin, who coined the term "genocide" put it. "Never again", was the basic message of the authors of the Genocide Convention. Yet, the Holocaust and the tragic events of World War II did not conclude the "age of genocide." The world has witnessed Rwanda, Cambodia and Darfur.

The international expert community came up with various interpretations of the root causes for the tragedy of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. Geopolitical explanations often refer to the Armenian-Russian alliance in World War I. Economic explanations allude to the disproportional wealth and economic pull of the Armenian minority in the Empire, during this turmoil. The third interpretation deals with the political transformation attempted by the Young Turks, with the goal of promoting a multi-party democracy for the first time in the country's history.

In this regard I'd like to recall the 19th century British thinker John Stuart Mill, who argued that democracy was almost impossible in multiethnic societies. According to Mill, democratic decision-making can take place only if the ethnic differences needing resolution are not immense. Although democracy does not require a completely homogeneous society, it does require a certain level of unity and trust between its various ethnic groups. In the absence of such conditions, the very process of decision-making regarding conflicting issues can threaten the peaceful co-existence of ethnic groups and take most violent forms.

According to prominent American social scientist Samuel Lipset, the most extreme interpretation of Mill's theory leads to the conclusion that the only way for a multiethnic society to build democracy is to eliminate its ethnic diversity via four possible "mechanisms": genocide, expulsion, assimilation or partition.

A century ago the history of ethnic tensions in our part of the world proved abovementioned assumption and its interpretation. At the end of the 19th century, the Armenian minority in the Ottoman Empire fell victim to ethnic cleansing and later on in the beginning of the 20th to genocide. Simultaneously, the majority of surviving Armenians and other ethnic minorities of the Ottoman Empire underwent forcible assimilation or expulsion from Turkey.

Since our discussion concerns memories of the Genocide in the Armenian collective conscience, I'd like to contrast it with that of the Turks, as described in a remarkable book entitled "*The Bastard of Istanbul*," authored by Turkish novelist, academic, public speaker and women's rights activist Elif Shafak. There is a passage I would like you to hear: "...they [Turks] had seen no connection between themselves and the perpetrators of the crimes. Armanush, [Armenian hero of the novel], embodied the spirits of her people generations and generations earlier, whereas the average Turk had no such notion of continuity with his or her ancestors. The Armenians and the Turks lived in different time frames. For the Armenians, time was a cycle in which the past incarnated in the present and the present birthed the future. For the Turks, time was a multihyphenated line, where the past ended at some definite point and the present started anew from scratch, and there was nothing but rupture in between."

This kind of memory disconnect and selectivity is not accidental: after establishing the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal, its founding father, brutally cut the cultural ties between the Ottoman Empire and its modern successor. In particular, in 1928 the Latin-based modern alphabet replaced the Arabic one used by the Turks in the preceding centuries. It was done by design and pursued the goal of making the new Turkish Republic look like a European state, particularly in the eyes of foreigners, and most importantly to remove the symbolic connections it had with the past Ottoman Empire. This thought-out policy also had a dramatic effect of making the past inaccessible to the next generations, with the exception of a privileged few that had specialised training in the old script.

What is relevant to our discussion is the fact that historical memory is selective: it can both unite people and separate them, and therefore there is always a dilemma: will it be

helpful and conducive to reconciliation of perpetrator and victim or harmful and adverse to it. Reconciliation requires compassion, and its chances are exacerbated by denial. Continuous denial traumatizes both sides, hampering any possibility for de-linking the present and the future from the past. Memory is confused by controversy, while mutual understanding is challenged by defiance of truth, which is the key to comprehending the tragedy of 1915. Understanding and acknowledgment of the deeds of the past government and the responsibility of the current generation, although not culpable, to recognize and to condemn the crime is an indispensable component of reconciliation. Some nations undertook this painful experience of recognition in order to be relieved of the traumatizing consequences of their history.

For decades, the Turkish population has been brainwashed about its history and to a large extent is not familiar with its factual past. Nevertheless, it's becoming apparent that it is difficult to indefinitely blindfold an entire nation. Although the taboo over the use of the word "genocide" is still prevalent, the issue is no longer considered non-existent. And despite that nationalism and traditionalism are on ascent, in response to broad changes sweeping society and at times undermining its very foundations, the movement of modernization is unfolding in Turkey today. Many Turkish writers, journalists and representatives of civil society now challenge their government's policies by particularly questioning its orthodox position regarding the Armenian Genocide.

Regrettably, in parallel to these developments, official censorship continues to serve as a dexterous tool of the Turkish government in manipulating its domestic opinion. This is the very essence of the notorious Article 301 of the Turkish Criminal Code. Despite some changes introduced in 2011, the European Court of Human Rights decided that "the scope of the terms under Article 301 of the Criminal Code, as interpreted by the judiciary, is too wide and vague and thus the provision constitutes a continuing threat to the exercise of the right to freedom of expression." Under this Article various intellectuals have been prosecuted and expelled from the country, including a Noble prize winning novelist, Orhan Pamuk.

The Genocide is not the only pending issue in our bilateral relations with Turkey. Since 1991, Turkey has refused to establish diplomatic relations with Armenia. In the absence of war, it is an unprecedented case in contemporary international relations. Moreover, Turkey unilaterally continues to maintain the land blockade on Armenia.

Our position remains clear and unchanged: we are ready to establish diplomatic relations with Turkey without any preconditions. To build a better future, we should draw lessons from our common past. However, we cannot revise history. Good neighborly relations between Armenia and Turkey will strengthen peace and stability in the region to the benefit of all its nations.

I'm confident that the truth will prevail, bringing peace to the souls of those who perished during the Genocide and those who carried it out. The noblest way to pay tribute to the memory of 1.5 mln victims is to strengthen the foundations of Armenia: a state which is a custodian of our past and is in charge of our future.