Armenian history

Gunningforthe

G-word

Great Catastrophe: Armenians and Turks in

the Shadow of Genocide.

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N APRIL 24th millions of Armenians

around the world will commemorate

the centenary of the mass killing of their

forebears by Ottoman forces. A growing

numberofhistorianssayitwasgenocide.

 “The central facts of the story are

straightforward,” says Thomas de Waal, a

Russophile scholaratthe Carnegie Endow-

mentforInternational Peace, an American

think-tank, in the introduction to his objec-

tive and meticulously researched account

of the Armenian tragedy and how it has

played out in modern times. “The Arme-

nians were an ancient people, whose

homeland was centred in what is now

eastern Turkey.” In 1913, there were up to 2m

ofthem in the Ottoman empire. Atthe start

ofthe firstworld war, the Ottoman govern-

ment ordered their mass deportation. A

few years later, Mr de Waal writes, there

was barely one-tenth of that number in

Turkey. The resthad been exiled orkilled.

 A plethora of academic tomes, mem-

oirs and novels about the genocide exist,

including Turkish government-sponsored

propaganda purportingto prove thatmost

of the Armenians died of hunger and dis-

ease during their forced march to the Syri-

an desert in 1915.  Mr de Waal navigates

through some of these. Yet, unlike many,

he does not set about legislating history.

Ratherhe offersthe widercontextin which

what Armenians call Meds Yeghern, or the

“great crime”, unfolded. (He uses the term

“greatcatastrophe”, which hasriled many.)

Abdul Hamid II, who became the Otto-

man sultan in 1876, was consumed with

paranoia ashe watched hisempire shrink.

He accused his Armenian subjects ofplot-

ting with the great powers to truncate it

further and unleashed a first wave of

pogroms, which claimed nearly 100,000

lives. Armenian revolutionaries retaliated

by killing Ottoman officials and siding

with “Uncle Christian” (Russia) as it gob-

bled up chunks of eastern Anatolia. (The

Armenian relationship with Russia is a

constant thread.) Decades later a different

group of Armenian “revolutionaries” em-

barked on a revenge killing spree of Turk-

ish diplomatsfrom Vienna to Sydney.

 Mrde Waal’sbiggestcontribution is his

overview of the interlocking phases of

Turkish and Armenian history after 1915.

Trenchant and colourful anecdotes

abound, along with some surprising facts.

The Ottomans were the earliest to recog-

nise the first and short-lived Republic of

Armenia in June 1918 (it collapsed two

years later under Soviet pressure). Three

months afterwards the Ottoman military

commander, Halil Pasha, who personally

directed massacres of Armenians and As-

syrian Christians in the eastern provinces,

met the Armenian interior minister in the

capital, Yerevan. “The two men had fought

abattle to the death in Van in 1915”, yetthey

“kissed each otherwarmlylike friends.”

 Turkeywasagain amongthe firstto re-

cognise the fledgling Republic ofArmenia

when itbroke awayfrom the SovietUnion

in 1991. Butbefore diplomatictieswere for-

mally established Armenia went to war

against Turkey’s ally, Azerbaijan, over Na-

gorno-Karabakh, a mainly Armenian en-

clave in Azerbaijan. (Mr de Waal’s book

about that conflict, “Black Garden”, is an

importantcomplementto thisone.) Turkey

sealed its border with Armenia and so it

has remained, leaving the tiny landlocked

nation ever more dependent on Russia.

Swiss-brokered interventions collapsed

when Turkey, buckling under Azerbaijani

pressure, shelved an agreementfrom 2009

that would have established diplomatic

tiesand reopened the border. The author’s

vivid description of the backroom deal-

ingsthatwenton helpsexplain why.

 Mr de Waal reluctantly concludes that

the killings do come under the United

Nations Convention on Genocide. He

believes the “G-word” (this last term was

coined bya Turkish diplomat) hasbecome

“both legalisticand over-emotional”. Itob-

structs“the understandingofthe historical

rights and wrongs…as much as it illumi-

nates them”. But according to Hrant Dink,

a Turkish-Armenian newspaper editor

killed in 2007 by a young ultranationalist,

Turkey’s main problem is not whether it

should deny or acknowledge that what

happened amounted to genocide, but

what its people comprehend. That is true,

but only up to a point. Turkey has recently

begun making conciliatory gestures to the

Armenians. That would never have hap-

pened had the world, and especially

America’s Congress, not held the possible

charge of“genocide” overit.