

Peter Balakian

Writer, Scholar and Activist

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During a meeting with his Wehrmacht commanders just one week before the Invasion of Poland, Adolph Hitler stated, “I have issued the command [...] that our war aim does not consist in reaching certain lines, but in the physical destruction of the enemy. Accordingly, I have placed my death-head formation in readiness [...] with orders to them to send to death mercilessly and without compassion, men, women, and children of Polish derivation and language. Only thus shall we gain the living space which we need. Who, after all, speaks to-day of the annihilation of the Armenians?”

Hitler was committing an atrocity, the systematic massacre of European Jewry, Slavs and Roma, that had not yet been given a name. Winston Churchill called it “the crime without a name.” The Polish lawyer Raphael Lemkin, in his seminal work *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* published in 1944, coined the term “genocide”. Because the neologism was fairly quickly and widely accepted, first being used legally during the Nuremberg Trials in 1946, the crime now had a name. Not only could it now be used to prosecute those who committed it, but people could now speak of genocide and its devastating effects, ensuring that certain events would never be forgotten.

The relationship between a given concept and the word, and in some cases words, used to express it is frequently complex and difficult. But by giving the crime of genocide a name, Lemkin effectively created the fundamentals of a grammar to attempt to understand that which escaped comprehension before. Trying to understand something as horrific as genocide may never become any less complex or difficult, but trying to understand is always an act of bravery. Lemkin defined genocide as a phenomenon with two phases:

One, the destruction of the national pattern of the oppressed group: the other, the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor. This imposition, in turn, may be made upon the oppressed population which is allowed to remain, or upon the territory alone, after removal of the population and the colonization of the area by the oppressor's own nationals.

Genocide is an act of force, brutality and imposition. Those who perpetrate it rob their victims of their livelihoods, homesteads, ancestral lands, material possessions and, in time, all the things that make them human: family, loved ones, identity and eventually their very sense of self. After the dust settles, the batons stop their sadistic cracking and the menacing barrels are once again pointed down, only a deafening silence remains. Those few who survive are left with nothing, feeling even themselves disappear. As the writer, scholar and activist Peter Balakian writes in his poem “In Armenia, 1987”:

*Where a scimitar cut the horizon [...]
Down there I felt my name disappear.*

If an atrocity that has no word and a person that has no name, then the silence invades everything. But there are those, like Balakian, who break that silence time and time again. Consider for a moment the world, our planet earth. Imagine its shape like misshapen ball of clay, its dedication to a drunken orbit around a dying light, its clouds swirling overhead like whirling dervishes, its astonishing velocity. But most of all, consider its silence. It is silent because we give the world its voice, and it is these very voices that make history. Those voices who break the silence keep history alive, even if those who lived that history have long since perished. History comes from our breath as Balakian writes in “The Claim”:

*History is a man's breath.
Whatever I take in I give out,
mother of mother*

Peter Balakian was born and raised in New Jersey to Armenian parents who arrived in the United States, like so many others seeking a new life, through Ellis Island. From an early age he was regaled with colorful stories told by his grandmother Nafina, who was by Balakian's own account a born storyteller. In listening to all her stories, however, he never once heard her speak of the day of August 1, 1915. Genocide had robbed her of the breath to give that bit of history an existence, just as the Turkish gendarmes and their barrels spewing fire and steel robbed her of all her loved ones save her husband and two infant daughters. Her husband then perished during a long death march. Millions of others suffered similar fates, an entire generation bound by memories of pain. Genocide taketh, and genocide taketh away.

Nafina revealed only bits and pieces in her stories. Balakian would comment, perhaps with the same wryness that so much of his writing and poetry exhibits, in an interview years later that this phenomenon is "more professionally called 'post-traumatic stress syndrome'". He did not truly learn of the Armenian Genocide until he read Ambassador Morgenthau's Story, the account of the American ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, currently the country of Turkey, during the years of 1913 to 1916. In the book Morgenthau described the genocide thusly:

I am confident that the whole history of the human race contains no such horrible episode as this. The great massacres and persecutions of the past seem almost insignificant when compared with the sufferings of the Armenian race in 1915.

This horrible "episode", inflicted upon millions of victims, was the first genocide in our modern era, made possible by advanced technology and improved means of communication. However, the fact that the Armenian people were the victims of genocide is twisted, manipulated and subjected to offensive semantic acrobatics to this very day by Turkey. It is a tactic of manipulation; because the silence is no longer deafening and voices in opposition grow louder everyday, Turkey simply responds with obfuscation. If bayonets and gun barrels can no longer silence the dissenting, then perhaps institutionalized doublespeak will: Turks claim that it was not "genocide", but "inter-communal warfare" and "casualties of war".

The Armenian Genocide killed between 1 and 1.5 million ethnic Armenians, murdered by order of the ruling triumvirate of Enver Pasha, Talaat Pasha and Djemal Pasha. However, Talaat Pasha, the Ottoman Grand Vizier and Minister of the Interior, was the primary architect. Though Turks now admit that atrocities occurred, they counter that between 200,000 to 700,000 Armenians died. Turkish historians argue that in 1915 there were fewer than 1.5 million Armenians in the entire Empire. In other words, there is a concerted effort to quantify what can be called genocide as opposed to simple casualties of war. World War I did claim millions of lives as casualties of war and left a wake of bodies in battlefields the world over. But genocide is the act of deliberately inflicting on a group of people conditions meant to bring about that group's physical and cultural destruction. It is the act of erasing people, of making them feel that their names have disappeared.

This is the defining difference and the central horror of genocide. It is horrific erasure. Balakian, in both his poetry and longer works, has been a voice that is at once intensely personal and expansively universal. His 1997 memoir, *Black Dog of Fate*, is a chilling and haunting account of his family's suffering, told mostly through the perspective of family members who perished long before. It is a volume that gives voice to the dead and shatters their silence. His 2004 book *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response* is a comprehensive and insightful history of Turkey's campaign to rid itself of the ethnic Armenians living within its borders. It is as incisive as *Black Dog of Fate* is introspective, and remains one of the premier histories about the topic. Additionally, Balakian, with Aris Sevag, translated a book entitled *Armenian Golgotha* by his great-uncle Reverend Grigoris Balakian, described by some scholars as the Armenian Primo Levi. Reverend Balakian was a priest in the Armenian Church who was one of 250 prominent intellectuals arrested in Constantinople in April 1915, an event that is widely considered to mark the

beginning of the Armenian Genocide.

In his various books of verse, including such notable titles as *June-Tree: New and Selected Poems, 1974-2000* published in 2001 and *Ziggurat* published in 2010, he has written poems that are dark, wry, hopeful, surreal, brutally real and even caustically funny. Using the language of his poetry, he has also consistently captured the sensation of trauma. It is a state of being where one's spirit is dulled, emptied, even left for dead, until an eruption of emotion leaps out. These moments may come at the most mundane times, but Balakian treats them as profoundly as grand epiphanies as when he writes in "Words for My Grandmother":

*Your hands in fluorescent
kitchen light still discolored
by the arid Turkish crescent.*

Such profound traumas do not slink away to the shadows after enough time passes. They do not heal like clean wounds but instead spread like gangrenous cankers, infecting more and all the while robbing still, even years after the fact. Balakian's work is a rejection of silence, a means of temporarily living in the same trauma and a reminder of those things most would rather forget. It is also a loud cry, one that says that no person shall be erased and no silence shall be so deafening that it can itself be pushed away. It also says that each person simply is; there is no need to justify one's existence. In his poem "The Claim", it is clear that erasure is the greatest crime, one that now thankfully has a name:

*I am a human being... it was impossible to
have by me the documentary evidence concerning my
losses but my co-deportees saved from death
witness that*

*I am
I am human herewith affidavit*

Excerpt from Peter Balakian's poem, "The History of Armenia", in which he imagines that his grandparents, both survivors of the genocide, alive in the present and living in his hometown:

Last night
my grandmother returned
in her brown dress
standing on Oraton Parkway
where we used to walk
and watch the highway
being dug out.
She stood against
a backdrop of steam hammers
and bulldozers,
a bag of fruit
in her hand,
the wind blowing
through her eyes
...
When I told her
I was hungry, she said,
in the grocery store
a man is standing
to his ankles in blood,
the babies in East Orange
have disappeared,
maybe eaten
by the machinery
on this long road.