



## SHOULD WE APOLOGIZE FOR HISTORY?

---

*Gottfried Brieger*

The year 2015 commemorates the centenary of a notable mass killing, which has been called *genocide* by many. This is, of course, the massacre of a large number of Armenians during World War I by the Ottoman Empire, which then controlled the ancient kingdom of Armenia.

A hundred years is a long time. This genocide has become a part of history, but is still very much alive in the thoughts of the descendants of those victimized. Should Americans apologize for this? After all, the United States didn't send any troops to Armenia during the war. The Turks, who are charged with the genocide, were on the other side of World War I.

President Obama seems to have a bit of trouble with the word *genocide*. He has not used the word since 2012, and has refrained from labeling the Armenian event as such, even in its centenary year.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps there is a problem with definition. There are numerous definitions given to the word *genocide* by individuals and institutions, but the definition used in the 1946 Resolution of the United Nations Assembly is rather straightforward:<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> "Armenian Genocide Recognition." *Wikipedia*, April 28, 2015

<sup>2</sup> United States General Assembly Resolution 96(I), "The Crime of Genocide". 1946

“Genocide is a denial of the right of existence of entire human groups, as homicide is the denial of the right to live of individual human beings; such denial of the right of existence shocks the conscience of mankind, . . . and is contrary to moral law and to the spirit and aims of the United Nations. . . . The General Assembly, therefore, affirms that genocide is a crime under international law . . . whether the crime is committed on religious, racial, political or any other grounds . . .”

Should President Obama apologize to the Armenian community? Perhaps not, but he certainly should give the appropriate label to the act. This would be considerably better than some of his predecessors.

Consider, for instance, the actions of President Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger in Cambodia in 1969–70. *Operation Menu*, a massive bombing campaign of Cambodia during the Vietnam War, lasted almost a year and cost nearly a million lives. This weakened the structure of Cambodia to such a point that the Khmer Rouge could easily take over and carry out its own genocide.<sup>3</sup> Surely Mr. Kissinger did not advise the president against this strategy, instead ordering General Haig to “bomb anything that moves, anything that flies.” Henry Kissinger is still alive. He has not called the operation *genocide*, and certainly has not apologized for his role in it.

In 1988, Saddam Hussein attacked the Kurdish town of Halabja in Iraq with chemical weapons. More than 5,000 people were killed immediately, and many others died later. President Ronald Reagan supplied the helicopters some years earlier to Hussein, and the United States provided some of the ingredients for the poisonous gases. Donald Rumsfeld first met Saddam Hussein as special envoy in 1983. He is still alive. He has not acknowledged the Kurdish *genocide* and is hardly going to apologize for it.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> “Cambodian Genocide.” *Wikipedia*, April 28, 2015

<sup>4</sup> “Halabja Chemical Attack.” *Wikipedia*, April 19, 2015

Then, there is the Rwandan Genocide of 1994, in which perhaps 800,000 Rwandans killed each other, with casualties approximately 70% Tutsi and 30% Hutu. What did the United States have to do with this intra-tribal slaughter? Bill Clinton was President, Madeleine Albright Ambassador to the United Nations. Both were well informed that a serious conflict was arising. However, Albright sent an official cable urging the UN to withdraw all but a skeleton crew from Rwanda. Her directives were followed. Nevertheless, Secretary of State Warren Christopher ordered that the term *genocide* not be used until May 21. All parties issued regrets. None have apologized for their roles in failing to prevent this atrocity.<sup>5</sup>

So should we apologize for history, especially genocide? Of course we should, if we wish to claim any moral credibility in this world, especially as new genocides loom on the horizon. The Christians in the Middle East. The Syrians. The Iraqis. The Afghans. Besides an apology, the United States might also consider stopping the sale of weapons to this region. After all, we sell more arms than all other countries combined.<sup>6</sup> But of course weapons don't kill, people do.

---

<sup>5</sup> "Rwandan Genocide." *Wikipedia*, April 18, 2015

<sup>6</sup> "U.S. Defense Industry and Arms Sales." <http://web.stanford.edu/class/e297a/U.S.%20Defense%20Industry%20and%20Arms%20Sales.htm>