

HA'ARETZ

Courage and history

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Nations are measured by their history. But we often forget that they are also measured by the way they confront their history. This can be a difficult task, requiring courage, vision and commitment to a different future. It demands more honesty and less pride. It makes a distinction between dignity and shame - and knows how to enhance the former and address the latter. And it requires the involvement of both the political leadership, on the one hand, and the individual citizen, on the other.

Which brings us to the following question: What can we learn from the German response to the Holocaust that might help Turkey alter its attitude toward the Armenian genocide? A loaded question? Obviously. An unfair one? Maybe. But is it a useful one? Definitely, and not only for the Turks. If there is one lesson we must have picked up on during the 20th century, it is that we are all "built" for genocide. There is no culture, polity, community that is immune from this. There are of course many ways of carrying out genocide. You can starve your victims, parch them, march them into the desert, shoot them, rape them, gas them, burn them, bomb them, hack them to pieces. You do not need to be an industrial powerhouse to do it quickly, efficiently. And by most standards, there is at least one genocide taking place right now, in East Africa.

Mentioning Turkey in the same sentence as the Holocaust is anathema to all Turks - and they are right because it is a horrific stigma to bear. "Placing the Turks in the same category as Nazis is intolerable to us," one Turkish official was quoted as saying in *The Economist* on October 4. But that is missing the point. This is not about comparative genocide - an exercise that invariably devolves into some form of bean counting. But when a state refuses to acknowledge history, it affects the psyche of the nation, perpetuating stasis, first on a moral level and then in every other aspect of life.

When World War II came to an end in Europe, in May 1945, the crimes of Germany were exposed before the world. The horror was such that for a while there were American officials who sought to reduce Germany to an agrarian society so that it could never again perpetrate such criminal aggression.

Things turned out differently, in great part because of Cold War exigencies. But at least in West Germany, a concerted effort was made by its political leadership - and first and foremost by Konrad Adenauer, the country's first chancellor - to restore Germany to the community of nations, foremost through the acknowledgment of the past. Not only did Germany accept responsibility, but it actively sought to preserve that diabolical chapter in its history - in the memory of the state and of every single German citizen.

It can be argued that the Germans were forced into accepting responsibility. They were occupied, crushed, starving, shocked and shamed. All true. But they did take responsibility, with the understanding that they could not escape history and that if they could muster the courage, they could use that experience to build a better future.

Such a tack requires leadership. And the epitome of Adenauer's leadership came with the reconciliation between West Germany and Israel, which began formally in 1952, with the signing of the reparations agreement. This also required a great deal of courage and leadership on the part of David Ben-Gurion, who pushed that accord through in the face of great opposition at home. It did not mean forgiveness by any means. But it was the start of reconciliation, and that is what genuine leaders owe to the future generations of their people.

Turkey's circumstances are different from those of Germany, and so is its historical development. But finding excuses is always easier than doing what is right. Yes, Turkey has simultaneously struggled with at least three massive challenges since its establishment in 1923, the roots of which dated back to the great reforms started in 1839: building a nation-state; modernization; and democratization. By the time Germany perpetrated the Holocaust, it had gone through all these stages, with greater or lesser success. Indeed, apologists are always quick to point out that "this is not a good time" for Turkey to address the Armenian issue. The bottom line is that it is never a good time: There is always some crisis brewing, some hyper-sensitive general, politician or group, too many other things going on. That is the nature of the mix that makes Turkey what it is.

However, all too often the Turkish people are underestimated. This is more frequently done by its own leaders than by foreigners. When Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan declares that "there was no Armenian genocide," that is precisely what he is doing: underestimating his people, and their ability to look forward and acknowledge mistakes. For the leader of a party whose popularity stems from the desire of many Turks to remove the shackles of a traditionally paternalistic state - this is no way to usher in change. History is not solely the domain of historians, as Erdogan and others would have us believe. Every Turk has a role in the making of Turkish history, and a stake in the making of Turkey's future. Recognizing past wrongs and calling them by name is difficult, and may even seem insurmountable, but the Turks must find the courage to try to do so.

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