

Snow softens a gorge in northern Armenia that people call Jardi Dzor, "massacre canyon," where Turkish forces are said to have shot some 4,000 Armenians in 1920.



An aerial photograph of a vast, snow-covered mountain range. A winding road or path is visible in the lower left, curving through the white expanse. In the upper right corner, a portion of a large, dark, textured structure, possibly a building or a cave entrance, is visible, partially obscured by the snow and the angle of the shot. The overall atmosphere is cold and desolate.

OUT OF EDEN WALK • PART FIVE

GHOST LANDS

A century-old slaughter still haunts Turkey and Armenia.



The sturdy friendship between the Armenian Christian family of Nuran Taş (second from left) and the family of Nizamettin Çim, a Kurdish Muslim (center rear), whose grandfather helped shelter the Taşes from intolerance, offers a



counterpoint to a history of ethnic tension in eastern Turkey, where the Armenian population was mostly killed or expelled during World War I. The Armenian and Turkish governments have yet to kindle such trust and amity.

By Paul Salopek • Photographs by John Stanmeyer

One million Armenians—some say more, some say less—were killed a century ago in the Ottoman Empire, the predecessor of modern Turkey.

A stone cenotaph in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, commemorates this tragic event: the Medz Yeghern, or “great catastrophe,” of the Armenian people. Each spring—on April 24, when the pogroms started—many thousands of pilgrims climb an urban hill to this shrine. They file past an eternal flame, the symbol of undying memory, to lay a small mountain of cut flowers. Just 60 miles to the northwest, and a few hundred yards across the Turkish border, lie the ruins of an older and perhaps more fitting monument to the bitterness of the Armenian experience: Ani.

What is Ani? Ani was the medieval capital of a powerful, ethnically Armenian kingdom centered in eastern Anatolia—the sprawling Asiatic peninsula that today makes up most of Turkey—and straddling the northern branches of the Silk Road. It was a rich metropolis that hummed with 100,000 souls. Its bazaars overflowed with furs, with spices, with precious metals. A high

wall of pale stone protected it. Renowned as the “city of 1,001 churches,” Ani rivaled the glory of Constantinople. It represented the flowering of Armenian culture. Today it crumbles atop a remote, sun-hammered plateau—a scattering of broken cathedrals and empty streets amid yellow grasses, a desolate and windblown ruin. I have walked to it. I am walking across the world. I am retracing, on foot, the pathways of the first ancestors who abandoned Africa to wander the world. I have seen no place on my journey more beautiful or sadder than Ani.

“They don’t even mention the Armenians,” marvels Murat Yazar, my Kurdish walking guide.

And it is true: On the Turkish government placards erected for tourists, the builders of Ani go unnamed. This is intentional. There are no Armenians left in Ani. Not even in official histories. So just as Tsitsernakaberd hill in Yerevan calls to remember, Ani is a monument to forgetting.



Last year the Armenian Apostolic Church, one of the world's oldest Christian communities, made saints of all the victims of the genocide of Armenians under the Ottoman Empire, the sprawling and multiethnic state that gave rise to modern Turkey. A veiled woman attends the canonization ceremony in Ejmiatsin, Armenia.

ONE OF THE OLDEST and most intractable political disputes in the world—a toxic standoff that has locked Armenia and Turkey in acrimony, in enmity, in nationalist extremism for generations—can be reduced to the endless parsing of three syllables: genocide. This word is freighted with alternative meanings, with shadings, with controversy. It is codified by the United Nations as one of the worst of crimes: the attempt to obliterate entire peoples or ethnic, racial, or religious groups. And yet when does it apply? How many must be slaughtered? How to weigh action versus intent? By what ghastly accounting?

The Armenian version of events: The year is 1915. World War I is nine months old. Europe

is herding its young into the fires. The vast and multicultural Ottoman Empire—the world's most powerful Muslim polity—has allied itself with Germany. A large Christian Armenian minority, once so peaceful and trusted as to be labeled by the sultans as the *millet-i sadıka*, or loyal nation, is wrongfully accused of rebellion, of siding with the Russian enemy. Some Ottoman leaders decide to resolve this “Armenian problem” through extermination and deportation. Soldiers and local Kurdish militias shoot Armenian men. There are mass rapes of women. Armenian villages and city neighborhoods are looted, appropriated. The dead clog the rivers and wells. Cities stink of rot. The survivors—ragged columns of women

and children—straggle at bayonet point into the waterless deserts of neighboring Syria. (Today just three million Armenians live in Armenia; eight to ten million are scattered in diaspora.) The Armenian population in the Ottoman Empire drops from about two million to fewer than 500,000. Most historians call this subtraction the modern world's first true genocide.

"I am confident that the whole history of the human race contains no such horrible episode as this," wrote Henry Morgenthau, Sr., the U.S. ambassador to Constantinople at the time. "The great massacres and persecutions of the past seem almost insignificant when compared with the sufferings of the Armenian race in 1915."

Turkish authorities categorically deny this

faced charges of denigrating Turkishness or the Turkish state.

"It is our hope and belief," then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declared in a carefully worded speech in 2014, "that the peoples of an ancient and unique geography, who share similar customs and manners, will be able to talk to each other about the past with maturity and to remember together their losses in a decent manner."

What is the special power of this word "genocide"?

The Armenian diaspora has spent decades funding lobbying campaigns to urge the governments of the world to deploy this term when describing what occurred under the Ottomans.

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account. Their version of the "so-called genocide" goes like this: It is a time of supreme madness in history, a time of civil war. Armenians suffer, it is true. But so do many other groups trapped inside the Ottoman Empire as it splinters during the Great War: ethnic Greeks, Syriac Christians, Yazidis, Jews—even the Turks themselves. Blood flows in all directions. There is no systematic extermination plan. And the Armenian death tolls are exaggerated, fewer than 600,000. Moreover, many Armenians are in fact traitors: Thousands join the armed ranks of invading coreligionists, the imperial Russian Army.

Challenging this official view still carries risks in Turkey. Though prosecutions have eased, Turkish judges deem the term "genocide" provocative, incendiary, insulting to the nation. When speaking of the Armenian calamity, even such luminaries as Orhan Pamuk, the Turkish novelist and Nobel Prize winner, have

In Diyarbakır, a Kurdish city in eastern Turkey, I am conducting an interview at a newly reopened Armenian church—a small, fragile gesture of Turkish-Armenian conciliation—when a man strides up to me.

"Do you recognize the genocide?" he demands. He is Armenian. He is agitated. He peers into my eyes.

I am startled. I'm working, I tell him.

"I don't care," he says. "Do you or don't you recognize the genocide?"

I put down my pen. He repeats his question, over and over. He is telling me: I am not a ghost.

THE QUESTION OF MEMORY: Never forget. But of course we do. Eventually we always forget.

"People have been making war for thousands of years," observed the Polish journalist and writer Ryszard Kapuściński, "but each time it is as if it is the first war ever waged, as if everyone has started from scratch."

Empires and Exile

Caught between the collapsing Russian and Ottoman Empires, the region then known as the Armenian highlands—now eastern Anatolia—lost nearly all its Armenians within a decade of the start of World War I. Historians estimate that 500,000 to 1.5 million of them were killed or displaced in what Armenians call a genocide, a claim rejected by Turkey.



Paul Salopek's 21,000-mile trek traverses areas where long-ago events are a source of present-day tensions.





On April 24, 2015, the hundredth anniversary of the beginning of a mass slaughter that many historians label the first genocide of the modern era, crowds join a torchlight procession through the Armenian capital of Yerevan to



honor the dead. During the annual commemoration, part somber memorial and part nationalist rally, the grieving can turn overtly political—participants sometimes burn Turkish flags.



Nektar Alatuzyan, 102, was a year old when the massacres and deportations of Armenians began in Turkey. Her family, rescued from a coastal mountain in southern Turkey by a French warship, escaped to Egypt; in 1947 she, her husband,



and their children settled in Armenia. The last eyewitnesses of what Armenians call Medz Yeghern—the “great catastrophe”—are deemed living treasures in Armenia. A dwindling few remain to tell their families’ stories.

In a town outside of Yerevan a shrunken old man slumps on a couch. His name is Khosrov Frangyan. He is bundled against the nonexistent cold—in blankets, in a pile jacket, in a knit cap, with socks pulled over his gnarled hands—because his heart and veins are antique. He is 105 years old. He is one of the last living survivors of the Armenian massacres. These frail elders, now mostly gone, are cherished as national heroes in Armenia. Because they are the last palpable links to the crime of 1915. Because they are a breathing rebuke to denial. They have repeated their stories so many times that their delivery seems dry, remote, rote—worn as smooth as well-rubbed coins.

“I was five when the Turks came,” Frangyan

bananas now! I want to keep the memory of those bananas!” Frangyan’s middle-aged daughter shakes her head. She apologizes. The old man gets confused, she says. But he is not confused. I have been to his homeland in Hatay Province, Turkey. I have stood near his old village amid orchards lush with tangerines and lemons. It is indeed a subtropical paradise. And I have peered from a hilltop overlooking the same blue sea where the warships dropped anchor. His chance salvation reminded me, unreassuringly, of the conclusion to that novel of human evil *Lord of the Flies*: How adults finally splashed ashore on a remote island of innocent, castaway children—children who had devolved, unsupervised, into

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rasps. “They chased us up the mountain.”

He recounts his story in shards. It is a fabled incident from the genocide. Some 4,700 residents of six Armenian villages in what is now southern Turkey fled up a coastal mountain called Musa Dağ. They rolled rocks down on their Turkish pursuers. They held out for more than 40 days. The desperate survivors waved a handmade banner at ships steaming past along the Mediterranean shore. “CHRISTIANS IN DISTRESS—RESCUE.” By some miracle French warships saved them and carried them off to Egypt, to exile.

Frangyan’s brown eyes are watery and red rimmed. He does not dwell, as some Armenian witnesses do, on the horrors, on the summary executions of parents in front yards, on mass rapes, on decapitations. No. His voice rises as he recalls instead the fruits of his lost village: “The gardens! My grandfather had figs—each tree was 50 meters high! I want to eat those

murderers—to save the day.

A century ago the French Navy rescued Frangyan and his family. But who will save the French sailors from human darkness? And who will rescue the rest of us?

I WALK OUT OF AFRICA. I follow the footsteps of our Stone Age ancestors. Wherever these pioneers appeared, other resident hominins disappeared. They vanished.

In eastern Turkey I walk by derelict Armenian farmhouses. Trees sprout from their rubble, their roofless rooms. I walk past old Armenian churches converted to mosques. I sit in the mottled shade of walnut orchards planted by the long-ago victims of death marches.

“We fought the Armenians, and many died,” says Saleh Emre, the gruff, white-haired mayor of the Kurdish village of Taşkale. He suddenly softens. “I think this was wrong. They belonged here.”



Mount Ararat, a powerful symbol of Armenian identity, looms over children at play in eastern Turkey. Redrawn borders after World War I left it inside Turkey, to the dismay of Armenians. Today Ararat is a fixture of Yerevan's southern skyline—seemingly so close, yet locked beyond a border shut by controversy, pain, and history.

Muslim Kurds occupy a strange place in the violent history of eastern Turkey. From a frontier gendarmerie who did the Ottomans' dirty work a century ago, they have become a besieged ethnic minority, demanding more political rights in modern Turkey. Victimhood now binds many Kurds to their long-departed Armenian neighbors.

Emre says his family acquired the land for his village from Armenians. It came very cheap. He lets this fact sink in. He ticks off the names of nearby towns that once were majority Armenian: Van, Patnos, Ağrı. Few or no Armenians live in them now.

When does a genocide officially end? At which point is the act of mass annihilation

complete—finished, documented, resolved? Surely not when the gunfire stops. (This is far too soon.) Is it when the individual dead disappear from the chain of human memory? Or when the last emptied village acquires a new population, a new language, a new name? Or is it sealed, at long last, with the onset of regret?

My guide, Murat Yazar, and I inch northward. We trek across yellowing steppes where wolves run before us, pausing to gaze back over their shoulders in silence, then trot on. We pass Mount Ararat. The 16,854-foot peak shines to the east, smeared white with snow. The Bible links the mountain to Noah's high-altitude anchorage. The beautiful volcano is sacred to the Armenians. (A popular misconception



The archways of the crumbling Surp (Saint) Garabed Church in Çüngüş, eastern Turkey, hint at the former heights of Armenian culture here. Many old churches have fallen to ruins or been converted into mosques in the former Armenian



heartland. But grassroots attempts at reconciliation, often led by Turkey's minority Kurds, have also helped rebuild one of the largest Armenian churches in the Middle East, in the city of Diyarbakır.



Arif Oruç (far right) and his Armenian family, who are Muslim, live a prosperous life near Batman, Turkey. A century ago thousands of Armenians converted to Islam to save their lives—or became Muslims as orphaned children adopted by



Turkish and Kurdish families. As the debate over what to call the massacres of Armenians becomes a topic of more broad-minded discussion in Turkey, descendants of “hidden Armenians” are grappling with their past for the first time.

has it that Armenian Apostolic priests even wear caps shaped like Ararat's cone.) In August 1834 the Russian meteorologist Kozma Spassky-Avtonomov climbed to the mountain's icy summit. Ararat towers so high that he thought he might see stars twinkling during the daytime. His expedition was the perfect Anatolian quest: He was trying to discern what is always there yet invisible. This is a landscape haunted by absences.

"CHOSEN TRAUMA" IS HOW the political psychologist Vamik Volkan describes an ideology—a worldview—by which grief becomes a core of identity. It applies to entire nations as well as individuals. Chosen trauma unifies societies

But demand what?

This is the key question that Armenians are asking themselves. Is the past a guide? Or is it a trap?

Apostolic Bishop Mikael Ajapahian, of the Armenian city of Gyumri: "In Armenia there is no enmity toward Turkey. We hold nothing against ordinary Turks. But Turkey must do everything—everything—to heal the wounds."

Elvira Meliksetyan, women's rights activist: "We don't know what we want. If everything reminds us of our past burdens, then we lose the future, no? We have no strategy. All this victimization makes us beggars."

Ruben Vardanyan, billionaire philanthropist: "A hundred years later we are the winners. We

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brutalized by mass violence. But it also can stoke an inward-looking nationalism.

I slog across the Lesser Caucasus Mountains from Turkey into the republic of Georgia. I throw stones to knock frozen apples from bare trees. Pausing in Tbilisi, I ride a night train to Yerevan. It is April 24, the hundredth anniversary of the Armenian genocide.

Billboards festoon the Armenian capital. One shows weapons—a scimitar, a rifle, a hatchet, a noose—arrayed to spell out "1915." Another bluntly pairs an Ottoman fez and "Turkish" handlebar mustache with Adolf Hitler's brush mustache and comb-over. The least combative symbol of mourning is the most poignant: forget-me-not flowers. Millions of violet petals brighten Yerevan's parks and medians. The corollas are reproduced on banners, on stickers, on lapel pins: a blossom of genocide. "I remember and demand"—this is the slogan of the commemoration.

survived. We are strong. So saying thank you, giving back something to the people who saved us, including Turks, is the next step. A hundred years ago some of their grandparents saved our grandparents. We need to connect those stories." (Vardanyan has funded an award, the Aurora Prize, to honor unsung heroes who rescue others from genocide.)

There is a torchlight march. There are photo exhibits. There is a concert by an Armenian-diaspora rock band from Los Angeles. ("This is not a rock-and-roll concert! To our murderers, this is revenge!") The Tsitsernakaberd with its eternal flame—the hilltop monument to the dead—is crowded with diplomats, academics, activists, ordinary people. At a genocide-prevention conference, an American historian dryly lays out the case for Turkish reparations. It is "not an absurd or immaterial proposition," he suggests, for Turkey to cede the six traditionally Armenian provinces of the Ottomans

to Armenia. (Germany has paid more than \$70 billion in compensation to the victims of Nazi atrocities.)

The most wrenching story I hear on my Armenia side trip comes from a young man with eyes like open manholes.

"I was just a baby, maybe one year old. I was dying in the hospital. I had pneumonia—I think it was pneumonia. The doctors could do nothing. A Turkish woman in the maternity ward noticed my mother crying. She asked my mother if she could hold me. She unbuttoned her dress. She took me by my ankles and lowered me down the front of her body. It was like she was giving birth to me all over again. She did this seven times. She said prayers. She shouted, 'Let this child live!'"

And?

"I got better." He shrugs. "The Turk saved my life."

Ara Kemalyan, an ethnic Armenian soldier, tells me that story inside a frontline trench about 150 miles southeast of Yerevan. There are *pocks* of distant gunfire. A dusty white sun. Rusty cans hang on barbed wire—a primitive alarm system against infiltrators. For more than 20 of his 38 years Kemalyan, a fighter from the breakaway region of Nagorno-Karabakh, has been squared off against soldiers—his former friends and neighbors—from the central government of Azerbaijan, a secular Muslim state. Up to 30,000 people, mostly civilians on both sides, have died in the violence over Nagorno-Karabakh since the late 1980s, and hundreds of thousands have been displaced. This poisonous little war, paralyzing the Caucasus, has virtually nothing to do with the older violence under the Ottomans. Yet Kemalyan still dubs the woman in the hospital, the Azerbaijani midwife who saved him with magic, an enemy "Turk." The specters of 1915 have occupied his heart.

BEFORE WALKING OUT of these ghost lands, I revisit Ani. The medieval ruin in Turkey. The monument to denial. This time I see it from the Armenian side of the frontier.

The closed Armenia-Turkey border is one of the strangest boundaries in the world. Turkey shut its land crossings in 1993 out of sympathy with Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh war. The Armenian side also remains sealed, owing in part to pressure from the diaspora against normalizing relations with Turkey. The result: Roads traversing a storied intersection of the globe—a fulcrum point between Asia and Europe—go nowhere. A train station on the Armenian side has not seen a locomotive pass in 22 years. A sleepy clerk sweeps the station office once a day while the rails silently rot. (A ghost airline does fly direct between Armenia and Turkey; it operates from a nondescript office in Yerevan.) As a result, the economies of both countries suffer. People on both sides of the line are cut off, isolated, poorer.

The Russian Army guards the Armenian side of the border with Turkey as part of a mutual-defense pact. This is how Moscow maintains influence in the strategic region. The sight is surreal: Strands of Armenian barbed wire, Russian watchtowers, and checkpoints face open fields in Turkey, which demilitarized its side of the border many years ago. Russian and Armenian troops face off against Turkish shepherds. The shepherds wave.

"I always keep my kitchen fire lit," says Vahandukht Vardanyan, a rosy-cheeked Armenian woman whose farmhouse sits across the barbed wire from Ani. "I want to show the Turks that we're still here."

I climb an overlook by her home where Armenian pilgrims disembark from buses. These tourists come to gaze longingly across a fence at their ancient capital in Anatolia. I look too. I see exactly where I stood months earlier in Turkey. A ghost of my earlier self roams those ruins. Nothing separates any of us except an immense gulf of loneliness. □



MATTHIEU CHAZAL

Follow National Geographic Fellow **Paul Salopek** on his seven-year walk around the world at nationalgeographic.com/edenwalk, where he posts personal dispatches and photographs from his journey.



Pastoralists in southeastern Turkey push sheep into pastures that have known the calls of Kurdish, Armenian, Arab, and Turkish shepherds. The Ottoman Empire, a patchwork of ethnicities and once a great cultural entrepôt, combusted



during World War I in the flames of ultranationalism. Today tens of thousands of Armenians live openly in Turkey—a tiny number compared with the three million in Armenia and the estimated eight to ten million in the global diaspora.



Picnicking at night beneath apricot trees—and a giant cross shining defiantly into Turkey—villagers in the border town of Bagaran, Armenia, belt out songs of memory, cultural endurance, and survival. The bitter dispute between Armenia and



Turkey dating back four generations has paralyzed economic, diplomatic, and political progress in the region. The ancient crossroads between Turkey's eastern highlands and the Caucasus remains in the thrall of ghosts.