

Scholarship, Manufacturing DOUBT *and* Genocide Denial¹

By Marc Mamigonian

“*Doubt is our product since it is the best means of competing with the ‘body of fact’ that exists in the mind of the general public. It is also the means of establishing a controversy...*”

—BROWN & WILLIAMSON TOBACCO COMPANY MEMORANDUM (1969)²

Denial of the Armenian Genocide began concurrently with the execution of the Armenian Genocide. As the Ottoman-Armenian population was massacred and deported, the Ottoman leadership constructed a narrative that, with periodic revisions and refinements, remains in place today: Armenians were disloyal and rebellious, a threat to security and the war effort; it was therefore necessary to temporarily relocate them; and measures would be taken to protect them and safeguard their property and assets.

Each element of this narrative, and each measure taken to give it substance, was a fabrication. What was important, however, was that each part of it could be made to appear true. The fabrications came to be accepted as truth in Turkey as Mustafa Kemal, the founder of the new Turkish Republic, institutionalized the official narrative about the Armenians that had already

been drafted by the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) leadership that planned and implemented the genocide.³

This was all well and good for Turkey, but it was one thing to manufacture a fake history for the consumption of its own people, and quite another to export it to foreign markets such as the United States, where the genocide had been heavily

reported in the press and public sentiment aroused to assist survivors.⁴

Today, nearly 100 years on, there is a large and constantly growing body of research and documentation of the Armenian Genocide that increasingly draws on previously inaccessible Ottoman-Turkish archival sources. Even in Turkey, a growing number of people question the government-mandated version of events. An observer could be forgiven for supposing that denial of the Armenian Genocide must be nearly non-existent at this point.

And yet denial of the Armenian Genocide is seeping into academia and mainstream discourse. In an earlier article,⁵ I explored “how genocide denial has evolved a more effective model that seeks to establish itself as the legitimate ‘other side of the story.’” I would like here to delve further back and look at the potential roots of some of the modern strategies used by the Turkish

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state and those who aid its efforts to “manufacture doubt” about the Armenian Genocide. This calls for an examination of the cigarette industry’s 50-plus-year effort to create a permanent smokescreen of controversy around the “alleged” link between smoking and cancer, as Big Tobacco provided a paradigm for other large-scale efforts to deny unpleasant truths—including modern denial of the Armenian Genocide.



How it came to pass that Armenian Americans began to raise the issue of recognition and justice for the Armenian Genocide, particularly after 1965 and with increased intensity in the 1970’s, is a complex story.⁶ In brief, a generation of scholars and activists began an effort to educate the wider American public about the crime that had been committed decades before, and to work for recognition and ultimately justice.

By the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, Turkey was on the defensive in this public relations war in the U.S.⁷ Even though Turkey had, for decades, relied on state-to-state contact with the U.S. and called upon the U.S. Department of State to represent its interests⁸ in the name of preserving good relations with an important trading partner and post-World War II military ally, this was no longer sufficient in the public realm. For Turkey, the solution was to try to *win* the public relations war.⁹ This required expanding its range of responses to the problem.

The renewed vigor and relative success of Armenian-American activism after 1965 must have taken Turkey by surprise. In this period, it was not until 1975 that Federal Foreign Agents Registration Act reports show Turkey engaging public relations firms for purposes other than travel and tourism promotion.¹⁰ In 1975, Turkey began working with Manning, Selvage, & Lee, Inc., “a public relations firm [that] disseminates material on behalf of the Government of Turkey for the purpose of influencing ‘the attitude of the public and the Congress toward Turkey.’” In the following years, other firms would be added:

Edelman International Inc., Doremus, and most importantly, Gray & Co.,¹¹ and Hill & Knowlton.



In establishing a relationship with Hill & Knowlton, Turkey attached itself to one of the largest and most influential public relations firms in the world, with considerable experience in the kind of narrative re-framing that Turkey needed. It was Hill & Knowlton that in the 1950’s had devised a PR strategy for Big Tobacco when it was confronted with mounting scientific evidence of the direct tie between smoking and lung cancer.¹² Articles had appeared in scientific journals and widely read popular pieces were spreading the news to a broader readership. The industry faced a public relations nightmare and falling stock prices.¹³

On Dec. 15, 1953, the heads of the major tobacco companies held an unprecedented summit to address these developments which threatened their lucrative businesses. In attendance was John Hill of Hill & Knowlton, who formulated a plan that would allow the industry to stall for decades and to shape the discussion around a manufactured “controversy” rather than the emerging scientific consensus. In the words of author and cancer researcher Devra Davis, this plan:

can be summed up very simply: create doubt. Be prepared to buy the best expertise available to insist that more research is needed before conclusions can be reached. [The tobacco industry] would marshal its own experts to magnify the appearance of a scientific debate long after the science was in fact unequivocal. John Hill’s brilliant innovation remains a staple for those who would fight the conclusions of science even today.¹⁴

One of Hill’s immediate recommendations was “a public statement by cigarette makers” that would “clarify the problem

and reassure the public that: (a) the industry’s first and foremost interest is the public health; (b) there is no proof of the claims which link smoking and lung cancer; and (c) the industry is inaugurating a joint plan to deal with the situation.”¹⁵

Less than a month after the meeting, an ad appeared in the New York Times and more than 400 other newspapers over the names of the presidents of most of the major cigarette manufacturers and tobacco growers entitled, without apparent irony, “A Frank Statement to Cigarette Smokers.” Admitting that recent reports “have given wide publicity to a theory that cigarette smoking is in some way linked with lung cancer in human beings,” the statement cautioned that the recent findings “are not regarded as conclusive in the field of cancer research” and “eminent doctors and research scientists have publicly questioned the claimed significance of these experiments.” Finally, they announced the creation of the Tobacco Industry Research Committee (TIRC),¹⁶ headed by “a scientist of unimpeachable integrity and national repute” and guided by “an Advisory Board of scientists disinterested in the cigarette industry.”¹⁷

Historian of science Robert N. Proctor notes that the TIRC, later renamed the Council for Tobacco Research, for decades “was the world’s leading sponsor of (what appeared to be) tobacco and health research.”¹⁸ However, “[t]he goal was really to look in such a way as not to find, and then to claim that despite the many millions spent on ‘smoking and health’ no proof of harms had ever been uncovered.”¹⁹

Through a combination of its influence as a major American industry and the credibility by association generated by funding research at institutions of higher learning, “the industry was able to clog congressional hearings, to distort popular understanding, and to delay or weaken legislation designed to regulate smoking. . . . Tobacco charlatans gained a voice before the U.S. Congress and were often able even to insinuate themselves into peer-reviewed literature.”²⁰

A 1972 memo by Fred Panzer, vice president of public relations of the industry-run

Tobacco Institute, offered qualified praise for the nearly 20-year-long strategy of “creating doubt about the health charge without actually denying it,” but cautioned that this commitment “to an ill-defined middle ground which is articulated by variations on the theme that, ‘the case is not proved’” has “always been a holding strategy.”²¹

“Manufacturing doubt” may have been only a “holding strategy,” but it worked for over half a century. In the end it could not prevent the onslaught of costly legal actions, resulting, most notably, in the 1998 Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement²² and a 2006 court ruling that “found 11 of America’s major Tobacco Companies and related entities guilty of nearly 150 counts of mail and wire fraud in a continuing ‘pattern of racketeering activity’ with the ‘specific intent to defraud’ under the Racketeer Influence Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act.”²³ As part of the 1998 settlement, the Tobacco Institute and the Council for Tobacco Research were shut down.

DOUBT
Just as the tobacco companies viewed children as potential future customers, Turkey understood the value of exposing students to their version of history. Such an effort would be facilitated by having work at hand by credentialed Western scholars presenting a version of history sympathetic to Turkey’s official narrative.



The Turkish state did not learn denial from the American tobacco industry or American public relations firms. But by the early 1980’s, it had reached a moment of crisis analogous to that of the tobacco industry ca. 1953–54, and new conditions required new methods of obfuscating the truth. Some of these new methods were old hat for Turkey’s PR advisors.

Speros Vryonis has written of the impact of the appointment of Şükrü Elekdag as Turkish ambassador to the United States in 1980, of the “profuse” and “organized” public relations and propaganda output during his tenure, and in particular of his inauguration of “a new policy in the vast world of American academe.”²⁴ The public relations push was multi-faceted.²⁵ An immediate need was to become more effective in countering Armenian-American efforts to secure U.S. recognition of the genocide, and here the expertise and connections of Turkey’s

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DOUBT

As Proctor writes of Big Tobacco, for decades it “urged the need for ‘more research,’ with the claim sometimes even made that it was dangerous to jump to conclusions, given that the case was not yet closed. And that, of course, is how the industry wanted the health ‘question’ kept: forever open.”

new PR and lobbying partners would prove invaluable in defeating Congressional resolutions, most dramatically in 1990, as well as preventing any recurrence of a sitting president publicly uttering the words, “Armenian Genocide.”²⁶

Another component was to present a more appealing image of Turkey in order to counter the reality of the genocide, ongoing abuses of human rights, the invasion of Cyprus in 1974, the brutality of the 1980 military coup, and the violent repression of the Kurds. A major effort on this front was the 1987 “Age of Süleyman the Magnificent” exhibition at the National Gallery of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, and Metropolitan Museum of Art—an exhibition underwritten by American tobacco giant Philip Morris at a cost of close to \$1 million.²⁷

Of particular interest to Turkey was “to rectify substantial factual errors about contemporary Turkey and Turkish history contained in secondary school social science textbooks...[and] standard reference encyclopedias.”²⁸ Just as the tobacco companies viewed children as potential future customers, Turkey understood the value of exposing students to their version of history. Such an effort would be facilitated by having work at hand by credentialed Western scholars presenting a version of history sympathetic to Turkey’s official narrative.

Thus a key element of Turkey’s long-range plan was to expand upon the small group of American scholars producing work that emphasized in a positive sense Turkey’s role in the world. By funding and encouraging further scholarship, it would be possible to cultivate academics who could produce a credible-looking body of Turkey-friendly and, in some cases, genocide-denying scholarship.

It may be that with its increased influence in the world, the Turkish state wanted more than simply to get its way by asserting its will: It wanted its narrative to be *believed and legitimized*. Bobelian writes that “[a]fter the 1990 confrontation in the Senate, the tide turned against Turkey’s distortions of history.... As time went on, fewer and fewer elected officials maintained

their faith in Turkey’s position,”²⁹ even if they continued to vote for it. In 2000, Şükrü Elekdağ observed that a Congressional genocide resolution failed “mainly because the winds of war began to blow in the Middle East.”³⁰ In 2007, after the House Foreign Relations Committee voted on another resolution, the late Turkish commentator, diplomat, and Member of Parliament Gunduz Aktan understood that even those “supporting the Turkish case... said loud and clear that the events of 1915 amounted to genocide,” and only “because of the strategic importance of Turkey, because of the national interest of the U.S., they are voting no.” For Aktan, this realization was “unbearable.”³¹ Once, it might have been sufficient simply to prevail, but no longer. Genocide denial needed to be made respectable, pedigreed, and not simply something one voted for while holding one’s nose.

Taking a page from Big Tobacco’s playbook, Turkey created its own version of the Council for Tobacco Research—the Institute

of Turkish Studies, directed by Ottoman scholar Heath Lowry—to boost Turkey’s scholarly bona fides. Established in 1982 through an initial grant of \$3 million from the Turkish government, ITS generated prestige by association, disbursing funds to scholars associated with many illustrious American colleges and universities.

Vryonis, as well as, most vividly, Roger W. Smith, Eric Markusen, and Robert J. Lifton³² have shown that ITS also served the interests of the Turkish Embassy (the Turkish ambassador serves as “honorary chairman” of its board of governors); and, as the late Donald Quataert would learn, breaking with Turkey’s official line carried with it serious consequences, as he was forced out as its chairman after acknowledging the Armenian Genocide.³³

Like the Tobacco Industry Research Committee/Council for Tobacco Research, ITS has funded many entirely legitimate scholars and projects. But just as the TIRC “didn’t pay a lot of attention to tobacco and tended not to fund research that might cast cigarettes in a bad light,”³⁴ so, too, ITS-supported scholarship has not paid much attention to the Armenians, much less the Armenian Genocide.³⁵ Surely, this is what Quataert had in mind when he wrote (in the review that sealed his fate at ITS) that a “heavy aura of self-censorship” prevails among Ottoman scholars, who “fall into a camp of either silence or denial—both of which are forms of complicity.”³⁶

By the year 2000, Şükrü Elekdağ would complain that ITS had “lost its function and its effectiveness,” from which one infers that he conceived of its function being something more than funding scholarly research. Instead, he urged the creation of a “project to make it quite clear that [Turkey] is not at all afraid to confront the realities of its past, a project aimed at shedding light on the historical facts in the course of academic research.”³⁷

Turkey’s version of Big Tobacco’s “Frank Statement” took the form of the notorious 1985 advertisement in the New York Times and Washington Post urging the U.S. Congress not to pass a resolution recognizing the genocide as such—with the names

of 69 scholars who questioned the appropriateness of using the word “genocide” to refer to “Armenian suffering” during World War I.

The ad, taken out by the Assembly of Turkish American Associations (ATAA) but co-authored by Heath Lowry,³⁸ argued that “the weight of evidence so far uncovered points in the direction of inter-communal warfare. . . . But much more remains to be discovered before historians will be able to sort out precisely responsibility between warring and innocent, and to identify the causes for the events. . . .”³⁹

As Proctor writes of Big Tobacco, for decades it “urged the need for ‘more research,’ with the claim sometimes even made that it was dangerous to jump to conclusions, given that the case was not yet closed. And that, of course, is how the industry wanted the health ‘question’ kept forever open.”⁴⁰

Turkey deployed the “69 scholars statement” in much the same manner as the tobacco companies used the “Frank Statement” and similar documents: “to clog congressional hearings, to distort popular understanding, and to delay or weaken legislation.” But it, too, eventually exhausted its usefulness; and Elekdağ would complain that “[u]nfortunately this document cannot be used effectively now. Many of the people who signed it are now hesitant or afraid to come out and declare their continuing support for it. . . . With the exception of Justin McCarthy none of them is prepared to sign a similar communique today.”⁴¹

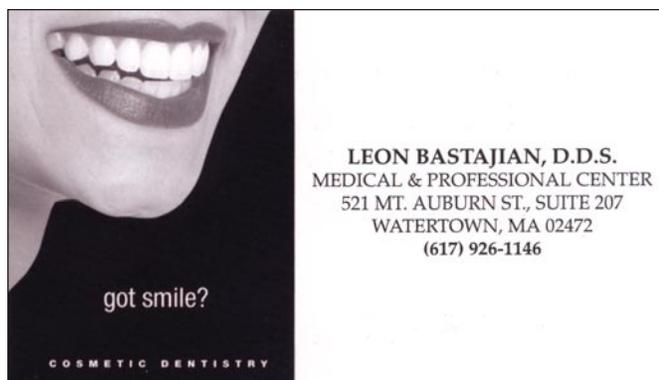
Since 2000, when Elekdağ voiced his discontent with what might be called the “holding strategy” employed up to that time, the Turkish state and those who support it have ratcheted up their efforts.⁴² When the creation of the “Turkish Studies Project” (funded not by the Turkish government but by the Turkish Coalition of America) at the University of Utah was announced,⁴³ it was hardly surprising that Şükrü Elekdağ was on its advisory board, since the effort could be seen as the fulfillment of his vision.

In future articles, I will take a closer look at the rhetoric and techniques of this ongoing and evolving academic campaign to roll out a “counter-genocide narrative” for the purpose of creating a permanent haze of doubt around the Armenian Genocide, and normalizing and legitimizing the Turkish state’s narrative of genocide denial.

Doubt is Turkey’s product, too, and the factory is humming. □

ENDNOTES

1. The author wishes to thank Armenian Weekly Editor Khatchig Mouradian, Michael Bobelian, Ayda Erbal, Richard Hovannisian, and Roger Smith for their helpful comments, and Lou Ann Matossian for her important research and contributions.
2. Quoted in, *inter alia*, David Michaels, *Doubt Is Their Product: How Industry’s Assault on Science Threatens Your Health* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), x. For original document, see Legacy Tobacco Documents Library at <http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/nvs40f00>.
3. Cf. Taner Akçam, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006), p. 184; Fatma Ülgen, “Reading Mustafa Kemal Atatürk on the Armenian Genocide of 1915,” *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 44, no. 4 (2010), p. 390, and see also Ülgen, *Sabiha Gökçen’s 80-Year-Old Secret: Kemalist Nation Formation and the Ottoman Armenians* (unpubl. Ph.D. thesis, University of California, San Diego, 2010), pp. 290ff.
4. See Richard D. Kloian, *The Armenian Genocide: News Accounts from the American Press, 1915–1922*, 4th ed. (Richmond, CA: Heritage Publishing, 2007).
5. “Tlön, Turkey, and the Armenian Genocide,” *Armenian Weekly*, April 2012
6. See Michael Bobelian, *Children of Armenia: A Forgotten Genocide and the Century-Long Struggle for Justice* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), for an in-depth account.
7. For example, Congressional resolutions were passed in 1975 (House Joint Resolution 148) and 1984 (House Joint Resolution 247), and President Ronald Reagan referred to “the genocide of the Armenians” in a proclamation of April 22, 1981.
8. Most famously in the 1930’s when MGM’s plans to film Franz Werfel’s *The*



The Armenian Museum of America,

a division of the Armenian Library and Museum of America, Inc., (ALMA)

joins Armenians around the world in remembering the countless victims of the Armenian Genocide of 1915–1922.

- Forty Days of Musa Dagh* were quashed. See Edward Minasian, *Musa Dagh* (Cold River Studio, 2007).
9. This was not an entirely new concept for Turkey. In the 1920's and 1930's Turkey worked to create a favorable image of itself in the United States, especially through the efforts of Admiral Mark Bristol and the American Friends of Turkey. See Bobelian, p. 77; Levon Marashlian, *The Armenian Question from Sevres to Lausanne* (unpubl. Ph.D. thesis, UCLA, 1992); Roger R. Trask, *American Response to Turkish Nationalism and Reform 1914-1939* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minn. Press, 1971), p. 244.
 10. See www.fara.gov/annualrpts.html.
 11. On Robert K. Gray and Gray and Co., see Susan Trento, *The Power House: Robert Keith Gray and the Selling of Access and Influence in Washington* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992). Gray was an executive at Hill & Knowlton from the early 1960's until spinning off his own firm, Gray & Co., in 1981; and in 1986 Gray & Co. merged with Hill & Knowlton.
 12. See "The Hill & Knowlton Documents: How the Tobacco Industry Launched Its Disinformation Campaign," a Staff Report, Majority Staff Subcommittee on Health and the Environment, U.S. House of Representatives, May 26, 1994, at <http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/ehb20d00>; Stanton A. Glantz, John Slade, Lisa A. Bero, and Deborah E. Barnes, eds., *The Cigarette Papers* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998); Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2005); David Michaels, *Doubt is Their Product: How Industry's Assault on Science Threatens Your Health* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Robert N. Proctor, *Golden Holocaust: Origins of the Cigarette Catastrophe and the Case for Abolition* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), etc.
 13. Proctor, p. 222.
 14. Devra Davis, *The Secret History of the War on Cancer* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), pp. 150-151.
 15. See <http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/brd30f00/pdf>.
 16. Hill himself suggested that the word "research" to appear in the name, presumably to bolster the appearance of scientific objectivity.
 17. For the full "Frank Statement," see www.tobacco.neu.edu/litigation/cases/suppordocs/frank_ad.htm.
 18. Proctor, p. 260.
 19. *Ibid.*, p. 261.
 20. *Ibid.*, pp. 278-279.
 21. See <http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/quo14e00>.
 22. See <http://oag.ca.gov/tobacco/msa>.
 23. Ronald Goodbread, "RICO Convictions of Major Tobacco Companies Affirmed," in *The Daily Washington Law Reporter*, May 12, 2011; see www.dwlr.com/blog/2011-05-12/rico-convictions-major-tobacco-companies-affirmed.
 24. Speros Vryonis, Jr., *The Turkish State and History: Clio Meets the Grey Wolf*, 2nd edition (Thessalonike: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1993), p. 86.
 25. See Vryonis, pp. 115-116.
 26. See Bobelian, esp. chapter "Legislating History."
 27. *Ibid.*, p. 87, and see exhibition book *The Age of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, and Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, 1987). Philip Morris International is a member of the American Turkish Council and reportedly lobbied against the 2007 Congressional genocide recognition resolution; see Kate Ackley, "Companies Line Up With Turkey: Many Fear Impact of Resolution on 1915 Killing of Armenians," *Roll Call*, March 28, 2007.
 28. Vryonis, p. 116.
 29. Bobelian, p. 206.
 30. *Turkish Daily News*, Oct. 24, 2000.
 31. Quoted in "Turkish MPs: Bush Administration Must Make Goodwill Gesture to Compensate for US House Committee Vote," www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav101107a.shtml.
 32. "Professional Ethics and Denial of the Armenian Genocide," in Richard G. Hovannisian, ed., *Remembrance and Denial: The Case of the Armenian Genocide* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999).
 33. See Lou Ann Matossian, "Institute of Turkish Studies Chair was Ousted for Acknowledging Genocide," *Armenian Reporter*, May 31, 2008.
 34. Proctor, p. 260.
 35. A review of ITS grants on its website, which covers 1993 to the present, supports this.
 36. Donald Quataert, "The Massacres of Ottoman Armenians and the Writing of Ottoman History," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 37, no. 2 (Autumn 2006), pp. 249, 258.
 37. *Turkish Daily News*, Oct. 24, 2000.
 38. Vryonis, pp. 110-111.
 39. For a great deal more information, Vryonis's lengthy discussion of the advertisement in *The Turkish State and History* and "U.S. Academicians and Lobbying: Turkey Uses Advertisement as a Political Tool" (*Journal of the Armenian Assembly of America*, vol. 14, no. 1 [Spring 1987]) are recommended.
 40. Proctor, pp. 262-263.
 41. *Turkish Daily News*, Oct. 24, 2000.
 42. To date, the most detailed examination of this is Jennifer Dixon, "Defending the Nation? Maintaining Turkey's Narrative of the Armenian Genocide," *South European Society and Politics*, vol. 15, no. 3, September 2010, pp. 467-485.
 43. See <http://unews.utah.edu/old/p/031009-1.html>. The formal name of the project is "The Origins of Modern Ethnic Cleansing: The Collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the Emergence of Nation States in the Balkans and Caucasus."