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ARMENIANS AND TURKS IN THE SHADOW OF 1915

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SPEAKER:

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MODERATOR:

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MARC PIERINI: Good evening everybody. We are here tonight to discuss the book, *Great Catastrophe* of Tom de Waal, but you're getting two great writers for the price of one. We have Tom de Waal and Hugh Pope, both are former journalists used to difficult subjects and difficult regions. Hugh wrote something called *Dining With Al-Qaeda*. This tells you a little bit about his past career. And they both wrote about three or four books each and therefore they're going to present this new book by Tom, first by way of a conversation between the two of them and then questions and answers obviously, then drinks, if you like, on this side or signing the book on the other side. So, I think, Hugh, you start with Tom.

HUGH POPE: Thanks very much Marc. Thanks for having us and thanks Tom for having written such a splendid book which I luckily got the galley proofs of and could hardly put it down which is saying something because I spent 30 years in Turkey and obviously the Turkey-Armenian issue which is at the heart of Tom's book has really been a leitmotif of all my years in Turkey. And I found it extremely refreshing to read because I think Tom really made his name in other parts of the world and came to Turkey afterwards and so he was able to take a new look.

Certain things are immediately striking when you read the book but certain facts he doesn't discuss much. He says, look, there were two million Armenians in the Ottoman Empire when the First World War started and at the end just 10% are left. There is no need to discuss the fact of the destruction of the culture of Armenians in Turkey and the people of that community.

What is interesting about the book, which you must buy, is that it just takes the first chapter to lay out the facts of the case and the book is actually about the century that followed, that is coming up to, obviously, the anniversary of events that had their worst moments in the summer of 1915. He shows how the trauma and the paranoia, that these twin things of the Armenians and the Turks were born in that time and cascaded down the decades with both really trapping eventually both sides into their narratives.

And how the word genocide which, obviously if you take the facts of the case, if it happened today you would certainly call it genocide but then also the unusual aspects of it or the retrospective application of that legal term. How does that all work out? It has kind of taken on a life of its own, almost independent of what actually happened to the real people at the time.

The other thing that is really interesting, of course, is the 50 years of silence that followed 1915. How did that happen? How was it that the two sides circled the wagons and didn't talk about it for so long? I think that that is the first thing that really struck me. I think that Tom was going to show a slide show of the extraordinary images but for that you will just have to buy the book because you'll see these very strong pictures of orphanages after the events and not just on Armenian side where you can see there are enormous orphanages set up. There is also a picture of Turkish orphans inside Turkey there; so showing the scenes from the other side.

I think that he also has built up, very well, the changes that I too saw in Turkey's approach to what has happened; this extraordinary transition that was led by the academics of Turkey, as Turkey integrated with the outside world, as Turkish academics began to take up posts around the world. Friends of mine who are academics in Istanbul tell the stories of how they were in the stacks of this or that library and they came across the books by Armenians about what happened to them and then they discovered for themselves what happened. And by 2000 the denial narrative of Turkish academics could no longer be sustained and the academics, themselves, took things into their own hands and the chapter about that is especially strong showing how gradually they built up to a big conference in 2005

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and that those academics managed to change the narrative. They managed to bring politicians on to their side; enough political weight on to their side to break through.

I think that also speaks to something else that you'll find in this book, it's about the people that Tom met as he travelled all around the Armenia diaspora meeting very many people and turning up very unexpected stories which I hope I'll ask him about in minute. But the other very surprising thing is, despite the twin narratives of the people's trauma and the paranoia and all that, he personally witnessed the very real warmth that people still feel today for each other when Armenians visit Turkey and very moving chapters at the beginning and at the end about how a Turkish community in these parts of the world... which we must remember that everybody in Turkey knows there were Armenians there; they feel it. All the signs of the Armenians are everywhere. The Armenian people, we now know, are still there because so many Armenians were left behind in one way or the other in terrible circumstances, children separated from families. But it's not like nobody knows this in Turkey. It's true and so when Armenian Americans – he has passage which he composed – the way that they were treated as good luck talismans arriving, actually, I thought was really appropriate.

He also tells the details for Armenians to realise that the people that they killed in the assassination wave against Turkish diplomats were often the people who might have been Armenians friends and he shows that assassination is not just a peaceful act, it's a grisly murder with a lot of collateral damage which is very unpleasant. And at the end, for a very interesting idea, that when Turkey is able accept the fact that a genocide happened at the end of the Ottoman Empire, that's the moment when Armenians will be able to let go and see that what happened was not just the theoretical part or in legal terms a genocide but really a great catastrophe for everybody in Anatolia. It's true. The tone of Turkish books appearing in the Turkish market today is of the gaping hole that the loss of the Armenians means inside Turkey.

From my own perspective I think that that's right and I think that the brave actions of those academics ten to fifteen years ago has begun to – the only way that this problem can be solved – has begun to make the changes that will eventually settle this. If the loch gates between the Turkish narrative and the Armenian narrative are ever going to be opened the water levels have to be equal on both sides. The water levels, in this case, have to be information and I really think that books like this show how those information levels are beginning to equalise. In Istanbul dinner parties now I've met Turkish diplomats, former heads of the Turkish Foreign Ministry, who can say Armenian Genocide around the dining room table and I believe they're beginning to say it on television too and, for me, that means that sooner or later there is going to be moment when the recognition of what happened is going to be very much broader.

The question, I suppose, for everyone outside Turkey and Armenia is what helps most? Does confrontation work? Does confronting what happened in those years with Turkey constantly and in a hostile fashion change the minds? Is that what brings the water levels to be equal or does the engagement, which is one of the main things in Tom's book, work better? I think he makes the case absolutely conclusively that engagement is what will win the day. So, those were my feelings reading the book and it really is a fantastically written book, as well. It's very elegant and, as I said, he has travelled a great deal. But I want to ask why did you write this book?

THOMAS DE WAAL: Thank you, first of all, Hugh and thank you for all of you coming. Thank you Marc. It's great to be here in Carnegie Brussels, as a Carnegie employee. One of the great things about working for the global think tank is that you can actually travel the world and be in a friendly office. I've already done this in Washington and Beirut and very glad to be here in Brussels.

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Why did I write this book? Well, as you've said, I was never a Turkey guy. I worked in Russia and the Caucasus and I guess the metaphor for me is Mount Ararat. If you go to Armenia – and I've been to Armenia many, many times – you'll get around and do your daily business and sometimes the weather is not so good and then sometimes the weather clears and suddenly you look up and if you're standing at the right moment you see this huge mountain, 5000 metre mountain, filling the horizon and you stop and gasp at this huge mountain which is actually on the other side of the border in Turkey. And then you stop and admire it and then you get back to your daily business. I think, as someone working in the Caucasus, this huge event, what later became the Armenian Genocide – at the time was referred to as many other things – of 1915 is a bit like that. It kind of dominates the history of that region, obviously the Armenians but not only the Armenians.

And, at some point, it becomes unavoidable. You have to deal with it. I didn't know to engage with it. I would only come across the politics of it and I found the politics of it very off-putting. Then the key moment for me, I started working on the protocols issue and all the high politics of it and then I got to know a very interesting man in New York who is the Armenian bishop of New York. He was born in Turkey, speaks half a dozen languages and he said to me I'm leading this pilgrimage to Eastern Turkey. And I said, well, I'm not Armenian. He said you're welcome to come.

So, lo and behold, September 2012, I set off and I arrive in Turkey. I join him a little late. I arrive in Van and I join a group of 72 Armenians. There were two non-Armenians in the group; me and another lady. And I spent five days with them going across Southeastern Turkey and it was absolutely extraordinary. I could have written a whole book about those five days, spending time in what was the former Armenian homeland of these people with 72 Armenians who were having these daily encounters with places they knew from their grandparents; moments of recognition. They're saying, oh, this is like the food my mother used to make in her kitchen. They felt an immediate bond with the landscape and the locals responded, as you mentioned; particularly the Kurds but also the Turks; a constantly warm reception to this Armenian group.

And then a very remarkable moment in Diyarbakır because the Kurdish parts of Turkey have moved much further than the rest of Turkey and the Kurdish Party has taken a stand on the Armenian issue, obviously for its own reasons – we can talk about that – but in a very genuine way. They've rebuilt the Armenian church in Diyarbakır. It had been a ruin ten years ago. Now it's this beautifully rebuilt church and the Armenian bishop was invited to do a requiem service there. And this very moving moment when this group of Armenians – I start the book with this – walks through the streets of Diyarbakır, go to this church, and the Kurdish mayor steps forward and says welcome brothers and sisters; welcome back to your homeland. I never expected to see that and thought something very interesting is happening in Turkey. It's a very uneven picture but things like that are happening in Turkey. So, that moment and then all the conversations I had with the Armenians in this group because the personal stories bring it home to you.

If I get an email about yet another genocide resolution and raise the money for blah, blah, blah, I don't read it but to hear stories of the Armenians saying my grandmother was from here, my grandmother was a desert walker, she tied her jewellery into her undergarments and then she never kept many possessions at home because she always thought we might have to leave in a hurry; just story after story every day. I collected several of them. And that persuaded me that this was a way into writing about this subject which was not starting with legal definitions of genocide but starting with, one, what is happening in Turkey and the rediscovery of history in Turkey and, two, the memories of these Armenians. That was a way into this issue which seemed to me much more productive than some of the books I had been reading.

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HUGH POPE: But you came into this whole issue, probably, from, as you said, the high politics. And just to talk about the G-word, as you mention, how did your own attitude to this expression develop as you did your research?

THOMAS DE WAAL: Yes, that's the big question. I wanted to take a step back and ask myself this rather deliberately naïve question: how is that what happened, the destruction of the Armenians in 1915... if you're working on that issue, Armenian-Turkish relations why is it that the first question pretty much everyone asks you, not just Armenians and Turks but outsiders, as well, is about the word genocide? So, do you call it a genocide? Was it a genocide? Should there be a genocide resolution? What should Obama say on it? Should he use the word genocide?

And when you take a step back from it, it's rather curious this, isn't it, because the word postdates the events by 30 years. It is an issue. It is an important issue but it's not the issue. The issue is what is justice for the Armenians? What is right for Turkey? How can this issue be resolved with dignity? What is the just memory for what happened? How do we deal with events of the past? How can Armenia and Turkey work together? Can they open the border? What about Azerbaijan? These are the issues. And then genocide is one of the issues inside of all those questions.

So, I kind of made it my business to ask that question. This was my research question number one. How did the Medz Yeghern and Great Catastrophe or the Great Crime become the Armenian Genocide? Then, obviously, I had to make a personal decision about this term and I pretty rapidly concluded, one, I'm going to call it the Armenian Genocide because, given the choice, I'd rather be with the people who call it Armenian Genocide than those who don't. I'd rather be in this camp than that camp. And many Turks, of course, now call it the Armenian Genocide, so I'd rather stand with them. But, two, also, I think and I also reached this conclusion, in general, the word genocide, as a word applied to everything, has become a problematic word.

Just to sum up, it's simultaneously too cold and too hot. What do I mean by that? Well, cold in the sense that it's a legal work defined in 1948 in the UN Convention on the Prevention of Genocide and so there are endless lawyers debates about was this or that mass atrocity a genocide or was it just merely a mass atrocity which I think is undignified for those hundred thousand people who may have died in a horrible event that someone decides not to call genocide. So, there are these endless legal questions around genocide which makes it too cold; like kind of mass homicide; talking about events in the past as a homicide rather than as a murder.

And then sometimes, it's too hot because when Lemkin, in 1944, coined the word at the end of the Second World War, actually in the publications of the Carnegie Endowment, I should say, it's obviously an association with Nazism and with Hitler. So, it becomes a political term in which everyone wants to use the word genocide against their adversaries and say you did genocide, i.e. you are a Nazi and we were the victims of genocide, therefore we experienced this terrible suffering which means that our action, whatever we do today, is justified. And I chart how it's used in the Cold War as a term of abuse. It's become a terribly toxic word, unfortunately, and this is one of the reasons why Turkey is so allergic to the word because, for them, in this rather naïve way, they associate with the Nazism and with the Holocaust.

So, this is the problematic side of word genocide. Unfortunately, if the objective is to have a conversation between Armenians and Turks, a dialogue between Armenians and Turks in which they understand each other, then it's best not to start with the word genocide because that shuts the whole conversation down to start with. Sure, it's in there and you have to talk about it later, get to it later, but

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if you want to start the conversation, start the dialogue then don't start with the word genocide, whatever you do.

HUGH POPE: Obviously, writing this book must have been a great exercise in tightrope walking to keep the balance right but it does seem that the Turkish official stance has moved. You quote Davutoğlu, the Prime Minister now, of talking about what happened to the Armenians as totally wrong and inhumane and Erdoğan gave the kind of apology that is always insufficient for Armenians but absolutely astonishing by Turkish standards last year in April. Where do you think that is going? What did you feel as your researches progressed?

THOMAS DE WAAL: First of all we should say ten or 15 years ago it would have been much, much harder to write this book because there is now a whole group in Turkey who are completely engaged with this issue and many Armenians talking to them. So, there is progress and, as you say, you go into a Turkish bookshop and you pull a volume down from the shelf called the Ermeni Soykırım, Armenian Soykırım, the Armenian Genocide. And when the Prime Minister, as he then was, issues a statement of condolences to the Armenians it's insufficient for many Armenians but that immediately destroys a narrative which has been there for two generations. You can't express condolences to an enemy or a traitor. Something bad happened to these people. They were innocent and we express condolences to them.

So, that's positive. Obviously, it's the beginning of a process. There is still much further to go. Just the academics you mentioned is very positive but I think Turkish school textbooks are still whitewashing history. There are still street names in Turkey named after Talaat Pasha, who was the notorious figure who ordered deportations. Many Armenian cultural monuments still don't even have the word Armenian there. So, it's a long way to go but the process has definitely started and the genie is out of the bottle.

I guess what concerns me and you would probably know this better than I would is where the whole Erdoğan system is going, whether that general space is beginning to close down in Turkey and hopefully we haven't just seen ten years of a kind of thaw and now we're seeing a re-freezing in Turkey, in general. But I don't think it is possible to go back. I think the literature is there. And, for the Kurds, this now just common currency, this political force, and that the Armenians were a victim of this terrible injustice. Obviously, we have many things to worry about in Turkey, in general, but I think the process has begun and is irreversible.

HUGH POPE: In your book you manage to completely convincingly set the genocide question aside and you tell all these stories of people and on the front cover, if I could just show it from the book, you have these pictures which seem to have been given by you by people that have...

THOMAS DE WAAL: Well, not quite. That's actually a story. Shall I tell you the long story?

HUGH POPE: Yes. Tell us the story of this picture which would have normally been on a screen behind you.

THOMAS DE WAAL: Yes, well, if you can all see, this is a black and white picture with 11 figures in it, one of whom is an old lady in a white headscarf. And this is, again, part of this extraordinary trip I did in 2012. Over five days I really did have the material for a whole book. Everyone, of course, had this kind of triple identity in this Armenian group. You ask the question where are you from and you'd get three answers. For example, they would say New York, Alexandria, Marash or from Adana or wherever in what's now Turkey and was the Ottoman Empire. And, obviously, for the Armenians in

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this group the most important part of this trip was when you came into my town. And with six Marash Armenians I went and joined them and went to Marash; this smaller group. One of them had been writing, had got to know the history of her ancestral town so well that she almost knew her way around before she arrived. The driver found this house of an eye doctor in Marash. Now, her grandfather as a ten-year-old barefoot boy had lived in this eye doctor's house and walked every day barefoot – no, I think maybe the doctor had lent him some shoes – and walked to the prison to give food to his father and uncle who were in jail in Marash.

We found the house of this eye doctor which was part of her family story and we banged on the gate and there was no one there. We thought, okay, well never mind, we found the house, at least. Then suddenly these two women in the house opposite lean out of their window and call us and say come in. And they clearly clocked us as Armenians – or not me but the others as Armenians – invited us in, sat us down and then immediately rummaged around and came up with this photo which is the photo on the front cover. Basically, their family story was that the grandmother of the house had been an Armenia, this lady called Veronica, and they wanted to share this picture with us. Then, they called up the cousin and we went to the cousin who worked as an insurance broker. Then, the cousin and this big man in a tiny office gives us coffee and pulls out a whole sheaf of black and white photos and the Armenians start pouring over these photos and say, oh, Kherlakian, now that was my great grandfather's... and suddenly, all these names come tumbling out; all these connections. A couple of them were actually related to this insurance broker. The Kherlakians came from Marash. Oh, one of them is now a big businessman in São Paulo and all these connections.

It was quite extraordinary. The oral memory is completely intact in these parts of the world. People know everything. They pass it down. This is kind of rewriting our history of what happened in 1915 because on these terrible marches across to the Syrian Desert lots of the women and children were taken into Muslim families and probably many, many more than we thought before; some of them by charity, some of them people just taking pity on a child or a young girl and some of them by force; some of them being taken as slaves and raped and abducted but tens of thousands of these Armenians being absorbed into these Kurdish and Turkish families and then they just disappear into history. But no one has forgotten. And then last ten or fifteen year all these stories come out and all these Armenia grandparents are remembered.

You know the book by Fethiye Çetin which describes very, very movingly her grandmother coming out as an Armenian late in life to her. So, this is another Fethiye Çetin story of a grandmother who was remembered in a family as an Armenian and is still fondly remembered. And this kind of rewrites, as it were, the history of this because you've got all these Islamised Armenian descendants there who are not exactly Armenia but not exactly Turkish or Kurdish, as well, who have this funny hybrid identity.

HUGH POPE: Great. I think on that note I'll open up the floor to any questions that anybody has that they'd like to put to Tom. Please state your name and affiliation.

NICOLAS TAVITIAN: My name is Nicolas Tavitian. Hello Tom. I represent the Armenian General Benevolent Union European Office here and I'm a fan of Tom's work and I read a couple of times the Black Garden about Karabakh; there were two editions. And I read the new book *Great Catastrophe*. My background is my family is Armenian from Istanbul. My grandparents were from Istanbul. My great-grandparents narrowly escaped the arrest of 24th April. So, I am from the Armenian diaspora.

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I'd like to make a couple of observations on the book. First of all, I think I can speak for others, we appreciate very much the way the human story of the Armenians is conveyed here. I think there are many stories. The story about the journey to Eastern Anatolia is very moving and, of course, rings true certainly with me and with much of what I've heard. For my more recent background, I have been involved for 15 years in Armenia-Turkey related issues and more on the dialogue side. In other words I was one of the leading members in the Armenian-Turkish Business Development Council and nowadays we are very active with civil society groups in Turkey. We go and commemorate the Armenian Genocide there in Turkey.

That said, and you could see it coming, I have a couple of critiques on the book; not on the details or on the choice of the arguments but a little bit the way where the book is going. You, Hugh, mentioned tightrope walking and sometimes I feel that there is a bit of that in the book. If we're going to admit to pain on the side of the Armenians we also need to admit to pain or suffering on the side of the Turks. And I feel, and excuse me for saying so, but in the Anglo-Saxon writing on this question there is a lot of that. In other words, you blend the human and the political. I think the human or the scholarly is as it is. You describe someone's pain, be it Muslim or Christian, Armenian or Turkish or anything else. You can describe sociological phenomena and then the political is something else altogether.

And there we confuse the two. In other words, and I'm getting to the point here, you seem – certainly in article in Foreign Affairs – you seem to say there was a genocide but it would be best not to call it a genocide. And I suppose you don't say it that clearly but I suppose you're speaking to Congress or to the President of the United State, since this is an American publication, because clearly it doesn't apply to yourself. You, yourself, call it a genocide in the book and, yet, when you speak to your political interlocutors you seem to say better to avoid the word. Is it really useful? We're encouraging competition between the victims of genocide. Maybe that's not the solution. So, I don't think that is, in itself, a very helpful message. You may want to say, well, too look at why there is new kind of word and that's what you pointed to. But that's a question you do not in fact answer in the book. Can I add a question?

THOMAS DE WAAL: Yes.

NICOLAS TAVITIAN: You say what is interesting to us – other than why is there a dispute on the word genocide and, as you can imagine I have my own answer – you say what would be interesting is where we go from here and how do we do justice to the Armenians? What do we want? And that question you do not answer in the book, either.

THOMAS DE WAAL: Thank you, Nicolas, for a lot of interesting comments. Let me try and answer as well as I can. First of all, on the tightrope walking, I kind of reject the idea that I'm tightrope walking. I think writing a book on Armenia and Azerbaijan and writing a book on Armenia and Turkey is very different. I see a symmetry in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. This is not a symmetrical issue, Armenian-Turkish relations. The Armenians are the abused side in this relationship. Obviously, there is a bit of story, a lesser, much lesser story of Armenians killing Turks and terrorism in 1918 and so on but the main story is of mass destruction of the Armenians.

There is triangle, though, which is, as it were, Armenians in one corner and Turks in the other and the Great Powers in the third corner and this rather vicious triangle in which the Turks abuse the Armenians and the Armenians, for obvious reasons, appeal to their Great Power protectors who are sometimes interested in them and sometimes not and the Great Powers abuse the Turks. And when the Great Powers are not so interested, Turks abuse them rather successfully and fatally. And so, if there is pain on the Turkish side it's not at the hands of Armenians, it is at the hand of Great Powers,

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Russia, France or in the Balkan wars, but unfortunately the Turks are victimising someone else for their own sufferings in other places. So, let me be clear about that. I'm not equating the pain. I think this is the worst atrocity of the First World War, the destruction of a whole civilisation.

Now, my whole issue on Armenian Genocide, as I say, and use of the term and the United States; Ronald Reagan used the term, the United States has used the term. I can see ways in which the United States can usefully use the term again but, this being politics, it needs to be done in a way which will be helpful and not just have a backlash in Turkey in which there is a kind of feel-good feeling for one day, oh yes, Obama has used the G-word and then suddenly there is a huge backlash in Turkey and lots of good Armenian-Turkish projects that we've been involved in come crashing down. That would be unfortunate.

So, if you use it you've got to have a whole policy about what is going forward and, for me, actually what Obama says is very secondary. I think the real story is in Turkey; to get Turkish recognition of this issue which has started but is still at the beginning. So, it's all, for me, the story is inside Turkey and it's about getting to Erdoğan and the Turkish leadership and Turkish society and Turkish school books and the Turkish Cultural Ministry. This is where the story is. So, wearing my political brain, using my political analyst brain, if that is the goal then, as I say, you start that engagement talking about and you postpone the genocide word, which is still toxic, and you engage the Turks in a conversation about their own psychoses and why they care about this word. What happened to the Armenians? And then you sort of work towards the word genocide later rather than starting with that word.

That's my approach but I'm perfectly prepared to stand up in this room and say Armenian Genocide and upset any Turks who don't like the term. I'm not taking a balancing issue. I'm standing up personally for that word but I'm saying that if you're a politician and you use the word and it has repercussions in Turkey, you've got to be aware of what those repercussions are.

MAX BRANDT: Thank you very much. I'm Max Brandt. I'm working as a chief of staff for a member of the European Parliament but my question is a private person and, now, also a fan of Tom, of your books. I am interested, you were talking about the role of the Turkish Government and you were pointing out that there were at least some steps, some wordings where you could really say, hey, this is a step in the right direction. I'm just interested on your opinion, how serious this might be, because I have the fear that is maybe not a step in the right direction but rather quite clever strategy, setting out a new narrative which is harder to fight. Because if you are saying nothing of this is happened, it's an Armenian lie, in Western Europe, at least, you are standing on lost ground. Everyone would say, sorry, there is no room for discussion. But when you are saying, yes, it happened and it is a tragedy but it is shared pain and, look, and somehow also we had it from the Russians and so it's a little bit harder, maybe, to contest it. So, I'm just interested how serious you think is this attempt, maybe also taking into regard that now the Turkish Government was trying to launch its own 24th April memorial and inviting the Armenian President to this. Sorry. I'm a very big friend of Turkey, working on Turkish relations but this is just insulting. I am not sure if this is serious. Thank you.

THOMAS DE WAAL: Thank you for the question. Clearly, when you leave something to politicians they're going to politicise it, they're going to use it, they're counting their votes, they're looking at the next election and this is true of Armenian politicians, Turkish politicians, American politicians. Of course, we read Erdoğan's statements on this with some scepticism. All I can say is that he has changed the record. The record has changed. He has changed the narrative. Now, is he going to change again? I don't know but we have to register that as a positive. But I do agree with you. Calling the Gallipoli ceremony on April 24th in direct competition with the Yerevan ceremony sent a

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completely bad signal which undoes much of the good work that Erdoğan did last year. Anzac Day, the day of the landings, is April 25th, which is the obvious day, which means that you could have people in Yerevan on April 24th and Gallipoli on April 25th. That was an obvious thing to do. But to call the Gallipoli ceremonies on April 24th was a big, big mistake. So, yes, I think we treat all politicians with some scepticism, however, we also hold them to the things that they've said and remind them of the things that they've said.

HUGH POPE: Anyone, any other questions? Yes, please.

ROBERT VANDEMEULEBROUCKE: Thank you. Robert Vandemeulebroucke, a retired ambassador. I served in Turkey in the 1980s when the Armenian question was also a very hot topic. I do remember that the Turkish Government of the day published a series of books trying to whitewash what happened in 1915 and that a number of international writers, Armenian writers, as well, were also publishing the historical facts. Now, my question is a bit similar to the previous one. I wonder the reaction in the 1980s by the Armenians, I do remember, was a bit more forceful than it is nowadays in 2015. And I wonder with the apology, although very timid apology by the Turkish President, what would satisfy the Armenians or, in other words, what should the Turkish Government do in order to make amends, maybe, in both senses of the word and what would the Armenian population want Turkey to do?

THOMAS DE WAAL: Thank you. First of all, I should say there is a whole chapter in my book about the Armenian terrorism of the 1970s and 80s. One of the interesting things about that very tragic period with these two terrorist groups assassinating several dozen Turkish officials and also many others, non-Turks as well in things like the Orly Airport bombing and so on. One interesting thing about that is that there was basically no Turkish narrative, only one book was published in Turkey between 1930 and basically 1980 on the Armenian question. And then they had this spate of terrorist attacks and the Turkish Government was in a panic and they said how do we counter this Armenian narrative and they realised there wasn't one; they had to write a new one.

In fact, I interviewed, in Ankara, two of these retired Turkish Foreign Ministry guys who actually set about rewriting the narrative. And the narrative they came up with was actually more radical and denialist than the one in the 20s. If you read the memoirs of the Turkish Djemal Pasha or whatever in the early 20s, he's basically admitting that bad things happened to the Armenians. In the 1970s it has been recast as a civil war and the Armenians were a danger and so on. So, it's more radical in response to this Armenian terrorism. So, this counter-narrative actually only happens in the late 1970s and early 80s. And I had some very interesting encounters working on the book on this: a couple of retired terrorists, if I can describe them as that, in Yerevan, who I met and some people who knew these Turkish diplomats and that whole tragic story.

Now, the question what would satisfy the Armenians is not really one for me to answer as an outsider. If I would obviously answer that question but I would ask 100 Armenians and I would get 100 different answers. I think this is very much an individual thing for Armenians about what, for them, constitutes closure and you have whole spectrum from the Dashnaktsutyun Party which is still occasionally issuing statements making territorial claims on Turkey and places like Eastern Turkey – and I try and point out to them that the last time there was an Armenian king in this area was probably in the 11th century, so you really are making quite a desperate claim there – to ordinary people who say if the Turkish Government just releases a statement of regret about the death of my grandfather, that would be enough for me.

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So, for me, I think a few things stand out which would really help to move towards some kind of closure on this. And, by the way, I don't use the R-word in my book. I don't use the reconciliation word. Again, I don't think it's for an outsider to recommend reconciliation. I use the dialogue word. I think it's up for Armenians and Turks to have dialogue and then, for them, personally, to decide whether they want reconciliation at the end of that process. But, a few things to mention. One is the school books which I think is really important. If Turkey could raise its standards in school books to most European countries which are not afraid to describe the dark pages in their history which is now standard across most European countries. In Belgium I would hope that you open a school book and you read about what happened in the Belgian Congo; maybe I'm wrong but I would hope that would be the case. And in Britain we read about Ireland and Africa and so on. So, if Turkey raises its standards to that, I think that's very important.

Secondly, Armenian cultural monuments which are many of them still surviving, many of them in very poor conditions, if they can be restored and properly honoured as Armenian churches and so on in Turkey; and taking down some of these street names of Talaat Pasha and so on. And so the big one is normalisation between the states of Armenia and Turkey; if the border can be opened. That is a much bigger issues which also involves... Azerbaijan has its claims on that process and how Azerbaijan's claims are accommodated or partially accommodated in that is also an issue. But the big breakthrough, obviously, is if Armenia and Turkey can normalise diplomatic relations and that border can open.

ARISTOTELIS GAVRILIADIS: Thank you. My name is Aristotelis Gavriliadis. I work in the European Commission. My question is related, more or less to, of course we know who was responsible, the Ottoman Government, but they were not alone and there is evidence, for example, that German engagement was very active during this period and I didn't hear anything from you on this. And secondly the Kurds; the Kurds were really active as executioners. I didn't read your book. I bought your book and I will read it with a lot of interest because I'm very interested in this question. But my question is what happens with the memories in German and in Kurdistan?

THOMAS DE WAAL: That's a very interesting question. I'm not a historian but I do have a chapter on the historians and I think the quality of the history – this is one thing that is very good news on this issue – the quality of the history being written on this subject is excellent nowadays. Again, the last ten-15 years have seen a number of very, very good books and studies. Actually, interestingly, one of the things there seems to be more of consensus is that the Germans had less of a role now than was thought 20 or 30 years ago for a couple of reasons. One, because it was the First World War and Germany was the other bad guy in the First World War; there was that association made. And then, secondly, Armenians writing history as a kind of a rehearsal for the Holocaust and therefore overplaying, I think, the German role. I think the Germans, basically, were the allies who just stood by and did nothing in this period. They didn't actively organise or help and some Germans actually did what they could even to help, some individuals. So, I think there is that.

The Kurds, this was a very much a top-down organised thing from Istanbul by the Young Turk leadership, but then as these convoys moved through Turkey undefended, defenceless these marauding Kurdish tribesmen cruelly took advantage in an opportunistic way. So, I wouldn't say they organised it but they were the ones who often raided these convoys, abducted women, rob, stole and killed many people. But they were, as it were, secondary players who were involved in these atrocities, rather than the organisers. And what is interesting is how the Kurdish narrative has completely turned around. You talked about memory. Memory is kind of real but memory is constructed. The Kurds are kind of remembering things that they had forgotten and two or three Kurds quoted for me this supposed story that is apocryphal but maybe even true of an Armenian bishop being led to his death in Diyarbakır and pointing to the Kurdish chieftain and saying, well, we're the breakfast but you'll be

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the lunch. And the Kurds quote this and think, ah, if only we'd known we would have done it differently and we regret what happened and now we are paying our dues by apologising to the Armenians.

MILTIADES ECONOMIDES: Economides, European Commission, working on Turkey. The recognition of genocide, apart from the symbolic or political repercussions would it have also economic, legal repercussions? I'm thinking of property, restitution of property and other things. Thank you.

THOMAS DE WAAL: My view – and I'm not a lawyer – my view, just having studied this as an analyst, is no. I think if you look at the 1948 United Nations Convention on Genocide it's the Convention on the Prevention of Genocide which implies it is looking to prevent future genocides rather than litigate previous ones. And Turkey was one of the first signatories on that convention and there is an interesting passage in Lemkin's memoirs, which I quote in the book, where he describes going in to talk to the Turkish diplomats about ratifying the genocide convention and the ghost of the Armenians is in the room but they don't talk about it. And there's a kind of tacit acceptance that we're not talking about legal application to previous genocides, only to the prevention of future ones. So, that's my view but others may disagree.

But, also, I think there is just a basic practical issue. If you were talking about legal action you'd be talking about re-litigating the whole of the First World War. You'd be talking about property, for example, somewhere in Turkey which an Armenian was evicted from. Maybe some Turkish family from the Balkans settled there. Maybe they then sold it to someone else and had many owners over the years. How on earth do you litigate property claims from the First World War. The Armenians definitely lost hundreds of thousands of homes but also Kurds, Turks in the Balkans, in the Middle East. Azerbaijanis in Armenia were also evicted to make way for Armenians fleeing. So, how on earth do you, if you're going to do this, make property claims? And I think then you need to do it in a holistic fashion and I think that is completely impossible which is why I think I return to the issue Armenian cultural monuments because they're, at least, indisputably Armenian. There are Armenian churches and there can be no dispute about who they belong to in a wider sense.

HUGH POPE: Any more questions? Good. Well, I'm happy to say there is a big pile of books in the corner which I'm sure Tom will be very pleased to sign. I just have one question in parting. The 2009 Protocols were seen as being extremely well negotiated and were very nearly implemented and could have achieved many of the things that you have touched on about how this can ultimately be settled with the benefits you describe. But do you think that those protocols, themselves, that are still sitting in the cupboards of the ministries in Ankara and Yerevan, can they be revived as they are or will it all have to start all over again?

THOMAS DE WAAL: I think I'm rather pessimistic about the protocols having a future. Maybe they could be the basis of something else in the future. And I tell that story in the book. I think I talked to pretty much all the main people involved; the Armenians, the Turks, the Swiss who negotiated it, and the Americans who did a lot on the political side. My conclusion about why they failed is, really, there were too many spoilers and also I think there was a bit of strategic failure, particularly on the American side. It wasn't really the Swiss' job; they were negotiating the documents themselves because the Americans took on the kind of political negotiations. And I think the Americans hadn't thought about the spoilers, in particular, Azerbaijan. I think someone needed to work a lot harder with Azerbaijan to persuade them this would be good for Azerbaijan and whether Azerbaijan could get something out of this. The Azerbaijanis felt left out and they acted as spoilers.

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What has happened since 2010 is that the two sides have got more entrenched. Azerbaijan has got stronger in Turkey. I think the Turkish Government is probably a bit less inclined and Armenia, Serzh Sargsyan, is also playing the nationalist card a bit more than he did the. So, we have to be, unfortunately, a bit pessimistic on the high political side. But who knows? I think Turkey is obviously the key actor here. If Turkey decides that this is in its political interests to do this, then if Erdoğan decides there are votes in this, he could do it in a flash. He could turn around: Azerbaijan is a small neighbour who doesn't have to dictate my foreign policy.

The way I see it happening though, my metaphor, is a whole sequence of dominoes standing in a row in which Turkey does something, Armenia, Azerbaijan, the US and they're all positive and they all reinforce each other and they all knock each other down and then borders open and railways reopen and links are established and everyone gets something. The problem is who starts. Who knocks over the first domino? And I think Armenia and Azerbaijan, these small players locked in their Caucasian conflict, are not going to be the first player. Turkey, as a more dynamic, bigger power can be the one who can take that more risky decision and push over the first domino and see a kind of virtuous pattern, kind of virtuous sequence happen. That is what I'd like to see. Unfortunately, having painted that beautiful picture, I don't see it happening.

HUGH POPE: Yes. It a region in which everyone believes that they are the greatest victims. I'd like to just wind up there and hand over to Marc.

MARC PIERINI: Thank you both. I think they deserve your vote. According to Carnegie tradition there is going to be a little transformative act. The chairs will disappear by miracle, drinks will be on this side and the book on this. Thank you all for coming.