

Forgive Us Our Trespasses
by Michael Hickman

Truth is relevance
Truth is recency
Truth is unforgiving
Truth is embarrassing

If we peer through history textbooks or other mainstream history sources, we find that truth is often filtered through a gamut of interpretations and subjective emphasis. Such texts look past the truth in favor of abstract statements that hardly convey the impact of historical events. As a result, we lose both our personal and national identities, along with the context in which they are formed. In compressing the losses of whole communities or civilizations into a few sentences, we condition ourselves to disregard the ugly truth behind the horrors that manifest themselves in the bedrock of all modern accomplishments. Subsequently, we neglect to see or feel the cracks crumbling the foundation beneath our feet. The Armenian genocide was an unforgivable atrocity that reveals the everlasting truth that is present, yet veiled. We need only scratch the surface to obtain an overwhelming perspective on the true experiences of the oppressed. We can find these real histories beneficial in guiding our lives, and we can open our minds to truth.

Mary L. Graffam

Truth is experience
Truth is planned
Truth is consequential

There are multiple underlying factors that contribute to ethnic cleansing. In the Armenian genocide, the ruling group was the Young Turks, and they wanted to establish a new nation based exclusively on people of Turkish descent. The Armenians were not hereditarily Turkish, were of a lower class, and were Christian. The Muslims in control eliminated diversity by any means possible (*Frequently Asked*). At the time of the Armenian genocide, a foreign woman living amidst the brutal savagery wrote several letters to people lamenting the vicious actions that took place in the region. Like those around her, Mary Graffam was searching for the truth of the matter. At one point in her letter, she reports, “The Beledia Reis here says that every male over ten years old is being murdered, that not one is to live, and no woman over fifteen” (Graffam 88). Slaughtering children is a heartless act that should never be overlooked. Yet no one seems to have any clue about the magnitude of this event. Even if there is mention of this genocide, it is often only in passing and is overshadowed by more recent or relevant topics. Graffam continues to write, “The truth seems to be somewhere between these two extremes” (88). The whitewashed version of history that writers frequently offer detracts from our ability not only to value life but also to acknowledge the senseless deaths these martyrs have suffered. Graffam’s words plead for truth-seekers to delve deeper into the stories sometimes ignored in summaries of history. Her writings rejuvenate a link with truth that transcends time...

Graffam was there when the death marches to remove the Armenians commenced. She gives us images of the experience: “The first night we were so tired that we just ate a piece of bread and slept on the ground ... We got accustomed to being robbed... [There was] a company of old

women, who had been robbed of absolutely everything” (Graffam 86-87). People ask, where is the truth? What comes from these acts? There are more images: “They sewed a red rag on the arm of a Kurdish villager and gave him a gun, and he had the right to rob and bully us all as he pleased” (Graffam 87). How can such stories educate us? These people lived then, and we exist now—is this information truly useful?

Lieutenant Sayied Ahmed Moukhtar Baas

Truth is ordered
Truth is commonplace
Truth is contradiction

Deportations accomplished the Turks’ goals, and Lieutenant Baas assisted in the purging of the Armenian people. In an account circulated to the King and War Cabinet, he explains that he understood the ins and outs of military operations; because he was a member of the Court Martial, he had access to an abundance of background information. The lieutenant states, “In July an order came to deport to the interior all the Armenians in the Vilayet of Trebizond...I knew that deportations meant massacres.” He participated in the familiar activities of genocide. The orders given to the army were “that all deserters when caught, should be shot without trial” (*First-Hand Account*). Are there traces of humanity left in these men? What would their reactions be if the Armenians gained enough power to reciprocate their oppressors’ repulsive actions?

Another instance of civilized thought being stripping away was when armed men, not associated with the army, attacked, raped, and murdered broken deportees. The army was ordered not to interfere, for their task would ultimately end with the same results (*First-Hand Account*). It is hard to locate some microscopic trace of anything close to the truth when we encounter instances like these perpetrated by average men.

Khachadoor Pilibosian

Truth is lies
Truth is brutality
Truth is escape

Armenian families woke up to find they were being herded like livestock on a little trip guided by armed men. They were not told what was going on or why it was happening. People cried out for some sort of answer. “The gendarmes (Turkish soldiers) answered, “There is nothing to get excited about; you are just going for a walk.” Pilibosian explained that everyone knew what these “walks” would entail. He added, “The Armenians felt helpless and depressed and were losing hope of being saved” (Pilibosian 12). Somewhere in the pits of our souls, embedded between deep emotional repression and our outward appearance, is the ability to choose between committing great evil and responding compassionately in such a way that makes the bare feet of our neighbors fall on grassy fields instead of blistering brimstone. By asserting our responsibility to care for others in times of desperation, a profound level of internal comfort can be reached.

Khachadoor Pilibosian was just a child when the tyranny of evil men forced his family to endure the agony that only the ugliest, most brutal nightmares can match. They were gathered together to make a great march where many would lie down in their eternal graves. Pilibosian’s father was in America while the genocide was taking place (30). He had no idea whether the family

was alive or dead (30). Pilibosian was in the same predicament, because he was kidnapped and traded for livestock (20). He was forced into a new family and made to do backbreaking labor from sunup to sundown (21). He knew nothing of his family until later when someone told him that his mother had died (30).

Truth escapes the immediate boundaries surrounding the word “genocide.” It presses on to other farther removed places. Pilibosian’s life was disrupted, not only by the death of his family, save his father, but also by merciless and backbreaking labor. Truth is unrelenting and stops for no one—not even the mighty.

Mariam Davis

Truth is aching
Truth is sorrow
Truth is reliving

“They did this terrible thing. Killing so many Armenians. And I know they did because I saw a lot of it. Walking through fields I saw it. Walking through villages I saw it. Walking through cities I saw it” (Davis). The truth evades us at any possible time. Men, women, even children are led by ulterior motive—Want. We want toys. We want cars. We want power. We want land. We want lands that are free of certain people. We want to clear off people by any means to get what we want.

Other people, like Mariam Davis, want a family. They want to be able to rock in their mothers’ arms at night. They want to run in the yard and play ball with their brothers and sisters. Davis’s family was slaughtered when she was five. When her brother died, they had to bury him in the sand because there was no firm ground around. He was two and a half. Later they went by the site to find that “[her] brother was dug up by the dogs, and his head was one place and his arms, legs were another place. [They] collected them and put it all back in the sand” (Davis).

Pain. Hearing her raspy voice, which was often in danger of being interrupted by the weight of her grief, makes one wonder if there is any truth in this tragedy. From the video of Mariam Davis’s story, anyone can see how her face tells the story of her life. She is older now and has more to say than most. Her face strikes up images of the worst atrocities men can commit in the name of want. History should abolish any sense of the word “human” from those whose machine-like detachment allows them to tear up homes, families, and the collective spirit of their victims. Davis’s tone shows that she is still completely crushed decades later.

After escaping from a tiny window in a room where the Turks imprisoned a group of Armenians, Mariam saw her mother facedown in the river. An officer came by after hearing crying and took her away to a town where she lived for years as an orphan. She was adopted by a Christian missionary and taken to America, away from the persecutions of men and their instruments of torture (Davis).

Where is the truth? Is there truth? If the truth is horribly distorted, how can we return to what we believe in our cores to be just? We have entire histories glossed over in mere sentences: “When Armenians protested repressive Ottoman policies, the sultan had tens of thousands of them slaughtered. Survivors fled, many of them to the United States. Still over the next 25 years, a million or more Armenians...were killed” (Ellis and Esler 642). Those who write statements like this need to be reprimanded for their generalizations. True, there is no shortage of information at our fingertips as we try to unravel what is occurring in the world, but the men who write such neat and clean histories do not engage us. It is fact after fact with the same technical voices that numb our minds for our entire educational careers. When those voices keep their monotonous tones, we tend

to accept their overly simplistic interpretations of such tragedies as the Armenian genocide; we thus fail to fully recognize the implications such events have on destroying what it means to be human in this world. Contrastingly, when people like Mariam Davis, on the verge of emotional breakdown, say that they saw men throwing living, breathing babies into burning bushes, it is hard to think of anything other than the horrible, dehumanizing acts these men commit.

Truth for the people outside this vicious circle of hatred cannot be merely confined to a page in a history book. Instead, their stories should guide our lives so we do not have to walk over the unrepentant shards of the world's past. There is no reason for men and women to stay in their oblivious states of mind. They witness the horrors that occur all around, so they should be able to reform their mentalities. Truth brings us to a plateau that overlooks the past, present and future—a future we may shape with our bare hands and clear minds.

Truth is freeing
Truth is redemption
Truth is knowledge

Knowledge is Truth

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