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# Institutional denialism as public policy: using films as a tool to deny the Armenian genocide in Turkey

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## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on how films are used as part of public policy to reproduce institutional denialism, normalizing denialist narratives in the public understanding of what happened to Ottoman Armenians in 1915–1918. I analyse the deployment in Turkey of two films that reimagine the events of 1915: *120* (2008) and *The Ottoman Lieutenant (Osmanlı Subayı)*, (2017). The films seek to educate the public regarding how to understand and remember events that international actors have “unjustly” depicted as genocide. The films are thus “defensive tactics” to protect the institutional denialist architecture. This article highlights an evolving public policy strategy that uses denialist representations to bolster public belief. The analysis shows how such policies strengthen an “us/them” logic, where “us” indicates a “rightness” framed by ethnoreligious othering that underpins “our” narratives of belonging in contemporary Turkey.

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This article focuses on how films are used as part of public policy to reproduce institutional denialism, normalizing denialist narratives in the public understanding of what happened to Ottoman Armenians in 1915–1918. The critical issue is that films are used to reimagine the past in a way that presents public audiences with denialist narratives. In particular, I analyse the deployment in Turkey of two films that reimagine the events of 1915: *120* (2008) and *The Ottoman Lieutenant (Osmanlı Subayı)*, (2017). I first encountered these two films while researching Turkish public engagement with the idea of the genocide around the time of the centennial on 24 April 2015. I also make brief observations about the use in France of *120* and the docudrama film *The Turkish Passport (Türk Pasaportu)* in what

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seemed to be a series of events organized or supported by the Turkish authorities to counteract the messages emerging from events marking the centennial.

*The Ottoman Lieutenant* and *120* focus on the traumatic experiences of specific communities to generate empathy, systematically focusing on the experiences of the Ottoman Empire's majority Muslim Turkish population during World War I. They aim to provide alternative interpretations of the events experienced by the empire's Armenian subjects in 1915 in order to challenge the categorization of those events as a genocide. On one hand, the films act to refresh the public memory; on the other hand, they seek to educate the public regarding how to understand and remember events that international actors have "unjustly" depicted as genocide. The films are thus "defensive tactics" to protect the institutional denialist architecture against "the gaze of the other" and "disruptive experiences", which in this case have been created by new knowledge about and recognition of the genocide (Gillespie 2020, 382). By focusing on the relationship between public policy and film, this article highlights an evolving policy strategy that uses denialist representations to bolster public belief. My analysis also reveals how such policies strengthen an "us/them" logic, where "us" indicates a "rightness" framed by ethnoreligious othering that underpins "our" narratives of belonging to contemporary Turkish society.

In their introduction to a volume on genocide in cinema, William L. Hewitt and Johnathan C. Friedman highlight the way in which film narratives in this genre aim to "generate empathy to challenge spectators' fundamental assumptions" (2017, 5). Given the complexity of experience and suffering, and the nature of film as a medium, there are always reductions, choices and attitudes that frame film narratives. That being the case, how can we evaluate a film about genocide that seeks to create empathy? Friedman talks about "effective films", where effectiveness is "first and foremost about historicity and attention to trauma as key criteria" (2017, 259). In a similar vein, in his discussion of films in relation to the genocide in Bosnia, David Pettigrew suggests that "[such] a film would presumably be expected to attempt to "tell the truth" about the genocide in the sense that it would convey accurate information about what happened, and would contribute to insuring that the truth and the suffering of the victims would not be forgotten" (2017, 207).

However, we can differentiate between films based on Holocaust stories or the Rwandan and Bosnian genocides and the films I am analysing here. The former act in contexts where the historical events are already broadly acknowledged by society as genocides. What is known and accepted creates a link between the historical facts and the film, thereby facilitating the viewer's engagement. Audiences watching such films can locate the narratives within their own understandings of genocide.

The films I am analysing do something different: they have been created to negate what is seen as disruptive knowledge that frames past events as genocide. Their aim is to shape the Turkish public's ability to engage with these disruptive representations. Their starting point is the denialist assumption that there was no genocide. They then provide alternative historical narratives to challenge the historicity of genocide claims. They act in a context that has already been constituted as a space where the truth of the events is denied, and where that denial has become the grounding of public understanding and belonging. The films tailor their narratives by using what Niklas Luhmann calls "familiar details along with the pictures or the texts" that are already familiar to the audience (2000, 58), thereby helping the audience to absorb their message. In this case, the familiar details come from Turkish denialism, which constitutes what Talin Suciyan calls "the habitus" within which generations of Turks have grown up and come to understand themselves as citizen-subjects (2015, 18–23). Over generations since 1915, this denialism has become the norm – the culture – that frames public policy concerns. These films are arguably designed to remind the public of how they must think about the past, presenting tropes about the 1915–1923 period that have become established in the foundational narratives of the new Turkish Republic. They both reinforce what the public thinks, it already knows, about "the known world" and invalidate the impact of "any information that is too risky" (Luhmann 2000, 65).

Although films are part of the world of entertainment, they can sometime also be political tools. On his discussions of the Holocaust narratives Jeffrey C. Alexander points out "in the course of constructing and broadcasting" a tragic narrative "a handful of actual dramatizations – in books, movies, plays, and television shows – played critically important roles" (2002, 34). In this sense by representing a specific imagining of a cognitive community, films can create and/or reproduce that community, helping them to make sense of their social interactions through the repetition of common narratives. Pınar Yıldız, for example, highlights how films construct and diffuse the sense of being Turkish (2021, 42–128). In a similar vein, I will suggest in this article that since the mid-2000s, films have become one of the mechanisms that reproduce denialism in Turkey. Although film-making appears at first glance to be a business or cultural activity located in the private sector, it is nonetheless a part of the political-ideological context.

We can consider films as creating new imaginings or, following Luhmann, new myths: "By being offered from the outside, entertainment aims to activate that which we ourselves experience, hope for, fear, forget – just as the narrating of myths once did. What the romantics longed for in vain, a 'new mythology'" (2000, 58). I argue that as a part of such myth-making, films can legitimise and delimit moral questions for their audience. In this case, they do so in a way that strengthens institutional denialism and counters

what are seen as unfounded international accusations of genocide. Perhaps films' ability to remind audiences of certain ways of thinking, of particular histories, is one reason why public policy is interested in them. Following Stuart Hall, one can argue that these films' representations of the past attempt to fix the meaning of violence, privileging a belonging to "us" while at the same time invalidating the relevance to "us" of alternative knowledge produced by Others (1997, 19). The films' historical lens displaces the historicity of Armenians' experience of violence and suffering, as their narratives centre on the victimization of Muslim Turkish Ottoman subjects in Anatolia during World War I. This move or strategy aims to create an equivalence of victimhood, prioritizing "our" dead in order to silence disruptive discussions about the specificity of the violence experienced by Armenians.

Arguably, the films on their own need not be read as actively denialist narratives. They might perhaps be seen as simply engaging with untapped historical references from World War I, particularly in the case of *120*. However, their use in public policy, and the support provided for their production and marketing, makes it difficult to maintain the argument that they are neutral in this way. Instead, I argue that their deployment in public policy contexts locates them as part of institutional denialism. The films *120* and *The Ottoman Lieutenant* mark a shift in official Turkish denialism that was taking place around the time of their releases in 2008 and 2017 respectively. Following Stuart Hall, I consider these films as representations that attribute specific meanings to events in Turkey in 1915 (1997, 7). They provide content in relation to the meaning of the violence experienced by the Armenian community during that period.

In the next section I consider the link between denialism and films, then in the following section I introduce the films and then analyse them. Before concluding the penultimate section looks at the utility of these films from within public policy.

## Denialism and film

Stanley Cohen's view of denial, set out in his seminal work *States of Denial* (2001), is worth repeating here: when "people, organizations, governments or whole societies are presented with information that is too disturbing, threatening or anomalous to be fully absorbed or openly acknowledged", this leads to information being "repressed, disavowed, pushed aside or reinterpreted" (2001, 1; see also Gillespie 2020). For me, this pinpoints denial as an inherently relational and intentional behaviour that is located within a historically framed institutional setting. It also suggests a relationship or orientation towards the Other that is constituted by a set of anxieties, and which forms the ground on which new knowledge, experiences or myths are considered from "absorbed or openly acknowledged" positions (Cohen

2001). As communication tools, films play a role in maintaining a common understanding of belonging, thinking and acting in a community. They also reproduce existential anxieties, as well as the corollary Otherness of certain groups. In light of this, some might object to the use of the term “denial” to refer to individuals who “know” only what has been disseminated and made available to them. This is a relevant question, but it needs careful consideration (Cohen 2001, 5–6). What might be construed as individual denials of violence and genocide in social interactions are nonetheless intentional acts – in Cohen’s words, “we are vaguely aware of choosing not to look at facts” (2001, 5). In the context of contemporary Turkey, individuals choose to interact on the basis of institutionally sanctioned sources and vocabularies of denialism.

The relationship between denial and denialism is an important issue. Didier Fassin usefully delineates this relationship. Denial concerns “the empirical observation that reality and truth are being denied”; denialism is “an ideological position whereby one systematically reacts by refusing reality and truth” (2007, 115). The denial of the Armenian genocide in Turkey is well observed and systematic. Individual public denials, following Fassin, are built on an institutionalized and structural ideology that frames denialism. This ideology has “its own facts and it has its own truth” (Akçam 2018, 2; see also Oranlı 2021). These facts and truth claims, which are deployed over a long period of time as the ideological and political glue for an imagined community, also create an “ideological, political or cultural pattern of denial” (Altanian 2021, 36). Institutionalized denialism frames ways of thinking and being by providing cognitive resources for the community to use when they are engaging with questions about the Armenian genocide. Therefore, individual practices of denial in everyday conversations and statements are manifestations of the ideological sedimentation of a way of thinking that is “historically authorized and justified” and underwrites a “pernicious set of beliefs and understandings” within a community (Altanian 2021, 36; see also Hall 1997).

Thus, the possibility for individuals to deny a historical event is constituted, maintained and reproduced by institutionalized denialism. As Altanian points out, institutionalized denialism “goes beyond individual denial” (2021, 138): social and political institutions need to act to maintain the possibility of individual denial. The idea of “history as we know it” needs to be reproduced in multiple intersecting spheres of sociability. This process creates the epistemological conditions for denial, enabling individuals to disassociate themselves from the trauma of being linked with a dominant group that has perpetuated genocidal violence. In this way, patterns of denial are normalized as cognitive conditions of thinking – in this case, thinking by individual Turkish citizens about the Armenian genocide within the everydayness of Turkey.

However, all of this implies that the relationship between institutionalized denialism and individual denial is not stable. It can be disrupted by events or sources of knowledge that challenge the cognitive repertoires maintained by denialism. Therefore, institutions react by restructuring their denialist epistemology to rearticulate the content of their messages while ensuring that the ontology of denial remains intact. These processes also highlight the fact that denying does not mean disengaging from the Other; indeed, as Gillespie points out, denialism is an “interactional performance” (2020, 386). While the Armenian genocide is denied in Turkey, the manner in which that denial is presented and justified has changed over time in response to the gradually increasing international knowledge base, which has led to wider acknowledgment of the genocide. Thus, the unstable relationship between institutional denialism and individual denial needs to be rekindled periodically to counter cognitive challenges, and this applies both to individuals and to social institutions. This need is a public policy concern: to help individuals to maintain a subjectivity that coheres with existing social knowledge, so as to maintain the coherence of the imagined national community.

This need was clearly addressed in 2002, when the Turkish government created the Committee to Coordinate the Struggle with the Baseless Genocide Claims (*Asılsız Soykırım İddiaları ile Mücadele Koordinasyon Kurulu*). This committee disappeared after the restructuring of the Constitution in 2017. However, it was reported in 2020 that the Turkish government was in the process of creating a new civil agency to perform a similar task, that is, to develop strategies to strengthen institutional denialism in the face of increasing international recognition of the Armenian genocide and the correlative risk of cognitive dissonance among the Turkish public (Staff 2020). Another part of this public policy architecture is the Turkish Historical Society (*Türk Tarih Kurumu, TTK*), an official history organization located in the offices of the president of the Republic. Through its research, the TTK provides content for the official denialist ideology. One of its most recent outputs is the documentary *Armenian Rebellion Against the Ottoman State, Terror and Propaganda* (*Ermenilerin Osmanlı Devletine İsyanı, Terör ve Propaganda*), produced in 2020. The documentary consists of seven short episodes, all of which are available on YouTube (TTK 2020). These agencies and mechanisms demonstrate how institutional denialism is practised as public policy to both maintain and propagate denialist ideology, providing grounds as well as resources for individual denials.

It is at this juncture that films become useful for public policy. Under the guise of independent entertainment products, they intervene in everyday life in informal ways to maintain or trigger denialist understandings and reactions among the public. They are different from the more didactic documentaries produced by formal organizations. Films subtly repeat existing denialist narratives through stories that appeal to the audience and connect with their

experience. These films nudge audiences to identify with particular segments of the narrative as part of their belonging to a community. They also expect to trigger defensive reactions in audiences, leading viewers to disassociate themselves from Others whom the films associate with undesirable acts and ways of being (Gillespie 2020, 391). This focus – an instantiation of violence – arguably pushes “us”, the audience, to feel solidarity while limiting our emotional engagement with Others’ narratives about the genocide.

Luhmann argues that in films, communication as “entertainment has an amplifying effect in relation to knowledge that is already present. But it is not oriented towards instruction, as with news and in-depth reporting. Instead, it only uses existing knowledge in order to stand out against the latter” (2000, 58). In the case of the films discussed in this article, this process maintains the binary logic of “our” suffering against “theirs”. Indeed, this is the reason why I focus on these particular films. Although they were not great box office successes on initial release, they have been shown repeatedly on various television channels since then. Cohen notes the role of the mass media, especially television, in “creating the cultural imagery of sufferings”, and he points out that “television is the primary channel through which the agonies of distant others reach the conscience of more privileged, safe and comfortable” people (2001, 168). Used in this way in public media, the films I discuss amplify existing denialist narratives in new forms, thereby strengthening a sense of belonging to a shared past. Moreover, they are also used to draw implicit parallels between then and now, since they are deployed in public media outlets at moments when the public needs support – for example, around commemorations of the genocide, or when international politicians or parliaments use the word “genocide” to talk about the Armenian experience in 1915. This deployment makes an implicit link between being victimized during World War I and being victimized today: the designation of the events of 1915 as genocide by many countries, researchers and politicians is taken to be the evidence of the latter. “We”, the dominant group, become the subjects of an ahistorical victimhood that is supposedly being perpetrated today by the Armenian diaspora and its international supporters. Communicated on TV, this narrative of victimhood deflects attention from the processes and perpetrators of the genocide, and guards against the risk of cognitive dissonance among the general public. I will now unpack the narratives communicated in these films and their relationship with existing (or absent) public discourses about the genocide in Turkey.

## **The two films**

In this section, I introduce the films, their contents and contexts to analyse the way in which they represent aspects of institutional denialism. I will begin by



looking at *120*, released in Turkey in February 2008. The film claims to be based on a true story from the city of Van on the Ottoman eastern front during World War I. It tells the story of 120 children from Van, aged between 12–17. In the absence of adult men, the children volunteer to deliver much-needed arms to the Ottoman troops fighting the Russian army in Sarikamış in December 1914 and January 1915. The film's structure aims to show the difficulties experienced by the people of Van at this time. It highlights how the shortage of adults and resources creates a situation where the city has to sacrifice its own children to defend itself and its country. The narrative focuses on the children's lives and families in the run-up to the expedition, which takes place at a time when the region is under attack by the Russian army, in conditions exacerbated by heavy snow. It certainly sets out to show the human face of the sacrifice: many of the parents know their children may not return.

The film begins before the start of the war, portraying everyday life in Van during the summer of 1914. A young boy called Mustafa is unwell. It appears that his older sister Münire has asked the long-standing family doctor, Dr Krikor Hekimian, to see Mustafa. This entry point into the narrative highlights a number of relationships. The town has a multiethnic population, with growing tensions based on both ethnic and socio-economic differences among various families. This is clear from the fact that although Mustafa's family have chosen to seek help from Dr Krikor, who is Armenian, we see the disapproval of some of their friends, who have gathered in the garden to enjoy a lazy summer's day. Similarly, the doctor himself is cautious about treating a Muslim Turkish patient; as the film shows us, earlier that day a nationalist Armenian gang (*çete*) warned him against treating Turks. For his refusal to heed their warning, the doctor is killed on the way home from Mustafa's house, shot dead by a local Armenian gang member. Dr Krikor's murder highlights the divisions within the Armenian community. These divisions are revisited at various moments in the film to emphasize the divergence of views between the gangs and other Armenian civilians, who are trying to escape the region. At this point, the audience is shown how Armenian groups (including gangs) and Turkish military officials are preparing their respective communities for the imminent war. The Armenian gangs meet in secret to disseminate information and instructions they have received about the imminent Russian attack and how to take over the city from within. Meanwhile, the Ottoman commanding officer decides to use the summer to teach local secondary school students to shoot under the guise of a shooting competition. He coordinates this project with the city governor and the secondary school headteacher, Cemal Bey, who is Mustafa's father. Cemal tries to maintain good relations with local Armenians, as we see in his desire to attend Dr Krikor's funeral. Thus, the narrative implicitly communicates the sense of betrayal felt by the local Muslim Turkish

community, and their need to defend themselves, in order for audience to understand the gravity of the situation.

Overall, the opening scenes set the stage for the rest of the film by highlighting the fault lines in the life of the city, which will be put under significant stress by the Ottoman Empire's entry into World War I at the end of October 1914. The main message throughout the film centres on the experiences of ordinary Turkish people in Van. It clearly focuses on the Turkish community's contributions to the defence of the country, which involves heavy personal sacrifices. Although the war is the context within which the story unfolds, the film does not provide a clear view of the war's broader dynamics. Arguably, the film implicitly questions the cost of the war to civilians – at the end, most of the children die on their return journey through snowstorms to Van. The producer's underlying aim seems to be to bring this story into the historiography of the period. Although the scriptwriting and production were undertaken independently, the contribution of the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism is acknowledged at the start of the film. The film has remained in circulation since its release in 2008: as well as being shown regularly on various Turkish TV channels, it was released Germany in 2008, and it subsequently screened in other countries, including in France in 2015.

My second film, *The Ottoman Lieutenant*, was released in 2017. Set in 1914, it centres on a love affair between a young American nurse called Lillie and a young Ottoman officer called İsmail Veli. Inspired by a presentation by Dr Jude, who is in the US to solicit help for his mission hospital in eastern Turkey, Lillie leaves home against her parents' wishes to honour her late brother's memory by taking his truck full of medical supplies to Dr Jude's hospital. She meets İsmail when she arrives in Istanbul. Wartime Ottoman life and conflicts are introduced to the audience through Lillie's eyes. Although her first encounter with İsmail is accidental, they soon see each other again at various social events in the city. Their relationship develops further because the government will allow Lillie to go to the medical mission only on condition that she travel with İsmail, who is taking up a new post in the area. During their journey, the audience is introduced to one of the themes of the film: betrayal. Lillie and İsmail are attacked and robbed of their medical supplies by Armenian bandits.

Once they arrive at the mission in eastern Turkey, Lillie – now unable to deliver the stolen supplies – offers her services as a nurse. In his capacity as co-director of the mission, Dr Jude accepts her offer, and he develops an emotional attachment to her, while she falls in love with İsmail, who is stationed at a garrison on the hill across the valley. As this love triangle develops, World War I looms with the imminent Russian threat to the Ottoman Empire's north-eastern border. It becomes clear that, in anticipation of this threat, İsmail has been assigned to observe the movements of the Armenian population and their clandestine activities against the Ottoman government. The

film uses the clash between this military assignment and Lillie's humanitarian instincts as a lens through which to portray the attacks on the Armenian population, understanding or explaining the situation from different viewpoints. But the narrative also tells the audience that these viewpoints are not clear-cut: Lillie's humanitarian position is challenged by Dr Jude, who is helping local Armenian bandits to hide their guns in the mission chapel, and who is also opposed to Lillie's affair with an Ottoman officer. İsmail shows determination in his role as an officer, but he is also discomfited by some of the atrocities inflicted on the Armenian population, as we see when Lillie and İsmail arrive at an Armenian village in the aftermath of one such atrocity.

As the Russian forces press forwards, the Ottoman garrison is attacked. The wounded soldiers are brought to the mission hospital. İsmail is not among them, however, and Lillie decides to go and find him, driving out in the truck she brought from the US. As she drives, the audience observes through her eyes the violence and suffering experienced by the local population. She reflects that they were all "escaping the war. ... They were all confronting the common suffering". She finds the wounded İsmail, and as she is driving him back to the mission, they see a group of Armenian villagers being pushed into a wooded area by some Ottoman soldiers. İsmail confronts the soldiers and saves the villagers, as he outranks their commanding officer; but as the villagers climb up into the back of the truck, İsmail is shot by the soldiers. Although they successfully escape to the mission, İsmail is in a terrible state. While Dr Jude tries to clean his wounds, the mission is raided by Russian soldiers. In the confusion, İsmail flees so that the Russian soldiers will not discover him there – as he is an Ottoman officer, his presence would jeopardize the mission. The narrative here portrays an out-of-control, violent situation. The focus, however, is on how the Ottoman soldiers were acting on their own initiative and refused to recognize the authority of an Ottoman officer. The narrative ends in a boat on the lake as İsmail dies from his wounds, attended by the distraught Lillie. The film thus concludes, having guided the audience towards a moral position that is captured by İsmail's confrontation with his fellow Ottoman soldiers' wrongdoing and his subsequent shooting by them, which results in his death. The message of the film resides in his attempt to morally balance his allegiance as an officer to his government and his people with his recognition of wrongdoing on all sides.

*The Ottoman Lieutenant* was a co-production between a US-based producer and a Turkish company that specializes in revisionist neo-Ottoman TV shows. While the production appears to have been a private enterprise, there were speculations about the production company's links with the Turkish political establishment (Gencer 2017; Acarer 2021). The film was produced internationally and used a broadly international cast, including Ben

Kingsley among others. It has often been seen as the Turkish answer to the film *The Promise*, which was funded by the late Kirk Kerkorian and premiered in 2016. Although the producers of *The Ottoman Lieutenant* have rejected the view that their film was intended to counter the narrative presented in *The Promise*, the aesthetic and narrative similarities between the two films are striking. Beyond these similarities, the plot of *The Promise* centres on the experiences of an Armenian character named Mikael Boghosian. A survivor of the genocide, Mikael narrates his own eyewitness account of the genocidal process, starting with the round-up of Armenians in Istanbul on 24 April 1915 and going on to describe other atrocities he experiences as he tries to reach the fictional village of Siroun in south-eastern Turkey. The film ends when he and the people he is trying to save reach the coast of Anatolia. The narrative is loosely based on Franz Werfel's 1933 fictionalization of events at Musa Dagh, a site of Armenian resistance against Ottoman soldiers in 1915, from which 4000 survivors were subsequently evacuated by the French navy (Werfel 1933/2018).

But the interesting observation here is not whether *The Ottoman Lieutenant* was explicitly produced to counter the message of *The Promise*. Instead, the interest lies in the situation that emerged following the premiere of *The Promise* at the Toronto International Film Festival in October 2016 (Daly 2017; Ritman and Galuppo 2017). Immediately after the festival screening, there was unexpected interest in reviewing the film on IMDb, a global online database for films and other entertainments that provides ratings and reviews. Writing in the *Independent* daily newspaper on 25 October 2016, Christopher Hooten (2016) reported that the film to that date had received 86,704 ratings, of which 55,126 were one-star, even though the production company had confirmed only three screenings. A large majority of these ratings had been received from outside the US. A few weeks later, it was reported that there were "91,000 votes largely split between ten – and one-star votes. The majority, over 57,000, [were] one-star votes" (Ihrig 2016). This was a curious situation. Most of those who rated the film on IMDb could not have seen the film: it was not released for public screening in the US until April 2017, and the film never premiered in Turkey at all. It is hard not to interpret this as an organized attempt to discredit a film that had not even been released.

After a series of delays, *The Ottoman Lieutenant* was released in March 2017 (May 2017 in Turkey). To judge from the small income it generated – 413,844 USD gross, against an estimated 40 million USD production costs (IMDb 2017) – it was probably not seen by many cinemagoers. Therefore, one might have expected it to disappear without making much of an impact on the public imagination, especially since *The Promise* was never released in Turkey. But since its cinematic release, *The Ottoman Lieutenant* has appeared regularly on many TV channels, including those of the widely

used Turkish satellite network Digitürk. It was shown around the week of 24 April 2022 and again at the end of July 2022. In spring 2022, it was part of the in-flight entertainment package on Turkish Airlines, Turkey's national flag carrier airline.

### What do the two films tell us?

Cohen's typology of literal and interpretive denial can help us to understand how these films function in Turkey. The films are underwritten by an epistemological shift in institutional denialism: they indicate a move from "the assertion that something did not happen or is not true" to a situation where "the raw facts (something happened) are not being denied. Rather they are given a different meaning from what seems to others" (Cohen 2001, 7). The observation of this move allows us to understand the changing contours of institutional denialism, which has reframed itself by acknowledging the deportations (*tehcir*) and killings of Armenians without undermining the denial of the genocide. Therefore, this indicates a change of emphasis but not change in the overall genocide denialism. In Cohen's terms, the films help to maintain a social world where "an undesirable situation (event, condition, phenomenon) is unrecognized, ignored or made to seem normal" (2001, 51). Even as the denialism reframes itself, it still needs to maintain its own long tradition, within which generations of Turkish citizens have been culturally embedded.

The concepts of literal and interpretive denial highlight how some of the nuances in these films' narratives reformulate the institutional denialist position around two registers of victimhood – who the "real" victims are – and self-defence. The films present reasons why the violence that some call genocide was acceptable; at the same time, they change the lens to one of shared wartime victimhood. In this respect, they track a change in the narratives of institutional denialism: they indicate a move away from a formal denial of the violence against Armenians to a position that acknowledges the violence by providing set of reasons for it. The first film, *120*, provides a narrative of what happened by suggesting that it was about vulnerable people defending themselves against both external and internal enemies under war conditions. The second film, *The Ottoman Lieutenant*, is also a war narrative, but it presents another interpretive nuance by pointing out that many people died on all sides during World War I (and the Ottoman administration was not always in charge of its own soldiers' behaviour). Both narratives contest what is implied by the concept of genocide, that is, that a specific ethnoreligious group was intentionally targeted by its own government and the politically dominant group. Part of this contestation seeks to recentre the discussion by focusing attention on the Muslim Turkish population as victims. On that basis, the films construct what happened (or did not

happen), and they provide reasons why what happened was not genocide. In this way, the two films ultimately strengthen sedimented denialist narratives that underpin the Turkish majority public's cognitive repertoire regarding the events of 1915 (Göçek 2014; Akçam 2013). This move is a significant strategic turn in institutional denialism. It explicitly asserts an alternative (and arguably exclusive) historicity for the events of 1915.

Thus, the films present the public with a new imagining. Furthermore, their narratives implicitly invite audiences to "relate what they have seen or heard to themselves" (Luhmann 2000, 60). As Alexander points out in his discussion on "trauma drama" this process achieves its 'effect by personalizing the trauma and its characters. This personalization brought the trauma drama "back home" (2002, 35). This nudges audiences to think in terms of "us"/Self (victims) and "them"/Other (perpetrators). Let me give a few examples of central moments that facilitate this process. One of these moments appears in scenes that highlight religious differences between groups. In the context of the multiethnic and multifaith Ottoman Empire, this comes across as a relevant point. However, it is communicated in such a way that the modern audience, which is predominantly Muslim Turkish, will read ethno-religious difference as foreignness/Otherness, and ultimately as not-belonging. The foreignness of the Other is emphasized by Armenians' links to international actors – France, Russia and the US – rather than to their fellow Ottoman subjects.

Another important moment concerns foreign powers' missionary activities. The narrative of foreign missionary activity is woven into the films to highlight both the us/them logic and the vulnerability of the Ottomans, thereby emphasizing existential security concerns in relation to the ethno-religious groups that constituted the social structure of the Ottoman Empire. This reference point is not accidental, and it reminds the audience of what they already know from basic history lessons: for example, that foreign missionary schools at this time created internal enemies that victimized Muslim Turkish communities. In *120*, the audience observes early on how Armenian religious leaders are communicating with Russians and in cahoots with local Armenian gangs. In *The Ottoman Lieutenant*, this link is clearly presented in two ways: in Lillie's American humanitarianism, which is implicitly Christian, and in Dr Jude, who is clearly acting against the Ottoman government's interests and supporting the Armenian cause in the mission hospital.

A further reference point is the way in which audiences are presented with a calculus of victims and perpetrators. Audiences see Armenians being displaced and even killed, but both films imply that their suffering is self-inflicted. For instance, in *120*, Armenians suffer because Armenian gangs kill other Armenians, or because their political and religious elite pay no heed to their own people's needs. Toward the end

of the film, *The Ottoman Lieutenant* shows some Armenians being killed because of irregularities arising from wartime conditions, as lower ranks in the Ottoman army react on their own initiative to the actions of local Armenian gangs: the low-ranking officer confronting Ismail justifies their attempt to kill Armenian women and children by saying “these are our Armenians, they killed our people”. In this case again, responsibility on the part of the political authorities is wished away. In a double movement, Armenians’ suffering is presented as a function of their own self-interested actions against the Ottoman Empire, and at the same time audiences are reminded that the defensive actions of the Muslim Turks were a manifestation of their suffering and their aim to defend “our” country against all its enemies. Through these references, the dominant Muslim Turkish audience are invited to empathize with the fate of the Armenians as an inevitable outcome of self-defence. For international audiences, the references are expected to demonstrate that claims of genocide are unfounded: Muslim Turks were merely fighting for the higher ideal of defending their country. This gesture presents “us” and “our” suffering by implying “our” homogeneity, represented here in the post-genocidal nation-state model: “us” Turks against those “outsiders”, the Armenians. These narratives, as Alexander suggests, aim to enlarge “the audience for a trauma and its social relevance” (2002, 44). Given their respective release dates, the films remind their audiences that threats and victimization by foreign actors, manifested in claims of genocide, are still a reality for the Turkish people.

### **The public policy of denial**

The denialist orientation of these films’ narratives and their mass media use track an overall change in public policy. This change was first signalled on 24 April 2014 by the then Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s message to the Armenian community in Turkey, which was immediately disseminated on national TV channels. The content of the message was unexpected, and it surprised many. It recognized both the Armenian suffering and the importance of acknowledging that suffering, locating it in the broader context of World War I and emphasizing the suffering of the Muslim Turkish population. This was accompanied by a firm warning against using the events of 1915 in a hostile manner against Turkey, implicitly targeting the use of the concept of genocide to define those events:

Using the events of 1915 as an excuse for hostility against Turkey and turning this issue into a matter of political conflict is inadmissible. The incidents of the First World War are our shared pain. To evaluate this painful period of history through a perspective of just memory is a humane and scholarly responsibility. Millions of people of all religions and ethnicities lost their lives in the First World

War. Having experienced events which had inhumane consequences – such as relocation – during the First World War, should not prevent Turks and Armenians from establishing compassion and mutually humane attitudes towards one another. (Erdoğan 2014)

The message concluded:

It is our hope and belief 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. And it is with this hope and belief that we wish that the Armenians who lost their lives in the context of the early twentieth century rest in peace, and we convey our condolences to their grandchildren. (Erdoğan 2014)

This message subsequently became an annual event. Every time it is issued, the line quoted above about common suffering and the past are emphasized. Erdoğan's most recent statement, issued on 24 April 2022, reiterated the idea of shared experience: "The last years of the Ottoman Empire, which coincided with the First World War, were a very painful period for millions of Ottomans" (Erdoğan 2022).

The president Erdoğan issued a similar statement on 24 April 2015, the centennial of the genocide. Two passages from this statement are worth quoting directly:

In World War I, which ranks among humanity's major catastrophes, millions from all nations also perished within the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire. I commemorate with compassion and respect all the Ottoman citizens, regardless of their ethnic and religious identity, who lost their lives under similar conditions during this War. We succeeded in establishing the Republic of Turkey not by forgetting these sufferings, but by learning to cope with them. Today, we are working and striving together with all our citizens and friends, regardless of their ethnic or religious identities, to attain a better future on the basis of peace, harmony and fraternity. (Erdoğan 2015)

The statement went on: "It is due to these values that we are able to enthusiastically host today in Çanakkale, the grandchildren of those who had arrived from all over the world a century ago to invade our shared homeland, so as to condemn war and promote peace and friendship". The statement thus clearly reiterates a shared pain, while also using another event of 1915 – the fighting at Gallipoli (Çanakkale) – to reiterate foreign powers' victimization of Ottoman subjects in general and Muslim Turks in particular. As Yıldız carefully demonstrates, by focusing on the centennial of Çanakkale (*Çanakkale destanı*) and moving the date for the commemorations to 24 April 2015 – the same date as the genocide commemoration day – the government was signalling what and whom it wanted the public to remember (2021, 131–132). The event was covered extensively in the media, and many countries were represented at the level of heads of state, prime ministers or ministers. The president of Armenia, Serzh Sarkisian, was also invited,



regardless of the fact that the event clashed with the genocide centennial commemorations in Yerevan. The presentation and organization of the Çanakkale event manifested a substantive strategy of denial, as it subsumed both the experiences of Armenians and their desire to mark the centennial of the genocide. This move effectively marginalized the specificity of the Armenian experience and the trauma of the victims.

While the Ottomans' defence of Gallipoli was an event of great historical importance, the above-described shift in its commemoration did two things. First, it intentionally blurred the significant difference between the fighting at Gallipoli, where Ottoman troops were struggling to repel the Allies' drive to occupy the capital, and the Ottoman Empire's violent treatment of its own Armenian subjects. Second, by using the annual Anzac Day commemorations in Çanakkale as evidence of Turkey's willingness to engage with past enemies in a friendly and peaceful manner, political actors seemed to be suggesting how far Turkey ought to go to engage with the events of 1915. This implicitly reveals the limits of what Armenians can expect from such an engagement.

As part of a public policy package, these films (together with films that specifically focus on the Çanakkale experience, such as *Çanakkale 1915*), statements and commemoration events are used to support the strategy of denial, which emerges as the national master narrative of how to imagine being Turkish. These messages anchor the architecture of institutional denialism. They allow a repositioning of national history in which violence is legitimated by a moral position based on the innocence of the Muslim Turkish population in the face of internal and external enemies. Arguably, the films are used to provide evidence for this denialist positioning. Perhaps they are seen as "witness" statements for the innocence of the Ottoman government. They present a moral appeal based on the justness of unfortunate defensive violence. Through their repetition, they become part of the public cognitive repertoire. One manifestation of the outcome of this repetition is the emergence of a slogan that is now common among civil society groups, public demonstrations or statements against claims of genocide: "We did not commit genocide, we defended the country" (*soykırım yapmadık, vatan kurtardık*). A significant part of this self-defence register emphasizes incredulity that a nation (*millet*) or people – Armenians, who were considered the most loyal (*millet-i sadıka*) of all the peoples of the Ottoman Empire – turned against the empire, leaving the government no option but to take action to stop them.

One might argue that while *The Ottoman Lieutenant* directly fits in with this denialist turn, given both its narrative and release date, *120* perhaps predated the beginning of this reorientation. It may also be significant that *120* was released in the aftermath of the assassination of the Armenian-Turkish journalist Hrant Dink on 19 January 2007. The outcry at his funeral, which

was attended by thousands from across society, was a surprise to the predominantly Muslim Turkish public. In particular, the use of the slogan “we are all Hrant, we are all Armenians” (*Hepimiz Hrantiz, Hepimiz Ermeniyiz*) during the funeral procession sparked tension among the general public. In addition, *120* was also used as an international propaganda tool. For example, Turkish groups screened it in France on several occasions in 2015, in the run-up to events to mark the genocide’s centennial. It seemed the aim was to demonstrate what had “really” happened – to implicitly use the psychology of victimized innocents defending themselves, then and now, to appeal for understanding among third parties in the international arena.

That this was part of a general public policy initiative is demonstrated by the use of another film during the same period: the docudrama *Turkish Passport* (*Türk Passaportu*), produced with the cooperation of the Turkish government. It narrates the story of number of Turkish diplomats who saved Jewish lives in various European countries during World War II. While the docudrama was well received at the Cannes Film festival, where it was screened in 2011, critical questions have been raised regarding the veracity of some of its storylines (Üngör 2012; Guttstad 2015; Baer 2020). It was shown at special screenings in France in 2015, some of them attended by Turkish and French dignitaries with the participation of local Jewish communities. The then Turkish ambassador to France gave speeches at some of these screenings, thanking audiences and emphasizing the humanitarian protection the Turkish state had always offered to the weak and victims of violence (ARTI 49 2015; TRT Haber 2015; Sarıtaçlı 2015). The aim appeared to be to provide a counterweight to France’s strong public emphasis on the centennial of the Armenian genocide. The discourse deployed the docudrama as evidence of Turkey’s humanitarian track record, questioning the veracity of the genocide claims.

The use of these films as part of public policy seeks to resolve the contradictory perspectives on what happened in 1915 by enforcing the Self’s (“our”) interpretation of what happened as the sole truth (Gillespie 2020, 384). It is an attempt to prevent contradictory knowledge from leading individuals away from denialist narratives and ideas about the Other. In Gillespie’s terms, the “Self’s direct-perspective” appears to be fragile, as it may diverge from the “Self’s meta-perspective on [the] Other”, which is based on institutional denialism (2020, 384). The films tackle this dissonance and the potential disruption of the metanarrative by reproducing the foundational imagining of a public self-understanding that dismisses any difference in perspectives on 1915 and reproduces justifications for the truthfulness of “our” perspective (Gillespie 2020, 384).

## Conclusions

My analysis in this article has focused on interactions between two films and denialist public policy. I have highlighted how Turkey's deep-seated institutional denialism is changing in response to international politics. I have also highlighted how this change has been initiated and diffused by formal statements and informal storylines, including the storylines of these films. While formal statements set out new directions for institutional policy actors to follow, films and their use help to restructure the existing landscape of denialist knowledge.

It is still possible to ask why films are a matter of public policy interest at all. The answer to this question relates to Cohen's observations regarding the "eradication" of the past as a strategy of control (2001, 243). He points out that the quest to eradicate engagement with an uncomfortable, disturbing past requires a "selective amnesia" that "is induced by eliminating certain elements of the past and preserving others. The past has to conform to the present to establish a version of history (master narrative) to legitimate current policy" (2001, 243). Given the vast historical gap between the genocide of 1915 and the present day, these films act as one of the mechanisms to create this selective amnesia. Located in a broader denialist policy that seeks to position the views of the majority, the films deflect questions that might reflect on perpetrator groups and bystanders. By using fictionalized storylines, they inform audiences' understanding: with repetition over time, these storylines become a public memory expressed in social interactions. By substituting the broader experience of violence and horror in 1915 with individual love stories and "our" tragedies, the films create ambiguity about the causes and targets of the violence. As Michael Bernard-Donals points out, this makes it possible for the audience not to confront "the abyss of the events" (2009, 96).

In Gillespie's terms, the films try to create the conditions to counter cognitive dissonance, as they invalidate reference points that are not easy for the public to engage with in Turkey (2020). Therefore, the public policy interest in these films is about using them to resist the deep and disruptive moral questions raised both by wide-ranging available public knowledge and by the international acknowledgment of the events of 1915 as a genocide. As my analysis has highlighted, public policy uses these films for the intergenerational sedimentation of denialist narratives.

In conclusion, my analysis of these films' relationship with public policy has revealed two interrelated and critical issues. On the one hand, Turkish public opinion about Armenian genocide claims needs to be regularly reminded of institutionalized denialist narratives. On the other hand, this in itself suggests that the hold of denialism on social interactions may not be very deep or resilient in the face of alternative knowledge and messages about the Armenian genocide.

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