

The Armenians and the Warlpiri: two genocides that sparked a pilgrimage to the outback

Descendants of two disparate massacres on opposite sides of the world find common ground deep in the heart of Warlpiri country



'In Australia, at least, the Anzac story has eclipsed the history of what happened to the minority Armenian Christians, about a million-and-a-half of whom died in Ottoman purges.' Photograph: Edmond Terakopian/PA

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History is often best understood outside of the books that record it, when it is experienced in the lands that staged it, by its actors' descendants.

And history, for all its serpentine connections and resonances, is what inspired two priests – Bishop Haigazoun Najarian and Deacon Nishan Basmajian from the Armenian Apostolic Church of the holy resurrection in Chatswood, Sydney – to recently undertake a 4000km pilgrimage deep into Warlpiri country in the Northern Territory.

At the remote community of Lajamanu – over a thousand kilometres from Darwin – Najarian presented the local community Baptist church with two ornately engraved Armenian “khachkars” or cross stones. The cross stones were blessed before a congregation of local elders, children, dogs and a delegation of non-Indigenous visitors – the culmination of three years' planning by Australian Catholic University academic Judith Crispin.

During the service Najarian evoked the difficulties that the Warlpiri and Armenians faced, historically and currently. Both, he said, had been subject to massacres – the Armenians at the hands of the Ottoman Turks and the Warlpiri by white settlers, miners and police – and they'd had to fight for the survival of their respective cultures.

Crispin explained how it took her three years to convince the Armenians – who had never been to remote Australia – to visit Warlpiri country.

“They’ve not been anywhere remote in Australia before so it was a big thing for them. I’m working on a project related to the Armenian genocide, which is how I know the priests, and I’ve been visiting Lajamanu twice a year for four years now ... so it was really just a case of bringing together the two groups,” she said.

“It occurred to me that rather than just feeling sickened by my (Australian) government’s ongoing refusal to acknowledge the Armenian genocide, or to dignify Aboriginal people with a complete account of past massacres, I might possibly facilitate a mutually supportive relationship between Armenians and Warlpiri.”

After the service at Lajamanu, a mutual statement was hand-written and signed by the Armenian clerics and by the local pastor and Warlpiri elder, Jerry Jangala Patrick.

It reads: “Together we acknowledge the past massacres of Yapa people and other Australian Indigenous people and the genocide of Armenian people in 1915. We stand together today as brothers in solidarity.”

The Australian government, like many other liberal democracies, refuses to formally acknowledge the mass killings of Armenian people that began in 1915, as “genocide”. Turkey expends enormous diplomatic and political effort to ensure that countries such as Australia do not formally acknowledge the slaughter of the Armenians as genocide.

The beginning of the attempted annihilation of the Armenians coincided almost precisely with Australia’s participation in the British invasion and failed occupation of Gallipoli in April 1915. There are witness accounts by Australian prisoners of war of the Turkish mistreatment and killing of the Armenians – though this has never been part of Australia’s carefully cultivated Anzac story, a myth that relies heavily on continued warm relations between Ankara and Canberra.

Indeed, the Turks have lobbied successive federal governments intensively to ensure that mention of the Armenian genocide did not cruel centenary commemorative celebrations around the 100th anniversary of the Anzac Gallipoli invasion. At one point the Turkish government threatened to ban Australian politicians who had formally acknowledged Armenian genocide from Anzac commemorations at Gallipoli in 2015.

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The Australian War Memorial, despite having ample material in its collections about the Turkish orchestrated mass murder of the Armenians, does not tell the story.

Anzac, more than any other, has, of course, become Australia's foundation story – at the expense of so much pre- and post-colonial history. The story of the failed invasion and occupation on a distant finger of the Ottomans supersedes, in public and political consciousness, that other invasion – that by the British Empire of this continent on 26 January, 1778, that preceded frontier wars and battles across the continent that culminated in massacres of Indigenous people well into the 20th century.

While the continuing violence and oppression of Australian Indigenous people, and their social disadvantage, can be linked directly to the trauma of the frontier and the ensuing assimilation-ist policies, the last accepted “massacre” of up to 100 Indigenous people happened at Coniston in 1928.

Coincidentally the man who led the Coniston massacre, mounted constable George Murray, was a former Anzac light horseman who served at Gallipoli. His tactics of pursuit and “dispersal” of the Indigenous – including many Warlpiri – were an acquired part of his training as an Australian Light Horseman. Murray was, naturally, exonerated after the white establishment rallied around him (another shameful story, for another time, involving some of Australia's most revered public families).

Anyway, such are the roots that link seemingly disparate strands of history.

Of his visit to Lajamanu, Najarian says: “I did not know what to expect – the only common thing I could share with the people was suffering, loss of land, a culture, tradition and identity ... The catch was our suffering because of the genocide ... and the suffering of the Aboriginal people.”