

A Reading and Discussion Guide

General Nonfiction Winner - 19th Annual Minnesota Book Awards

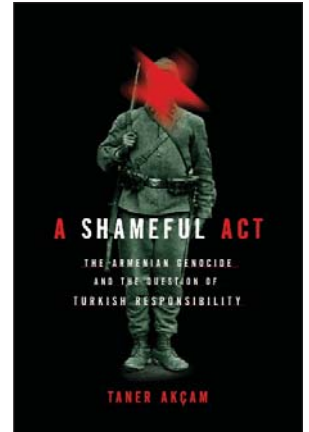
***A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* by Taner Akçam**

Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Company, 2006

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SUMMARY:

Beginning in 1915, under cover of a World War, some one million Armenians were killed through starvation, forced marches, forced exile, and mass acts of slaughter. Although Armenians, history, and world opinion have held the Ottoman powers responsible, Turkey has – for the past 90 years – rejected any claim of genocide. In his pioneering work, *A Shameful Act*, Taner Akçam has made extensive and unprecedented use of Ottoman and other sources, as well as earlier studies by Armenian researchers, to produce a thorough account of Ottoman culpability.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What was your understanding of the Armenian genocide before reading *A Shameful Act*? How does the book enhance or change your understanding of this history?
2. Does the book provide all the background information you need to follow and understand the documented sequence of events?
3. Talk about the extent to which sources are documented in the book. In what ways and to what extent was this documentation helpful?
4. A goal of the author and his editor was to give *A Shameful Act* broad appeal beyond academia. Are they successful in accomplishing this goal? How do you think the book would have been written or organized differently if it had been intended for an academic audience only?
5. What specific events documented in *A Shameful Act* do you find most fascinating and/or horrific?
6. What past and current situations in other countries does the Armenian genocide parallel?
7. The Turkish government continues to reject any claim of genocide. What makes it possible for the country's modern day government to continue the denial?
8. The author has experienced many social injustices as a result of his writing, including imprisonment and torture in Turkey as a young man and receiving death threats in response to *A Shameful Act*. Why do you think the author chooses to write from a purely historical perspective, and does this approach surprise you at all given his personal experiences?
9. What impact do you think and hope *A Shameful Act* might have?
10. If you were going to spend several months or years researching and writing about an event or series of historical events, what event(s) would you choose, and why?

A CONVERSATION WITH TANER AKÇAM:

Q. What inspired you to write your award-winning book?

My firm belief in justice for all people was instilled in me early on in life. Human rights for all is a very important moral principle which I take very seriously. What ultimately inspires me to do the research and writing that I do is my commitment to uncovering and telling the truth in order to help bring about positive change in the world.

Q. What interesting challenges did you encounter in writing *A Shameful Act*?

One of the challenges in writing a book of this nature is that the research must be exhaustive. I love that challenge as I am passionate about confirming facts from multiple sources and helping to solve an important question or puzzle. Writing *A Shameful Act* was challenging in that my publisher and I wanted the book to have broad appeal beyond the audience of academia for which I've typically written.

Q. What rewards and challenges have resulted from the publishing of your book?

I am very grateful that my book has received the positive national and international attention that it has. To receive major media attention and to have one's book reviewed in publications such as *The New Yorker* and *Publishers Weekly* is very unusual for a scholarly writer like me, and truly an honor. To be recognized in the state where I live through winning a Minnesota Book Award was a real surprise and also a great honor.

On the flip side, writing on the topic of Armenian genocide was a dangerous undertaking. I have been harassed and persecuted by Turkish authorities and Turkish American groups – even received death threats. The positive response that my book has received from other sources has helped validate and affirm that *A Shameful Act* is a very important work and that I have done something valuable in writing it.

Q. How did you decide to become a writer?

I didn't intentionally set out to be a researcher and writer – it just evolved. I was born in Turkey in 1953 on the Russian border, and my dream as a young boy was to become a medical doctor. However, at the time I entered university, economics was a hot topic, and that's what I ended up studying. At the age of 22, I was sent to prison for my involvement in producing a student journal focused on Turkey's treatment of the Kurdish minority. After several months of being imprisoned, I was able to escape to Germany.

Once in Germany, I began working as a research scientist at Hamburg Institute and eventually received my PhD from Hanover University with a dissertation entitled

Turkish Nationalism and the Armenian Genocide: On the Background of the Military Tribunals in Istanbul between 1919 and 1922. My work as a published writer actually grew out of my work on my PhD.

Q. What do you like most about living in Minnesota?

This is a warm and welcoming community. Although I enjoyed my time in Germany, I never felt like I quite belonged. In Minnesota I don't feel like an outsider, I feel at home. I've lived in Minnesota since 2002.

Q. How do you most enjoy spending your time when you're not researching and writing?

I love listening to jazz, attending Minnesota Orchestra concerts, and hiking – particularly in mountainous areas. One wonderful thing I've come to know and love in the United States is the study and drinking of wine.

ABOUT TANER AKÇAM:

Taner Akçam, a sociologist and historian, was born in Ardahan province, Turkey, in 1953. He was granted political asylum in Germany after receiving a ten-year prison sentence in Turkey for his involvement with a student journal, which resulted in his adoption in 1976 by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience. He lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota and is a professor at the University of Minnesota. Akçam is the author of ten scholarly works of history and sociology, as well as numerous articles in Turkish, German and English. Recent books by the author include:

From Empire to Republic: Turkish Nationalism and the Armenian Genocide, 2004

Dialogue Across an International Divide: Essays Towards a Turkish-Armenian Dialogue, 2001



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