

Turkish Affirmations of the Armenian Genocide

The Genocide of The Armenians and the Silence of the Turks

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The genocide of the Armenians has been a taboo topic for us Turks for eighty years. The eighty-year-old silence has produced such tension and a mountain of prejudice, not only between the two societies, i.e. the Turkish and the Armenian, but also in the academic world, that even the development of a common language in which the subject could be discussed is becoming a serious problem. For this reason, the fact that I, a Turkish historian, am critically approaching this subject for the first time is more important perhaps than the content of my speech. There is not only the risk that I may be accused of treason in Turkey, but also the risk that you may want to perceive me on this podium as the corporate representative of the Turks, expecting from me an account for the Turkish stance of the last eighty years. Conscious of all these problems, I ask you to listen to me, a historian who is about to speak to you solely in his own name.

My purpose is neither to hide behind the “pretext of having been born too late” nor to assert that I do not have my share in the “collective responsibility.” Quite the contrary, independent of what position I personally may take, I am aware that I am a member of that collectivity which produced “the perpetrators” (or that I belong to a group of perpetrators). Precisely for this reason, I would like to explore the topic fully conscious of the fact as to what it means in this sense “being a member” and “bearing collective responsibility.” It is easier for our generation, which cannot be held directly responsible for the events, to reflect upon the past and to define it as an essential element in our collective identity. This “haughtiness,” this vantage of my generation perhaps could help to finally achieve a breakthrough.

On the other hand, the meaning of the passage of eighty years cannot be underestimated. It is incumbent upon us to “remember” a reality that was treated in our history as a non-event, one which was simply denied, to “recover it in our consciousness,” and to assign to it the proper significance, But what shape can or will this recovered memory take? What does it mean “to incorporate the fact of the genocide in our historical present, and what will be the result? A start can only be made by way of discovering the meaning of belonging to the perpetrator group and of bearing collective responsibility. We have these and many other questions to answer.

At this juncture I would like to explain just how the Turks view or do not view the Armenian Genocide and how they have made it a taboo topic. The question to which I am seeking an answer may be formulated in the following way: why is it that a calm discussion of the subject is not possible, even if we proceed from the premise that there

has not been any occurrence of genocide? Wherein lie the reasons for reacting to the topic with an agitation rarely observed elsewhere? I do not claim that I can answer this question in all its aspects. I will merely list some points that I consider meriting discussion.

I am of the opinion that the formation of the Turkish national identity played a decisive role not only in the decision to commit genocide but also in the current denial and tabooing of it. It is therefore indispensable that I first delve into the peculiarities of the origin of national identity and some of the related factors. I proceed from a concept that the well-known sociologist Norbert Elias has framed. He spoke of “national habitat,” linking it firmly with the process of the formation of nation states. The concept epitomizes some of the peculiarities which were formed during the creation of a nation state. These peculiarities reflect a common mentality, an ethos permeating the psyche of the entire nation and help to explain why in certain situations general patterns of behavior emerge. In other words, a direct link is being established between national identity and the rise of a nation state, at the same time recognizing the central role of the nation state in the evolution of national identity.

UNDERSTANDING THE PERPETRATORS AND THEIR VIEWS

Generally speaking, we are inclined to characterize as “inhuman” acts that we consider morally reprehensible because of their dreadfulness. The revulsion we feel against these acts obviates any need to understand them. This attitude is well suited to engender a distance between us and the act in question, thereby preventing us from identifying with “what is bad.” We can perhaps assuage our consciences by this means, but we must recognize that this does not help us to achieve “understanding” or to “evaluate” adequately. Adorno called our attention to the fact that beyond a moralistic attitude, the need “to understand” is absolutely necessary. He offered the following observation:

In the final analysis, the issue concerns the manner in which the past is recalled and integrated into the present; whether we stop at mere reproach or resolutely withstand the sense of horror in order to be able to comprehend even the incomprehensible.

On the other hand, however, difficulties likewise arise with the so-called scientific objective approach. In the first place, the scientific language that can be defined as a “dictionary intended for non-humans,” because of its capability to objectify the events, is handicapped in terms of establishing a distance from the language used by the “perpetrators.” Every attempt “to understand” has the potential of relativizing and justifying the act of perpetration. We must see to it that every historical reconstruction that “wants to know how events have transpired,” as Walter Benjamin maintained, uses the method of introspection when analysing the perpetrator, and consequently becomes guilty of moral indolence.’

For this reason, perhaps it is better not to create a common perspective while analysing a phenomenon such as genocide, but to rely instead on two different perspectives, the perspective of the “perpetrators” and that of the “victims.” These two distinct perspectives bring to the fore distinctly different material for the reconstruction of historical events. The works that have been produced up to today about the genocide of the Armenians have essentially emanated from the perspective of the “victim group.” My attempt in this regard can be understood as an investigation of the subject from the viewpoint of the “perpetrator group,” a venture that could not be undertaken until now because of the past history of denial and tabooing.

The most important point in which the “perpetrator perspective” differs from the “victim perspective” is the predominance of the factor of historical continuity. In this perpetrator perspective, genocide appears neither as an “unintended accident” nor as an “aberrant phenomenon” free from the exertions of a cultural/ political background, and not likely to repeat itself. This argument does not suggest that events such as genocide are the inevitable result of the sway of certain cultural/political conditions. Certainly,

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genocide is afforded only by virtue of the existence of a set of very specific conditions that coincide in a special way with the dynamics of a compatible cultural/political background. By sensitizing ourselves to their significance we can better understand and define those special conditions that lead to genocide and determine the extent to which those factors that constitute the above-mentioned cultural/political background are still in effect today.

While I maintain that past events have shaped Turkish national identity and do even determine our present behavioral patterns, others may object that this “has nothing to do with modern times,” because the events took place in a “past era.” Thus it can be argued from a modern viewpoint that the consequences of the events of a hundred years ago have no great significance insofar as their relationship to the marks they left behind is concerned. Instead of initiating a discussion on these ideas, I would like to limit myself to adducing here a statement by Norbert Elias:

It is always amazing to ascertain the remarkable degree of persistence with which certain patterns of thinking, feeling and acting can endure in one and the same society over many generations, even though the members of that society do make specific adjustments to changing circumstances.’

This is also my thesis with reference to Turkey. If, for example, we examine the arguments that are being advanced with regard to the Kurds, we can recognize evidence of the surprising degree to which the state of mind, the model of thinking that dominated in the decade after 1910, persists today. I do not want to be understood as saying that there is a simple “danger of recurrence.” But before we take shelter behind such an easing of the emotions, we would do well to inquire whether the social conditions and the mentality from which the act of genocide has sprung still persists. This is the only way in which we can understand and combat the presence of a barbaric potential, however in different forms, at the core of societies.

If in given societies certain destructive potentials exist as peculiar ingredients of national identity, as a type of mentality, then we must make a conscious effort toward reckoning with these. One of the most important ways to confront a mentality that directs, to a great extent, subconscious processes entailing, almost automatically, spontaneous reactions, consists of bringing this mentality to the conscious level. This is the method that Adorno called “confronting the subject.” If you want “to understand” and analyze collectively committed cruelty, and you wish to prevent the repetition of such events, then you will not find a solution if you direct your attention primarily to the group of “victims.” Attention must be directed to the “perpetrators” in order to uncover a series of “conscious or unconscious” mechanisms which underlie their actions, for it is the activation of these mechanisms that makes these people “perpetrators.”

Following this general introduction, I would like to list below, in the form of a thesis, a few fundamental features of Turkish national identity that have played an important role in the decision to commit genocide as well as in the subsequent tabooing of the topic.

SOME CHARACTERISTIC TRAITS OF TURKISH NATIONAL IDENTITY

1. Compared to France, Germany and other European states, Turkish nationalism and Turkish national consciousness entered the historical stage very late. There are different reasons for this belatedness. Special significance attaches to the influence of Islam and the cosmopolitan character of the Ottoman Empire. Because of its late development, Turkish nationalism was strongly influenced by Social Darwinism and racist ideologies. This intellectual background of Turkish nationalism, combined with the urgent need to catch up, made that nationalism aggressive.
2. Turkish nationalism arose as a reaction to the experience of constant humiliations.

Turkish national sentiment constantly suffered from the effects of an inferiority complex. Various factors played a role in this. Critical, however, was the fact that the Turks not only were continuously humiliated and loathed, but they were conscious of this humiliation. The Turkish political elite had clear ideas as to what people thought of the Turks, and this knowledge became an important determining factor for their actions. One of the consequences was a strong “sense of being misunderstood” and a fear of being isolated. A nation that was humiliated in this way in the past and is also conscious of that experience, will try to prove its own greatness and importance. As Elias noted:

The established feeling of inferiority ... and the resentment, the sensitivity to the humiliation, often connected with it was countered [and compensated] with the preoccupation with its own greatness and power.

The result is a penchant for power.

3. Turkish national identity evolved in conditions in which the fear of annihilation and dissolution was omnipresent. The process of disintegration afflicting the Ottoman Empire was of such gravity that it produced a traumatic anxiety among Ottoman leaders. The fear of annihilation and disintegration, fed by a deep consciousness of weakness and helplessness, is “the midwife” of Turkish national identity.

One result of this mental attitude was to reflect upon the possible reasons, persons and circles of political operatives that could have caused these negative developments. Seen through the prism of Turkish national identity, the Christian minorities were viewed as one of the primary factors responsible for the decline and disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. The Christians were, therefore, stigmatized as enemies. This enmity was rendered all the more intense by the fact that some imperial powers used the Christians as a lever in order to realize the partition of the empire consistent with their own power interests. The Christians hereby obtained certain economic and social privileges.

Another factor which created an image of hostile Christians was the role Islam played in this connection. On the basis of Islamic culture and its system of laws, the Moslems have always considered the Christians as an inferior minority group and have never viewed them as being equal to themselves. Thus the Christians did not enjoy equality in the Ottoman Empire. But during the stages marking the disintegration of the Empire, the reforms and economic privileges led to a change in the position of the Christians. The Turks gradually lost their social status as a superior class. They could not reconcile themselves to the idea of equality with the Christians by way of reforms, or that a Christian minority should attain a better economic position than they. This loss of status led to the rise of hate-revenge sentiments against those who were seen as responsible. The Moslems did not “peacefully” accept their steadily weakening position. This awareness of loss of status played a significant role in the enactment of the massacre against Christians, and the history of the nineteenth century provides much evidence for this.

4. The psychology of those found on the brink of disaster and dying a slow death was shaped through two peculiarities. First, the rebellious Christian minorities lived in the fringe areas of the empire. Continual losses of territory on the fringes of the empire had created among the Turks a siege mentality, that is, the feeling that the empire was encircled by enemies. Elias points out certain features in the development of the German nation state, the incidence of which may be observed in the development of the Turkish nation state also:

The process of state development for the Germans was deeply influenced by their position as a central block in the configuration of those three ethnic blocks. The Latinized and Slavic groups again and again felt threatened by the populous German state. Representatives of the nascent German state simultaneously felt threatened from different sides. All parties quite recklessly availed themselves of every opportunity for expansion that presented itself.

The pressures stemming from this configuration of states in the center led to a continuous crumbling of the peripheral regions that separated from the German union of states and established themselves as independent states.

Second, this “crumbling” of the fringes was not the result of the military defeats of the Ottoman leadership. The insurrections of the minorities could almost always be crushed. It was pressure from abroad that forced the Ottomans to make political concessions to those they defeated militarily. Thus a nation and its elite, who were accustomed to dominating others over the course of centuries, were shocked by the ability of others to toy with and degrade their honor. One way that nations under pressure from above and reduced to whipping boys tend to react is by way of avenging themselves against those they hold responsible for their misfortune. Elias captures the essence of this dynamic when he writes:

A state’s relative weakness vis-à-vis other states creates specific crises for the people involved. They suffer physical insecurity, doubt their own worth, feel degraded and disgraced and are prone to indulging in wishful thinking about revenge that they would like to inflict on those they hold responsible for the situation.

5. Another characteristic of Turkish national identity is the fact that the Turks consider themselves the actual, true victims of history. “We are the nation upon whom actual injustice was inflicted. We are a persecuted nation, but no one recognizes that. We are treated as the “stepchildren’ of history.” Two factors have contributed to the evolution of this mental attitude. First, throughout the nineteenth century, the national wars of liberation of Christian groups in the Balkans (Greeks, Serbs, Bulgarians, etc.) were experienced as massacres of the Moslem population. Secondly, Europe paid no attention to the massacres of Moslems, although European nations were highly sensitive to the massacres of Christians and utilized every occasion to interfere. It is not an exaggeration to say that in the minds of the Moslems had entrenched itself the firm belief that the entire world was poised against them; they considered themselves the victims of history.
6. Two essential factors are responsible for the difficulty of the Turks in coping with this sentiment of collapse and worthlessness. First, there was the deeply rooted belief in the superiority of the Turks over other peoples and the right of Turks to dominate them. There is still talk today of erecting a world empire and of dominating other nations as signposts of Turkish superiority and historical uniqueness. The most important reason for this attitude lies in the fact that the Turks, as a ruling stratum, (even though they themselves were not conscious of their Turkishness), and under the influence of Islamic thought, identified themselves with Islam and felt superior to the empire’s other religious groups. The idea of the “ruling nation” (Millet-I Hakime) dominated the thinking of the Ottoman-Turkish ruling elite. At the same time, the Ottoman-Turkish ruling elite was overwhelmed by the greatness of its own past. There was really an enormous gap between the sense of belonging to an empire that ruled over three continents and the current situation, in which national honor was being dragged through the mud. The conflict between these past and present realities intensified the need to 1) reject the present, 2) return to the old days of imperial glory, and 3) punish those who were accused of being responsible for the current malaise.

It is possible, even necessary, to introduce here additional factors for consideration. The decision to commit genocide can be understood only against this background, but I do not claim that the genocide is a direct result of this frame of mind. Needed were additional conditions which, however, could lead to genocide only in this context. One of these conditions was that the Turks were the heirs to a sublime and glorious past but were steadily growing weak and were suffering from the ills of the exaltation of their past. The demise was unavoidable in the event of a war. The decision for genocide arose within the purview of this assumption.

Generally speaking, nations that have a “great and glorious” past live in the shadow of and under the burden of this past. When such nations lapse into a position of weakness, when they are repeatedly wounded in their sense of honor and degraded and have a

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premonition of ruination, the burden of the awareness of the past, its ballast, becomes even greater. The stronger the feeling of loss of worth and the level of humiliation, the more forcefully is the past idealized and its recovery made a priority. Depending on how strongly it is believed that the glorious past could become the ideal future, the potential for violent action, which is deemed to be needed, will be increased.

A wounded national pride, a national identity unsure of itself, and a national ideal looking backwards to the past were the cumulative effects of the troubled German history (which can also be read as Ottoman-Turkish history-T.A.), which in the long-run is punctuated by defeats and an ensuing loss of power. The vision of a greater past projected into the future provided a fertile environment for the rise of especially vicious forms of behavior and credos.

As a rule, the desire to apply power against those who are held responsible for the loss of strength and power, humiliation, and the loss of worth is the result of these developments. Parallel to this debacle and loss of self-worth, one has to consider other occurrences. Accelerated disintegration and fragmentation of the national state give rise to feelings of fear of “annihilation,” “siege by enemies,” and “a war of naked survival fought with one’s back to the wall” in the later stages of this process. When the situation is seen as increasingly hopeless, those in power who cannot prevent this decline become increasingly aggressive. When the national elite sees it as less and less probable that a great and ideal future can be created and that the goal appears in jeopardy and the process of decline is unstoppable, the counter-measures meant to stop this process acquire a more and more barbaric character. The resort to genocide stands at the apex of this process. If this process of decline is erratic, and now and then hopes spring up that one can find a way out, the end result promises to be even more painful. When a nation has a premonition of downfall it will never concede that it is at the edge of such a downfall and will stubbornly focus on the dream of a great future. In such a situation, the dreams become even more unrealizable.

The force of the downward trend was reflected in the extreme brutality of the means with which they tried to stop it. With their backs to the wall, the defenders easily become the destroyers of civilization. They easily become barbarians.

This was the history of the Turks before World War I. PanTuranism and the ideal of a great Turkish empire became stronger as the disintegration and partition of the empire progressed and the situation grew more hopeless. While the quest for a collective identity that would hold the empire together proved abortive, the leadership turned farther toward the East, to regions and peoples where the ideal of empire could be realized. The Turks perceived the First World War as an historical opportunity. Those who had suffered defeat and lived through a painful process, including degradation and loss of honor, for years, now saw the looming on the horizon of an historical opportunity to stop the decline from which there was otherwise no escape. The Turks’ bad fortune, it was thought, could now be reversed and the disintegration stopped. The great Turkish empire could be recreated; not on all the same lands, but on another expanse inhabited by loyal Turkish people worthy of trust. It was as if the clouds had unexpectedly lifted to reveal the contours of a glorious sun.

The rapid succession of military debacles the Turks suffered during the first months of World War I had a very sobering effect however. Especially the defeat at Sarikamish, near Kars, in the Anatolian east, in December 1914 and January 1915, burst the Turanian-Islamic dream like a soap bubble. The Ottoman-Turkish rulers could, however, assign blame and identify those responsible for this defeat. The Turks had not really lost; they had been betrayed. Elias’ description in the German context is apt here: “[The defeat] had been caused by cunning deception, by criminals, by means of a conspiracy, by a ‘stab in the back’ administered by internal traitors in the rear of the combat troops.” This quote from Elias, though describing the Nazi case, can not only logically be extended to the rationale advanced for the case of the Armenian Genocide, but it can literally be seen as a general accusation levelled against the Armenians in some studies of the genocide.

The sudden loss of an historical opportunity that had resulted from the constant military setbacks, humiliations, and losses of self-worth coincided with another historical

event. Enemy forces stood at the entrance of the Dardanelles in March, 1915, and with that, the end of the empire was in sight. Without a doubt, this cast a special dark pallor over the mood of the Ottoman leaders. The land, (Anatolia), so quintessential for the survival of the Turks, would be handed over to the Armenians after the defeat. There had been a corresponding plan for reform even before the war. In order to avert such a possible outcome, the Turks had resort to the most ruthless and daring action. "When a chronic feeling of sinking, of being driven into a corner and encircled by the enemy awakens the belief that only absolute ruthlessness can rescue the vanishing power and glory..." then one does not recoil before the idea of using the most barbaric methods. The dimensions of the sense of loss of self-worth and of meaning, and the fact that the Ottoman Empire stood at the doorstep of defeat led rapidly to desperate actions that were "insane" and reckless. Ottoman-Turkish ruling circles were gripped by the great fear that the end of the empire could become a reality. Their refusal to accept this led to the brutality of the measures they undertook for deliverance. It is probably not incorrect to consider the Armenian Genocide as a product of this frame of mind. The battle for the Dardanelles lasted 259 days and represented a kind of "purgatory." Death and resurrection were being lived every day. It is probably no accident, however, that the genocide of the Armenians became a compelling issue after the defeat at Sarikamish and at a time when the war for the Dardanelles had become a struggle for life and death.

THE REASONS FOR TURKISH SILENCE

Why is discussion of the Armenian Genocide a taboo? Why do we Turks have the feeling that lightning has struck our bones whenever the theme is addressed? What are the reasons for this sensitivity and indisposition? At first these reactions appear difficult to comprehend. If it wishes, Turkey can recognize the fact of genocide, at the same time asserting that it had no connection to the act. There is sufficient material available to justify doing this. Turkey maintains that it is a completely new state. Official history propounds the thesis that the war of liberation was also directed against the Ottoman rulers. Moreover, a few members of the Ittihad party that organized the genocide were brought before the court in 1926, and some of them were executed. Even if an explanation along the lines of "it is indeed regrettable, but we did not do it, it was the Ottomans" would meet with strong objections, it could be seen as a normal, expected pattern of response.

Since the possibilities of a discussion free from portentous problems are not being pursued, there must be deeper underlying reasons for the extreme reactions, evasions, and denials. In the form of a preliminary thesis, I would suggest for consideration the following points, fully cognizant of the fact that they are rudimentary points and need to be developed further.

LACK OF HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The first and most important point concerns the lack of historical consciousness in Turkish society. I would characterize amnesia as a social disease in Turkey. The inability to remember refers not only to the period of World War I but also to incidents from the 1860s and 1870s that have long since been forgotten.

To begin with, the founders of the Turkish Republic have severed our connections and bonds to history. Each state that asserts itself as a new entity must provide a basis for its legitimacy and predicate that legitimacy on the historical past. The Kemalist cadres of the republic had serious difficulties with this issue. Islam had consigned everything that was called Turkish to oblivion over the entire course of Ottoman history. For that reason, the rulers of the new republic had no possibility of linking their newly established nation state, which they fashioned on the principle of Turkish national identity, with the Ottomans. They had to find a new Turkish history for themselves. They had to skip backwards six hundred years, past the Ottomans, who had repressed the idea of Turkishness, and who had even degraded it. As a final result, this long time span of history was treated as non-existent.

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Through a series of reforms, this time interval, intended or not, was stricken from memory. The Latin alphabet was introduced with the “revolution” of 1928. Thus future generations were barred access to the written testimony of the past. The Turkification of the language was carried out in such an extreme and rapid fashion that the younger generations can no longer understand the language of the 1930s. Consequently, the relationship to the past and to history became circumscribed by the manner in which a few officially approved history professors defined it. It is difficult to conceive of a society that has no access to what has occurred before 1928. Yet it is true that people cannot even read the diaries of their parents and forebears. As a society, we are dependent today on what is etched in our memory, what we have ourselves experienced and what has been conveyed to us by our family members.

THE REASONS FOR “WANTING TO FORGET”

Lack of historical consciousness is a common problem. However, there are still more direct reasons for fearing the discussion of the Armenian Genocide as if one feared “a monster.” I hereby maintain that the “wish to forget history” is directly related to the genocide of the Armenians. In order to be freed from the connotations of the term genocide, the founders of modern Turkey undertook a kind of cleansing as they ushered in the republic. The slow but continuous disintegration of the great empire, the military defeats in wars that continued over the years, the loss of tens of thousands of people, a society whose dignity was scorned along with the constant loss of self-worth, overwhelmed by the imagery of a great history, fantasies about recreating the past, the terminal bursting of these dreams, and the inability to absorb and integrate these numerous contradictions, and ... finally, the genocide: that constitutes a social trauma of major proportions.

As is the case with individuals, so it is also with societies that they experience difficulty in incorporating in their own living history events that produce crises. Mechanisms of blocking out and forgetfulness intrude and encumber the effort to overcome the difficulty. The reason why the republic is described as a new birth, as a zero point, lies in the psychological crises generated by the legacy of the past and the desire to not remember it. The republic believes that the entire dismal image can be suddenly erased and that the Turks can thus be delivered from a nightmare, from an extremely dangerous, fatal illness.

I believe that this frame of mind plays an important role in steering all discussion away from the genocide. To raise the issue is akin to telling someone who was miraculously delivered from a fatal illness that the disease is not really in remission and that he should brace himself for a relapse. Not only do people not want to think of decline, humiliation, and disgrace, but people do not want also to be reminded of them. We like to believe that we have recovered and that we have acquired a new persona. Therefore, the official line is that Turkey emerged from a period of upheaval in history from which “a new personality was created from nothing.”

I maintain here that we have not yet recovered, that we have not yet acquired the “new personality that has divested itself of the spell of the old crises,” and that as long as we do not talk about the Armenian Genocide, our chances of creating a new “other” remains rather tenuous. As long as the act of perpetration is not consciously accounted for, all peculiarities of this event will live on in the unconscious. If, as Turkey maintains, a decisive turning point really occurred and a completely new element emerged, then there should be a link to the past that would be free of the problems prevalent today. The desperate effort to avoid any discussion about the genocide is the most telling proof that the assertion regarding the rise of a “completely new and other element” is not a valid one. A society, a state does not like to confront an imagery that is at variance with its self imagery, and, as such, is likely to destroy its world of fantasies. Herein lies the reason for our sharp reaction to those who call our attention to that reality.

WANTING TO FORGET IS A KIND OF SEQUEL

Another question that must be addressed is what do we expect if we “forget” the genocide or drive its reality into the inner recesses of the unconscious? My suggestion at this point is a kind of “historical quest for the traces.” To be sure, it is not just a matter of repressing the memory of a historical period. Through such repression, even the conditions that led to the Armenian Genocide are relegated to the unconscious. However, they are not destroyed, but live on in another form.

The Turks were gripped by powerful impulses of wishful thinking during the years of World War I. They wanted to free themselves from the shackles of their weak and powerless position, They wanted to establish a new strong hegemony and thereby cast off their feelings of humiliation and disgrace. We can speak of the fact that a strong collective narcissism was developed, primarily through the vehicles of Pan-Turanism and Pan-Islamicism. These needs remained unsatisfied as a result of the Ottoman defeat. Collective narcissism suffered hard blows and neither the community that perceived itself as such a collective, nor individuals have come to terms with this frustration. The relinquishing of the goals to which the elite aspired was not an act that could be compared to a reckoning with the past, but a mere “swallowing.” In this respect, the words of Mustafa Kemal are very instructive with regard to Pan-Turanism and Pan-Islamism. It was essential for him not to turn against them, but to choose not to deal with what could not be achieved, given Turkey’s insufficient resources.

In the final analysis, the past was not shut off, it is waiting in the unconscious to be summoned up again. “Social-psychologically, it is to be expected that the damaged collective narcissism is lying in wait for a chance to be repaired. It grasps for whatever brings the past consciously into harmony with the narcissistic wish, but there is also the possibility that reality can be modelled in such a way as if there was no damage in the first place. I do not assert at this juncture that collective narcissism will again manifest itself in Pan-Turanic goals. That can occur in yet another way. The underlying drive, however, is the desire to again dominate other nations and to again become a great power.

I will not go into how this affects the unfolding of the present day realities in Turkey. There are, however, a series of indications that we have begun to recover from the shock of the debacles of World War I. Fundamental changes in world structure and the relative economic strength of Turkey compared to its neighbours reinforce the desire in Turkey to return to the old powerful days of empire. It can be argued that this condition accounts for one of the essential reasons for the strengthening of nationalistic and fundamentalist forces in Turkey. The desire to be a great power and to return to the old days does not derive from a psychology of disintegration and decline, but from a belief that it can be fulfilled through modern Turkey’s own resources and strength.

OUR SELF IMAGE AND THE GENOCIDE

One of the most important reasons for the tabooing of the Armenian Genocide lies in the coupling of this event with the establishment of the republic. To a certain extent, the establishment of the republic depended heavily on the genocide. The founders of the republic knew that, and they were not averse to expressing it openly. For example, one of the leaders of the Ittihad ve Terakki stated: “If we had not cleaned up the eastern provinces of Armenian militia who were cooperating with the Russians, there would have been no possibility of founding our national state.” A speech was delivered in the first parliament of the young republic, the thrust of which was that we accept the label of “murderers” since it served the purpose of saving the fatherland:

You know that the problem of [Armenian] deportations threw the world in an uproar and all of us were labelled murderers. We knew before this was done that world opinion would not be favourable and this would bring loathing and hatred upon us. Why have we resigned ourselves to being called murderers? Those are things that have only happened in order to secure something that is more holy and valuable than our own live at the future of the fatherland.

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These “brave” words that the Turkish Republic was built on the genocide of the Armenians were reflections of the enthusiasm of the years during which the Turkish Republic was founded. In the course of time, however, we have sketched out an entirely contrary portrayal. Our nation state “had been created from nothing and in opposition against the imperial forces,” an achievement of which we could be proud. The Turkish state was the symbolic proof of a national existence, that “we had dug ourselves” out of the national void “with our fingernails.” Anti-imperialism was an indispensable component of our national identity. One aspect of national identity of which we were obviously proud was the organizing of the “National Forces” (Kuvayi Milliye) that had helped us obtain our independence. The “spirit” of these fighting forces, which originally were part of the first guerrilla units of the Turkish national movement, was still inspiring the generation of 1968 as a symbol of anti-imperialist identity.

One of the most important reasons we go out of our way not to discuss the Armenian Genocide is, therefore, the fear that our faith in ourselves would collapse. The model, the structures of thought that we use to explain the genocide to the world and in Turkey could collapse through such discussions. A discussion of the Armenian Genocide could reveal that this Turkish state was not a result of a war fought against the imperial powers, but, on the contrary, a product of the war against the Greek and Armenian minorities. It could show that a significant part of the National Forces consisted either of murderers who directly participated in the Armenian Genocide or of thieves who had become rich by plundering Armenian possessions.

Three different aspects can be discussed with respect to the connection between the Armenian Genocide and the establishment of the Turkish republic. First, the Turkish national movement was organized by the Ittihad ve Terakki party that had carried out the wartime genocide. It is known that the plans for this movement were already drafted during the First World War. In case of military defeat, preparations were made to organize a long lasting resistance. These plans were carried out in the Armistice of 1918 and thereafter.

An important point is that organizations, such as the “Society for the Defense of the Rights...” and “Rejection of Occupation,” that were the mainstay of the forces supporting the national movement in Anatolia, were formed either directly on the order of Talaat Pasha or with the aid of the Karakol (Police Station) organization connected to Talaat and Enver. If we look at the regions in which those organizations were established and the sequence of the acts of their founding, it becomes clear that these events initially took place everywhere a perceived Armenian or Greek danger existed. Of the first five resistance organizations that were founded after the Mudros Armistice agreement, from the 30th of October, 1918 to the end of the year, three were directed against the Armenian and two against the Greek minorities.

The local cadres of Ittihad ve Terakki constituted the main elements among the founders of these associations. This overlap of membership was so great that when later the central organization “A-RMHC” (Society for the Defense of the Rights of Anatolia and Rumelia) formed a party, it was stipulated that no one from the “Freedom and Accord Party,” seen as an enemy of Ittihad ve Terakki, could become a member.” An important mission of the Karakol movement, which organized the national movement in Anatolia, was to arrange the escape to Anatolia of those Ittihadists who had been involved in the Armenian Genocide and who were then being sought by the British. To some extent the organization was a symbol of the nexus linking the Armenian Genocide to the resistance movement in Anatolia.

The second important connection between the genocide and the national movement concerned the formation of a new class of wealthy men in Anatolia who had enriched themselves thanks to the genocide. Even Turks point to the fact that the economic motive played an important role in the Armenian Genocide. An important figure in the national movement, Halide Edip, said, “...there was a strong economic one ... this was to end the economic supremacy of the Armenians thereby clearing the markets for the Turks and the Germans.” The prominent people who had enriched themselves through the genocide feared that the Armenians could return to avenge themselves and reclaim their goods. After all, this was part of the Allied agenda. These nouveaux riches were drawn even closer to the national movement on those occasions when Armenians

did return with occupying forces to reclaim their goods and carry out a few acts of revenge, especially in the Çukurova (Adana, transl.) region. The newly rich thus became an integral part of the national movement. In many areas the resistance was directly organized by these newly rich elements. It was not an accident but rather a necessity that in many regions members of the governing bodies of the organizations for the protection of rights were those whose fortunes had been made as a consequence of the genocide of the Armenians.

Among those who had been enriched through the genocide were some who served directly at the side of Kemal himself. Topal Osman, for example, was one who later advanced to the rank of commander of the guard battalion, (protecting the institution of the Grand National Assembly in Ankara, and the person of Mustafa Kemal-transl.), and Ali Cenani, who had been exiled to Malta, later became the Minister of Commerce in the new republic. The list can be expanded. It is not surprising, therefore, that on September 22, 1922, the national government repealed a January 8, 1920 law of the Istanbul government concerning the restitution of Armenian goods. This change served to reinstate the law of September, 1915 concerning the Abandoned Goods [of the Armenians]. The government in Ankara knew it had to take into account the interests of those who had a share in the founding of the republic.

The third important link between the genocide of the Armenians and the republic is a natural outcome of the first. The initial organizers of the national movement were people who had directly participated in the enactment of the genocide. Those who set up the first units of the National Forces in the Marmara, Aegean, and Black Sea regions and held important posts in these units were for the most part people sought by the occupation forces and the government in Istanbul for their participation in the genocide. When Kemal began to organize the resistance in Anatolia, he received the strongest support from the Ittihadists for whom there were arrest warrants on account of their role in the genocide. Many who were sought or were actually arrested and deported to Malta for their role in the genocide, but fled or escaped later, received important posts in Ankara. There are many examples, but a few should suffice here. Sükrü Kaya became the Interior Minister and held the office of Secretary-General in the Republican Peoples Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi), founded by none other than Mustafa Kemal. During the deportations of Armenians he was “Director General of the Office for the Settlement of Nomadic Tribes and Refugees.” This was attached to the Interior Ministry and was officially responsible for the implementation of the Armenian “deportations.” For this reason Sükrü Kaya was also known as “Director General for Deportation” (Sevkiyat Reis-i Umumisi). Mustafa Abdülhalik (Renda) was the governor of Bitlis and later Aleppo during the genocide. Rossler [Germany’s veteran consul at Aleppo-trans.] said of him that: “[He] works inexorably on the annihilation of the Armenians. In an affidavit prepared by Vehip Pahsa, the commandant of the Third Army (during the war, in February, 1916) the special role of Abdülhalik Renda in the genocide is being emphasized. According to General Vehip’s testimony, thousands of human beings were burned alive in the region around Mush, a district under the control of Mustafa Abdülhalik. This event is mentioned in German consular reports as well as by eyewitnesses.

There are others, for example, Arif Fevzi (Prinçizade), who was a deputy from Diyarbakir during the war years. He was suspect number 2743 in the warrant prepared by the British for the detainees in Malta, was assigned to the group implicated in the genocide, and was to be charged as such. He held the office of Minister of Public Affairs from July 21, 1922 to October 27, 1923. Ali Cenani Bey, the Ittihad ve Terakki deputy for Aintep, was suspect number 2805. He had enriched himself from the loot and spoils associated with the genocide. “In the English archives ... a very dirty file exists on him.” He was the Minister of Commerce between November 22, 1924 and May 17, 1926.

Dr. Tevfik Rüstü Aras was also one of those who held important political posts in subsequent years. During World War I he was a member of the High Council on Health, which was responsible for the burial of the dead Armenians. Between 1925 and 1938, he served as Foreign Minister of the Republic of Turkey.

This list could be extended by several pages. It can be stated conclusively that Mustafa Kemal led “the war of liberation ... with Ittihadists who were sought for Greek

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and Armenian incidents and ... was supported by and relied on prominent persons who carried the ghost of the Greeks and Armenians into the subculture of the resistance movement. Participation in the national war of liberation was a vital necessity, a last refuge for all members of Ittihad ve Terakki and especially the special organization that masterminded the organization of the genocide. Only two alternatives existed for them. Either they surrendered to be sentenced to hard labour or death, or they fled to Anatolia and organized the national resistance. A well-known journalist and close friend of Mustafa Kemal, Falih Rifke Atay, expressed this quite clearly:

When the English and their allies began to demand an accounting from the Ittihadists and especially of the murderers of the Armenians after the end of the war, everyone who had something to hide armed himself and joined a gang.

I think that the tabooing of the Armenian Genocide in a republic whose foundation was created in this way is “understandable.” The devastation that would ensue if we had to now stigmatize those whom we regarded as “great saviours” and “people who created a nation from nothing,” as “murderers and thieves” is palpable. It seems so much simpler to completely deny the genocide than to seize the initiative and face the obliteration of the ingrained notions about the Republic and our own national identity. I would like to conclude my talk at this point with an open question: What significance do the effects of such a policy have for society today and in the future, especially when such “denial” means that the frame of mind and the pattern of behavior that led to the genocide against the Armenians continue to exist?

Historic Conference in Chicago March 2000

Turkish Scholars Acknowledge the Genocide

By Daphne Abeel

Mirror-Spectator Staff

ANN ARBOR, Mich. - In 1998, Prof. Ronald Grigor Suny, professor of political science at the University of Chicago, travelled to Koc University in Istanbul to lecture on the Armenian Genocide. That trip and the ensuing contact with Turkish scholars was the genesis of a three-day workshop this past weekend (March 17-19), held at Wilder House, University of Michigan.

“What was so extraordinary and unexpected,” said Suny, in an interview following the workshop, “was that within just a few minutes into the first panel, there was a discussion on the highest level, free of political bias. This is what we had sought - the creation of a community of scholars who could talk openly about these issues. The Turkish participants, except for one, used the word ‘genocide’ repeatedly.”

Titled “Armenians and the End of the Ottoman Empire,” it brought Armenian and Turkish scholars together for the first time to engage in an open discussion of how Armenians contributed, adjusted, and, ultimately, felt victim to the transformation from Ottoman Empire to the modern Turkish republic. Said Suny, “My trip to Istanbul had excited me about the possibilities of engaging with Turkish scholars.” With the assistance of his academic colleagues at the University of Michigan, Kevork B. Bardakjian, Fatma Muge Gocek, Stephanie Platz, and Kenneth Church, a broad invitation was issued to scholars in the Armenian and Turkish communities to come together. “We got a good response, even from Turkish scholars in Turkey, although there were some from the Armenian community who did not feel ready for this type of discussion,” said Suny. The workshops attracted participants from Istanbul, Germany, New York City, California, Minnesota, Boston, and Princeton, N.J.

Suny, in his opening remarks, praised the participants’ courage, saying, “This is a small, humble and historic meeting. It is the first time scholars of different nationalities, including Armenia and Turkey, have gathered to present papers and discuss, in a scholarly fashion, the fate of the peoples of the Ottoman Empire as that state declined and disintegrated.”

While the workshops touched on the fates of Jews, Circassians, Arabs and Greeks, Suny said, “The principal focus was on the people and events that have been elided- the massacre and deportations of Armenians by the Ottoman Empire, which constituted the first genocide of the 20th century.”

Suny singled out several speakers for comment. Among them was Dr. Gerard J. Libaridian, an historian based in Boston, who served as senior advisor to the former president of Armenia, Lebon Ter-Petrossian. Libaridian participated on a panel titled “The Young Turks and the Armenians.” and opened his remarks with the reading of a

poem, “The Crossroads” by Eghishe Charents. Using the poem as a touchstone for his talk, he said, “It is important not only what happened, but what we make of what happened. Why do some people like the problem and not the solution? We share a common past that has been hijacked by the nationalists.”

Suny also reported on the comments of several Turkish scholars. Salim Deringil from Bosphorus University in Istanbul said, “This was the most difficult paper I’ve written in my life. Venturing into the Armenian crisis is like wandering into a mine field.” Suny praised Deringil for producing “wonderful documents relative to the situation of Armenians and Turks in the Ottoman Empire.”

Engin Akarli of Brown University called for “a dialogue with the documents and the need to move away from universally normalized concepts like the nation-state.”

Halil Berktaş of Sabancı University in Istanbul presented a paper in which he explored “the stereotypes of others presented in Turkish literature during the World War I period.”

Borrowing a term from another Turkish scholar, Taner Akcam, Berktaş spoke of “a collapse panic” in the Ottoman Empire and said, “Today, there are illusions about Turkish Armenia. It looks as though Anatolia is normal territory for the Turks. But in 1915, Anatolia was unknown by the Turks, a backward place. The Turks had to reoccupy it after World War I.”

Suny reserved special mention for Akcam, who is affiliated with Stiftung zu Förderung von Wissenschaft und Kultur in Hamburg. Akcam, a radical student leader who opposed the Turkish military regime and escaped from a prison in Ankara was “the first important Turkish scholar to study the Armenian Genocide and to use the word ‘genocide,’” said Suny. During his presentation, Akcam used Turkish documents to pinpoint the actual decision to carry out the deportations early in March 1915, after the defeat of the Turkish army on the Caucasian front.

To his Turkish colleagues, Akcam said, “I am so happy to be here. I don’t feel so alone now.”

Encouraged by the content and participation in this workshop, Suny said that plans for additional workshops and discussion were in the making.

“We should go on and invite others to join us. It is so important that we not think of ourselves as Armenian or Turkish historians, but as scholars who are coming together for a mutual discussion.”

The tentative title for the next workshop is “World War I and the Ottoman Empire: Imperial Dissolution in a Transnational Conjuncture.”

“Several universities have expressed interest. I have high hopes that this dialogue will continue,” said Suny.