

September 2001

THE LONG DENIED ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

Turkey's carefully forgotten history

Turks, and their history books, still cannot accept that there was organized mass murder of Armenians between 1915-17. Perhaps that is because so many of the murderers and looters were also heroes of the founding of the modern Turkish republic.

by **TANER AKCAM** *

It would be naïve to suppose that France was motivated by compassion for the Armenians and their tragic past when it voted, last January, to describe the killing of the Armenians in 1915 as genocide. As the Turks say often enough, France should first recognize that it has itself been guilty of genocide or crimes against humanity in Algeria. But questionable French motives should not be a reason for yet another cover-up of what the ruling Ottoman party did to the Armenians in 1915-1917.

Many of the Turkish criticisms of France aimed to obscure the facts, rather than dispute a false charge. A Turkish paper published these words of anger: "Let it be clear to world public opinion: in the past we punished all the infamous half-castes who, not content with profiting from our lands, attacked our possessions, the lives and honour of the Turks. We know that our forefathers were right and, if there were such threats again today, we would not hesitate to do what was necessary" (1). This angry outburst is not exceptional: works regarded as scientific use similar expressions.

Why does the word genocide provoke such rage in Turkey? The Turks could, after all, simply recognize that the massacres occurred but say they were not responsible for them. The founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, spoke on the subject dozens of times; he condemned the massacres, which he called infamous, and demanded that those who were guilty be punished. The leaders of the then ruling Ottoman party, Ittihad ve Terakki (Union and Progress) (2), who

* Turkish historian and sociologist, author of *Dialogue across an International Divide: Essays towards a Turkish-Armenian Dialogue*, The Zoryan Institute of Canada, Toronto, 2001.

organized the killings were tried in 1926, although they were indicted for different crimes. Several of them were executed. So Turkey could simply express regret for the crimes against the Armenians and explain they had been committed by the Ottoman state, not the new Turkish republic.

In search of identity

One of the main obstacles to a public debate is a collective amnesia: the loss of Turkey's communally shared memory results from the deadening of the Turks' historical awareness over several decades. Atatürk severed the lines connecting people to their past. Every nation-state, at the moment of its creation, looks for historical roots on which to found its legitimacy. If it doesn't find them, it invents them. As French historian Ernest Renan noted, "Forgetting and even historical mistakes are essential factors in creating a nation" (3). The founder of the young Turkish republic scrupulously obeyed this rule.

The Turks faced a specific difficulty: over the centuries of Ottoman rule, Islam had gradually effaced everything to do with Turkish identity from the collective memory. The Turks had to go back to the pre-Ottoman period to discover their missing identity and roots - passing over 600 years of history in silence.

Through a series of reforms, such as the westernisation of dress codes, they tried to erase the traces of a recent past that had become undesirable and, with the adoption of the Latin alphabet in 1928, more or less inaccessible to the younger generation. The collective memory was thus emptied of much of its content. It was replaced by an official history written by a few authorised academics, which became the sole recognized reference. Events prior to 1928 and the writings of past generations became a closed book. The notion of the past was rendered evanescent, and the limits of memory and historical awareness reduced to no more than people's own personal experience and that of their closest environment. In these circumstances, how can ordinary Turks be expected to take the initiative and open a debate on their own history ?

In addition to the absence of historical awareness, there is another, greater reason for the Turks' behaviour: their history is composed of a series of traumatic shocks. Between 1878 and 1918 the Ottoman rulers lost 85% of their lands and 75% of the population of their empire. In its final century, the empire steadily disintegrated: a series of heavy military defeats, interspersed with the occasional victory, led to unfavourable armistices under pressure from the Great Powers. This period of uninterrupted wars, which killed tens of thousands, was, for the Turks, an era of dishonour and humiliation.

The Ottoman elite, crushed by the weight of a glorious past and suffering from a loss of self-esteem, saw the first world war as a historic opportunity to regain its former grandeur and recover its national pride. That illusion fast vanished. In the atmosphere of resentment that followed, the genocide seems to have been revenge against those seen as responsible for this situation. The Armenians became substitute enemies for the Great Powers and, by implication, the Christian peoples of the empire.

The Ottoman leaders used the Armenians to settle scores they could not settle elsewhere. That is why they insisted on presenting the new republic as a renaissance - or even an absolute beginning. Their leaders did not just purge this period of trauma by rewriting history and refashioning a new national identity. They also managed to blot out its memory and stifle any initiative that could impinge on this organised amnesia. This explains the susceptibility towards

anything that touches on the Armenian question. The Turks have not yet been able to construct an identity purged of the old trauma

The republic implicated

Links between the founding of the republic and the Armenian massacres have also done much to make the subject taboo. Leading figures connected to the republic have spoken publicly on the issue. A well-known member of the Ittihad ve Terakki party, Halil Mentese, said: "If we had not cleansed eastern Anatolia of the Armenian militia who collaborated with the Russians, the founding of our national republic would not have been possible" (4). At the republic's first National Assembly, speeches were made on the themes of: "We took the risk of being thought of as murderers to save the fatherland". Another assembly member said: "As you know, the question of the deportation was an event that provoked the reaction of the whole world and made us all seem like murderers. We knew, before we launched this action, that we would be subjected to the anger and hatred of the Christian world. Why did we allow our name to be mixed up with the opprobrium of a reputation of murderers? Why did we take on such a huge and difficult task? Because we had to do what was necessary to preserve the throne and future of our country, which in our eyes are more precious and sacred than our own lives."

With time, these words affirming with some courage that the republic had been founded on genocide were superseded by official history: anti-imperialism and respect for the Kuvay-i Milliye forces (the first resistance troops during the war of national independence) became the indispensable components of national identity. So the Kuvay-i Milliye spirit became a symbol of anti-imperialist identity for all the young generation of revolutionaries in Turkey in the 1960s.

Fear of seeing these certainties crumble is an important reason for the Turkey's refusal to debate the Armenian question. There would be a danger of destroying the usual models of representation used to explain Turkey and the world. A debate on the genocide would end up by showing that the state was not the product of an essentially anti-imperialist struggle, but rather of a war conducted against the Greek and Armenian minorities. It would also become clear that a significant number of the Kuvay-i Milliye soldiers, held up as heroes, had either directly taken part in the genocide or had profited from looting the Armenians.

Before the end of the first world war, plans for a retreat in Anatolia and for organising a national resistance had already been worked out in case of defeat. In 1918 these plans were put into action. The organisations behind the national resistance movement such as Mudafaa-i Hukuk (Society for the Defence of Rights) or Reddi Ilhak (Refusal of Division) were founded, either on the express orders of Talat Pasha, minister of interior from 1913-1917, or of Enver Pasha, minister of defence during the same period, or on the orders of the Commissariat (5) which they headed. These organisations were set up in particular in regions where there was a possible Greek or Armenian threat.

After the capitulation treaty signed with the British on 30 October 1918 in Mudros, Greece, the first five resistance committees were organised against the minorities: three against the Armenians and the other two against the Greeks. Their founders were members of the Ittihad ve Terakki party, some of whose officials were wanted by the British for having taken part in the genocide. The commissariat, among other tasks, had to hide them and find them shelter in Anatolia. It thus became a symbol of the interweaving of the genocide of the Armenians and the resistance in Anatolia.

Afraid of revenge

There was a second link between the emergent republic and the genocide. It came from the emergence of a class enriched as a result of the genocide, which came to constitute one of the social bases of the national movement. The leading families, or "notables", who had prospered from the looting, feared that the Armenians would return to take back their possessions and take revenge. That is what happened, in fact, in the Cukurova region, where the surviving Armenians returned with the occupation forces to take back what belonged to them. So the notables fell in with the national liberation movement, and even organised it in some places. Some of them were close to Mustafa Kemal himself: for example Topal Osman who later became commander of his personal guard. Measures passed by the old Constantinople (Istanbul) government on 8 January 1920 for the restitution of Armenian possessions were cancelled on 14 September 1922. The new government in Ankara (which became Turkey's capital in October 1923) realised the need to look after the interests of those who had contributed to the founding of the state.

There is also a third link between the genocide and the republic: some of the organisers and top officials of the first Kuvay-i Milliye brigades in the regions of the Marmara, Aegean and Black Seas were wanted for taking part in the massacres. In organising the resistance movement, Mustafa Kemal had been actively helped by members of the Ittihad ve Terakki party wanted for crimes against the Armenians. They were later given the highest positions.

Sukru Kaya, minister of the interior and secretary general of the People's Republican Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP) founded by Mustafa Kemal, was in charge of settling immigrant and nomadic populations at the time of the "deportation". This position made him officially responsible for organising the deportation. The German consuls present recorded Sukru Kaya's words: "We must exterminate the Armenian race".

Mustafa Abdulhalik Renda was prefect of Bitlis, then of Aleppo, during the massacres. The German consul Rössler describes him as someone "relentlessly taken up with the destruction of Armenians". Vehip Pasha, commander of the 3rd army, explained in the account he wrote in 1919 how, during the war (after February 1916) Renda had had thousands of men burned alive in the region of Mus. He later became a minister and president of the National Assembly.

Arif Fevzi, detained in Malta (prisoner number 2743) for having directly organised the Diyarbekir massacres, became a minister from 1922 to 1923. Ali Cenani Bey (prisoner number 2805), who profited materially from the genocide, was minister of trade from 1924 to 1926. Trustu Aras, a member of the sanitary commission in charge of burying Armenians who had been killed, later held high positions in Ankara: he was foreign minister from 1925 to 1938.

Thus Mustafa Kemal used people from the Ittihad ve Terakki party wanted for crimes against the Armenians and Greeks, as well as notables who joined the resistance for fear of revenge by these two minorities, to conduct the war of national independence. For the wanted party members, in particular those from the Special Organisation which actually committed the massacres, joining the war of independence was a matter of survival. Their choice was between surrendering and receiving heavy sentences, even execution, or joining and organising the resistance. Falih Rifki Atay, a close friend of Mustafa Kemal, summed up the situation: "When, at the end of the war, the British and their allies decided to ask for explanations from Ittihad ve Terakki party officials for the massacre of the Armenians, all those who could be in trouble took up arms and joined the resistance" (6).

All this makes it easier to understand why the genocide became a taboo subject. Admitting that there were thieves and murderers among those heroes who saved the country would, most certainly, have had a shattering effect. Negation is an easier path for those who fear shaking the Turks' belief in the republic and national identity. But there is a third option: in the name of democratic values, the country could distance itself from its past.

Notes

- (1) See Akit, Istanbul, 12 February 2001.
- (2) Part of the Young Turks movement, founded in 1908.
- (3) Ernest Renan (1823-1892), "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?", conference at the Sorbonne, Paris, 11 March 1882.
- (4) Statement reported by historian Yusuf Hikmet Bayur, *Türk Inkilabi Tarihi* (History of the Turkish revolution), vol II, chapter IV, Turkish Institute of History, Ankara, 1988.
- (5) The job of the commissariat was to organise the resistance and help those wanted for murder of the Armenians to escape.
- (6) Falih Rifky Atay, *Cankaya, Atatürk'ün Doğumundan Ölümüne Kadar* (Cankaya, From Atatürk's birth to his death), Istanbul, 1980.

Translated by Wendy Kristianasen
