

Conflicts

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Workshop: Turks and Armenians, 1915 and After

The Use and Abuse of 1915 in Turkey's Context

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1915: What It Was; Regardless of Why It Started, Its Name, etc.

«1915» is notorious as it symbolizes the annihilation of the most important civilization of Anatolia (Ottoman Empire) that year:

- Approx. 2.500 churches: Only 6 left in Anatolia today.
- 451 monasteries: None is left in Anatolia today.
- 1.996 schools, 173.000 students: None is left in Anatolia today.
- In Harput valley (eastern Anatolia) where 92 Armenian schools gave instruction to some 8.660 students, the first Armenian theater had opened in **1880**, and the first photograph studio in **1890**.
- Of over 1.5 million Ottoman Armenians only 55.000 are left today on the same piece of territory, all in Istanbul.

1915: Abused to Create Conflict or Used to Build Cohesion?

Of course, the bitter memory of 1915 is a matter of conflict between Turkey and Armenia and, far more strongly, between Turkey and Diaspora, but:

Peculiar enough for the uninitiated, this bitter souvenir was (and to some degree, is) used to create «**cohesion/friendship**»:

- Before a group of Turkish public intellectuals started the discussion about 1915: It was used for **total cohesion** within the Turkish society,
- After the discussion began: It is being used for **partial cohesion** encompassing the great majority of the Turkish population,
- After 2009: It's used to build **strong ties with Azerbaijan**, a Muslim-Turkic **nation-state** in hot conflict with Armenia.

The same cohesion-building (still better: identity-building) role of 1915 is particularly valid for the **Armenian Diaspora** today.

One can predict the weakening of this role if Turkey were to stop the denial.

Then, the Diaspora might even face natural assimilation in time because it is a small **Christian** minority living in **Christian** countries.

But I'll dwell on the Turkish case only.

1919-1922, and After

During the 1919-1922 Independence War against the Allied occupation, 1915 was successfully used to rally the Kurds behind the Ankara government. Because:

- The Kurds were Muslim, and the invaders were non-Muslim (still today in the Middle East and the Balkans, the pillar of **identity** is not language or ethnicity but **religion** and even **denomination**)
- Incomparably more important: Anatolian notables, Kurdish landlords in particular that had seized the immense properties left behind by the Armenians would have been compelled to return them if the Ankara government was defeated.

One very representative case:

- Three provinces in the southeast (Antep region) were occupied by British forces for 11 months (Dec. 1918-Nov. 1919) during which not a single bullet was fired by the local population against the invader,
- Armed resistance began when French forces took over: They contained an «Armenian Legion».

The same implicit/natural alliance was used thereafter to keep the Kurdish landlords from entering into conflict with the Kemalist State.

Two Turkey

I am considered as an expert on minorities in Turkey. But I learned about 1915 only after I turned 40. I can explain this as follows:

- The well-known Turkish eccentric and philosopher Celal the Bearded once said (about something else): «**This much ignorance can only be attained through education**». Public education in Turkey is very «successful» concerning the Kurdish, and particularly, the Armenian question,
- Concerning these questions, and especially the latter, Turkey can roughly be divided into two regions well into 1980s:
 - **East** of capital Ankara: This is where Anatolian Armenians lived. There, everybody knows about 1915.
 - **West** of capital Ankara: Nobody has ever heard of 1915. I am from Izmir, from the Westernmost end of this region.

The Turkish State, let alone using 1915 to provoke conflict, was very careful to hide it from everyone, to begin with its own citizens of course.

- The great majority of Turks have heard about 1915 only after ASALA started to murder Turkish diplomats (1973-1984),
- It's much like the Kurdish case: Turks have started to learn about the Kurdish Question only after PKK started to attack military garrisons in 1984.

Beginning of the Discussion in Turkey (1): The 90th Year Conference (2005)

2005: The first conference ever on Armenians: «Ottoman Armenians at the Close of the Empire: Problems of Scholarly Responsibility and Democracy»

Organized by a group of public intellectuals and supported by **Bosphorus**, **Sabancı**, and **Bilgi** universities in Istanbul it was scheduled for **May 25th** at the Bosphorus University.

It had to be postponed due to a series of heavy threats, during which the Justice Minister Cemil Çiçek said: «We've been stabbed in the back».

The new date was set for **September 23rd** but following a complaint by an association of nationalist lawyers an Istanbul administrative court ordered the stay of execution of the Conference on the grounds that **the contents of the papers to be presented were unknown**. This decision had nothing to do with the concept of law:

- It interfered with academic freedoms,
- The Court has exceeded its competence because there was no administrative action to stay: The Conference was not organized by any university but by a group of citizens; the universities were providing the conference hall only,
- Sabancı and Bosphorus universities were not notified until 17.00 hours on the eve of the Conference (a Friday) so that no time for an appeal was allowed, although the decision had been written 4 days prior.

The said association of lawyers had no legal power to submit such a complaint because it lacked a legal interest in the case.

The Conference was finally held at **Bilgi Uni.** because the Court forgot to notify this university!

Turkish MFA, traditionally very rational compared to other State institutions, played a very positive role during the whole process.

The good news: After the Conference was held, a higher administrative court overrode the stay of execution decision, and the president of the Istanbul administrative court was demoted to simple judgeship.

The bad news: The bulk of the public opinion called the conference organizers **traitors to the nation**.

Beginning of the Controversy in Turkey (2): Apology From Armenians Campaign (2008)

On Dec. 14th, 2008 four public intellectuals opened for signature on the internet a campaign entitled «Özür Diliyorum» (I Apologize) :

«My conscience does not accept the insensitivity showed to and the denial of the Great Catastrophe that the Ottoman Armenians were subjected to in 1915. I reject this injustice and for my share, I empathize with the feelings and pain of my Armenian brothers and sisters. I apologize to them.»

Here, «Great Catastrophe» was the word-to-word translation of «Metz Yeghern» in Armenian, and this was fiercely criticized by both Armenian and Turkish nationalists.

Within a week over 30.000 signatures had been collected.

In reaction:

A tremendous public reaction began including insults and death threats,

A multitude of web sites were started: «I don't apologize!» and «I expect apology from the Armenians!»,

146 retired ambassadors published a declaration condemning the Campaign,

The good news: The Court of Cassation finally decided that the campaign would **not** be subject to prosecution

The bad news: Almost everybody called the conference organizers traitors to the nation.

www.ozurdiliyoruz.com

özür diliyorum Toplam Katılan Sayısı : 30166

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1915'te Osmanlı Ermenileri'nin maruz kaldığı Büyük Felâket'e duyarsız kalınmasını, bunun inkâr edilmesini vicdanım kabul etmiyor.
Bu adaletsizliği reddediyor, kendi payıma Ermeni kardeşlerimin duygu ve acılarını paylaşıyor, onlardan özür diliyorum.

Destekleyenler

Adilet Ağoğlu	Bilal Ermen	Fatmagül Bektaş	İsmail Cemil Şahin	Muhsin Güle	Sim Sakık
Adnan Elçigil	Bülent Sönmez	Faiz Hızır Erdem	İyıl Kasapoğlu	Nispet Tanrıoğlu	Süleyman Özal
Ahmet Borstar	Burhan Sarıtaşlar	Fahim Çiçek	Jülide Kural	Nurhan Tarcoğlu	Suavi Aydın
Ahmet Çakmak	Büyüce Ermanlı	Feray Balınan	Kadir Çangırbay	Nurhan Yentirlik	Sükrü Erbaş
Ahmet Çiğdem	Çağrı Kayseri	Ferda Balıncak	Kemal Bek	Ökan Dağı	Sükrühan Güncü
Ahmet Eren	Canan Tolon	Ferda Kestel	Kemal Söğütan Sarıca	Öktay Doğu	Sungur Sarıcan
Ahmet İnan	Çaldı Başoğlu	Ferhat Ferhat	Kemal Gökgöz	Ömer Faruk Çarçarlıoğlu	Süreyya A. Arslan
Ahmet İsmail	Özalp Hın Çan	Ferhat İnan	Kiçkin Hatuni	Ömer Lajine	Süreyya Berfe
Ahmet Kuşç	Çam Mansur	Ferdun Arıaç	Koray Güllüoğlu	Ömer Madra	Suzan Sarıcan
Ahmet Soyral	Çem Özdemir	Ferdun Yazıcı	Koray Çalıyıcı	Ömer Tapanar	Tahir Eki
Ali Kartal	Çem Yagül	Ferhat Çetin	Koray Düzgören	Orhan Çelebi	Tahsin Yeğliden
Alihan Bursalı	Çemil Köçak	Figen Bulut	Korhan Söğütan	Orhan Kemal Demirci	Tarhan Bara
Alihan Bora	Çengiz Akar	Fikret Adıgüzel	Kutluoğlu Arslan	Orhan Köpçak	Tarhan Erdem
Alihan Kuvşun	Çengiz Alihan	Fikret Başkaya	Kuvvet Lümbüzoğlu	Orhan Yılmazoğlu	Tarhan Ziya Elvanlı
Alihan Ebuzya	Çengiz Çanda	Fikret Başkaya	Lale Algin	Orhan Siler	Tarhan Ziya

From Rapprochement with Armenia to Azeri Patronage on Turkish Foreign Policy

After 2008, controversy about 1915 unevenly divided the Turkish public opinion between:

- those who have a **conscience** and want to learn about 1915; and
- those who have a nationalist **consciousness** and don't want to change their «knowledge».

President **Abdullah Gül**, encouraged by the Turkish MFA and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, started in 2008 a policy of friendship with Armenia through «football diplomacy». In April 2009 the two countries agreed to sign two very important protocols.

In reaction, Azerbaijan closed two Turkish mosques and announced a retroactive heavy price increase for the natural gas sold to Turkey. Later on, the Turkish flags at the Turkish cemetery in Baku were dismantled along with their flagpoles.

Prime Minister Erdoğan immediately went to Baku, spoke at the Azeri parliament and, in spite of the Turkish official policy that had asked for «a development in Karabagh» only, solemnly declared that Turkey would not open the Armenian border before Armenian occupation of Karabagh ended. **The protocols were killed at birth.** The reasons were:

- 1) Mr. Erdoğan is a politician with an Islamo-Turkish ideology. He had calculated that he was losing votes because of this «**Armenian Opening**», and that he could get the votes of the much larger nationalist group by approaching Azerbaijan, a Muslim country of Turkic ethnicity (this vote calculation and this Islamo-Turkish ideology was to bring the end of the «**Kurdish Opening**» in 2015 as well);
- 2) He did not like others than himself to take initiatives in domestic or foreign policies;
- 3) Turkey was getting Azeri oil and natural gas at reduced price.

Later, as a second condition to open the border, Mr. Erdoğan asked Armenia to stop seeking international recognition of the Armenian genocide. He also threatened in March 2010 to deport the illegal Armenian workers.

A strong wave of «Islam-Turkish Synthesis» was started under the auspices of the State :

- Anti-Armenian conference series began at public universities,
- Instances of «ordinary fascism» were displayed in the streets,
- Mr. Erdoğan ordered the Monument of Humanity (dedicated to Turkish-Armenian friendship) to be dismantled,
- Anti-Armenian demonstrations attended by cabinet ministers were organized.

«Ordinary Fascism»

2009, Eskişehir: «Jews and Armenians Cannot Enter» – «Free Entrance for Dogs»



«Ordinary Fascism»

2009, Kayseri: Handing Out of Halva for Hitler's Soul

(distribution of Halva –sweets- is an old tradition to memorialize the dead)



Kars, The Monument of Humanity dedicated to Turkish-Armenian Friendship
(declared «ucube» [freak] by Mr. Erdoğan and dismantled on June 2011)



Anti-Armenian Meeting at Taksim/Istanbul (Feb. 2012) to commemorate the Azeri massacre by Armenians at Khojaly (1992): «You Are All Armenians, You Are All Bastards»
Attended by the Minister of Interior, the Governor, and the Police Chief of Istanbul.



The New Name of the «Other» in Turkey: The Kurds

Armenian Question as the **focal point of cohesion-building** in Turkey has now given place to the **Kurdish Question**.

On his march towards a One Man rule, President Erdoğan has now a more profitable «Other» to build «national consciousness». In this he profits from PKK's strategic mistake to carry armed struggle to Kurdish cities, resulting in the destruction of these towns.

The new focal point permits Erdoğan to build an interesting
(and larger) coalition the **common denominator**
(to say the least,) strong **anti-Kurds**

- 1) Islamists & conservatives;
- 2) Turkish Armed Forces;
- 3) Intelligence Service (MIT);
- 4) MHP (extreme-right opposition party); and



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