

Clark University  
Strassler Family Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies

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## **Denialism and Civil Society in Turkey**

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### Two Subjects

- I) Civil Society in Turkey and its accomplishments concerning denialism,
- II) The causes of this denialism.

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## Civil Society and Denialism at the State and Popular Level

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## Taboo and Civil Society

- The question of minorities is the main taboo everywhere. The Armenian issue in particular, has always been the greatest of them all in Republican Turkey.
- Taboo: "An issue one cannot tackle without taking substantial risks, ranging from one's reputation to one's life."
- Civil Society in Turkey is a very recent phenomenon. Concerning the Armenian issue, it fights on two fronts:
  - Denialism at the State level,
  - Beliefs deeply rooted in Turkish society, and feeding State denialism.

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## Some Accomplishments-1

- An abundant amount of publications despite heavy pressures (esp. T. Akçam, R. Zarakolu, O. Köker)
- 2004 Minority Report. First and only official report describing the situation of minorities.
- 2005 Conference on Ottoman Armenians in spite of the Minister of Justice and the Administrative Court.
- Support for the activities of Agos.
- 2009: Commemoration of 24 April in Istanbul: "They have been deported, they don't even have a gravestone".
- Jan. 2007. Massive participation to Hrant's funeral: "We Are All Armenians".

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### Some Accomplishments - continued

- Strong reactions against cases of “street fascism” (popular racism):  
Jan. 2009, Eskişehir: “Jews & Armenians cannot enter; dogs can”



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### Some Accomplishments - continued

Feb. 2009, Kayseri: Sweets distributed for the soul of Hitler



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## Accomplishments – A Case Study: Apology Campaign (15 December 2008)

- Three university professors and one journalist + 350 public intellectuals:

“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”.

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www.ozurdiliyoruz.com

### özür diliyoruz

Toplam Katılan Sayısı : 30166

Text in other languages

Anasayfa | Katanlar | [Katılmak için tıklayın!](#)

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

Adalet Ağaçoğlu	Bülent Erkmen	Fatmagül Berktaş	İrvin Cemil Schick	Niüfer Göle	Sim Sakık
Adnan Eksigil	Bülent Somay	Fazıl Hüsnü Erdem	İşıl Kasapoğlu	Nimet Tannıkulu	Solü Özel
Ahmet Boratav	Burhan Şenataşlar	Fehim Çacul	Jülide Kural	Nuran Terzoğlu	Suani Aydın
Ahmet Çalkmak	Büşra Ensanlı	Feray Salman	Kadir Cangırbay	Nurhan Yentürk	Şükri Erbaş
Ahmet Çöğdem	Çağlar Kayder	Ferda Balancı	Kemal Birik	Olcan Dağı	Süleyman Gönçü
Ahmet Evin	Canan Tolon	Ferda Keskin	Kemal Gökhan Gürses	Öktay Özel	Sungur Savran
Ahmet İnel	Çelâl Başlangıç	Ferhat Kentel	Kemal Göktaş	Ömer Faruk Gergelioğlu	Süreyya A Antmen
Ahmet İsvan	Celalettin Can	Ferhat Tunç	Kezban Hatemi	Ömer Laçiner	Süreyya Berfe
Ahmet Kuyuş	Cem Mansur	Feridun Andaç	Komet Gürkan Coşkun	Ömer Madra	Suzan Samancı
Ahmet Soysal	Cem Özdemir	Feridun Yazar	Koray Çalıskan	Ömer Taspınar	Tahir Elçi
Akif Kurtuluş	Cem Yegül	Fethiye Çetin	Koray Düzgören	Oral Çalşar	Tahsin Yeşildere
Akın Birdal	Cemil Kocak	Figen Batır	Korhan Gümtüş	Orhan Kemal Cengiz	Tanül Bora
Aksu Bora	Cengiz Aktaş	Fikret Adanır	Kutluğ Ataman	Orhan Koçak	Tahsin Erdem
Alaz Kuseyri	Cengiz Alihan	Fikret Başkaya	Kuvvet Londoğlu	Orhan Miroğlu	Tank Ziya Elçinci
Alay Ebuzyia	Cengiz Çandar	Fikret İlkez	Lale Arğun	Orhan Siler	Temel İskit

## The Immediate Results

- Death threats to the four,
- Abundant insults (through emails, websites, articles...),
- Over 6500 bogus signatures sent from internet cafes to sabotage the Campaign (manually cleansed, still continuing),
- Innumerable cyber attacks that collapsed the site countless times.
- 7 service provider companies used, all from different countries.

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## Why This Declaration?

- Two main targets:
- 1) Accomplish a moral duty
  - This was imperative so that the Armenians could at last bury their dead with whom they have been living for almost a century now.
  - Those who have apologized were in no way responsible. But they did it anyway because:
    - 1) Those who should have done it did not seem to be willing at all,
    - 2) There is no such thing as “collective crime” but there is a notion called “collective conscience”
- 2) To finally get Turkey discuss the Armenian issue.  
This was perfectly fulfilled thanks to unbelievable protests against the Campaign.
- A third target no less important: To start in Turkey an era of recognition of other historical wrongs: Those concerning the Kurds, the Alevis, the other non-Muslims.  
Once you prove it is possible to touch the greatest taboo, the others will follow.

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## The Protests: Two Words

- Hell broke in the morning of 15 December 2008. Two terms:
  - 1) “Büyük Felaket” (Great Catastrophe / Metz Yeghern)
  - 2) “Özür diliyorum” (I apologize)
- Nationalist Turks:
  - Loathed the first term because they read it as “Genocide” (Nazi).
  - Loathed the second and said: “Armenians owe us an apology!”
- Radical diaspora Armenians:
  - Loathed the first term because they didn't read it as “Genocide”.
  - Belittled the second because they said they wanted an “Official Apology”.
- The Campaigners found themselves in a state of “neither Jesus nor Moses”: The right path.

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## Why “Great Catastrophe” (*Metz Yeghern*) ?

- 1) To avoid alienating the public opinion,
- 2) To alleviate the suffering of the Armenians:
  - This is the main Armenian term in international usage for the calamities of 1915 before “genocide” was invented in 1944 and codified in 1948,
  - This is the term in usage in the Republic of Armenia:  
This is the name of the Martyrs Monument in Yerevan: *Metz Yegherni Hushardzan* – The Monument of the Great Catastrophe.  
(*Tzidzernagabert* is the name of the mound – Citadel of the Swallows).
  - The Pope used *Metz Yeghern* in Yerevan in 2001 with no protests.
  - The Catholicos Karekin II used it in his address in Armenian (translated into English as “genocide”).

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## Why “I Apologize”?

- We know we could have easily tripled the number 30.000 signatures if we had omitted this last sentence and finished with: “I empathize with the feelings and pain of my Armenian brothers and sisters.”
- But we had to use it to reach our two targets.

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## Two Main “Theses” of the Protests in Turkey

- 1) “You must definitely be of Armenian origin”,
- 2) “If you are not, how much did they pay you?”.

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## Main Themes of the Protests

- “How dare you apologize in our name?” (Write & Read)
- “Nobody can call my grandfather a Nazi”
- “Why should I apologize for something that I didn’t do?” (nobody asked; collective conscience)
- “To apologize means we’ve committed genocide. Then will come demands for Reparations and Restitutions” (no legal implications)
- “You have compromised the national cause” (side effect)
- “This has nothing to do with Republican Turkey; it’s the Empire” (hide)
- “They killed us, too. They should apologize too” (situation II)
- “Who is going to apologize for millions of Muslims who had to flee from the Balkans in the same conditions?”
- “You now made us make all the concessions. Now the Armenians will discuss nothing” (contrary).

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## The Armenian Side Is No More Monolithic Either

### **It started with Hrant’s funeral**

- Jan. 08. Hos (Armenian) and Şimdi (Turkish) commemorated Hrant in Paris
- May 08. Serge Avedikian dedicated his documentary: “We drank from the same water” to Hrant
- July 08. My interview in Armenian Weekly
- Oct. 08. “Appel de Blois” against criminalizing the past through the legislative

### **It continued with the Campaign**

- Jan. 09. Jean Kehayan at *Liberation*: “Letter to My Turkish Friends”
- Jan. 09. Declaration of French Armenian intellectuals: “Merci”
- Jan. 09. Khatchig Mouradian, ed. of *Armenian Weekly*: “Apology campaign more important than Soccer Diplomacy”
- Jan. 09. Patrick Azadian of Glendale-Calif. “We are not all Hrant Dinks, unfortunately”
- Feb. 09. Aborted initiative of Armen Gakavian of Sydney-Australia
- Apr. 09. Pres. Sarkissian in his commemorial message: “We support Turkish intellectuals who fight for historical justice and who share our sorrow.”

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## The Outcome of the Campaign

- Over 30.000 signatures
- No judicial prosecutions, but protests from important officials and institutions, including:
  - The Prime Minister
  - Two major opposition parties
  - MFA
  - Speaker of the Parliament
  - Turkish Historical Society
  - 205 academics and several university boards, including Istanbul Uni.
  - No less than 11 sites opened to collect signatures: “I am not apologizing!” .

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## Causes of Denialism at the State and Popular Level

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## Two Main Causes

- 1) Siege Mentality
- 2) Complementary Factors Feeding Denialism.

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### 1) Siege Mentality: Socio-Psychological Medium

- Armenians have one concern: To have the term genocide accepted. Turks have at least four concerns: Kurdish, Cypriot, Armenian, Islam questions
- Reason: Since 1915 Turks have never sought to solve them.
- Present situation: Zombies coming out one after the other:  
1965-75: Cyprus → 1975-85: ASALA → 1985 PKK → 2002 AKP
- Result: Sevres Paranoia
  - Christian and imperialist West wants to divide us
  - Kurds will split our country
  - The Islamists will force our daughters to use the veil
  - Specific to Armenian issue: Armenians will take away our properties and lands
- Conclusion:
  - 1) The Turks are scared
  - 2) Total ignorance in W. Turkey, bloody stories of grandpas in the E.
  - 3) “Learned ignorance” in both (Celal the Bearded).

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## 2) Complementary Factors Feeding Denialism

- Crimes of ASALA + Actual refusal to admit them as crime
- The term “Western Armenia” used in the Declaration Concerning Independence of Armenia (1990), with a reference thereto in the Constitution
- Occupation of Karabakh and neighborhood
- The Continuum: Recognition, Reparation, Restitution (3 Rs)
- The G-word
  - People: Reaction to identification with the Nazis
  - Elites: Fear of subsequent 3 Rs.

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## My Opinion

- **To start with:**
  - Turkey should officially express deepest sympathy for the results of the Ottoman crime and should apologize for hiding it from her own people for almost a century,
  - As a gesture of goodwill, Turkey should symbolically indemnify the lost property,
  - Armenians should express sympathy for civilian Muslims killed before and after 1915.
- **To finish with:**

To reduce this historical conflict to a single word humiliates both peoples

  - One listens no more if the word is not pronounced, the other listens no more if it is pronounced
  - Every year they lock their eyes to the lips of the U.S. President
  - Two proud peoples have become slaves of the same sacrosanct word

The Diaspora is unintentionally crippling its child: Turkish internal dynamics led by Civil Society.

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