

Breaking the Nation's Taboo

The *Meds Yeghern* and Turkish Intellectuals

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An Apology Action

On December 12, 2008, a group of Turkish intellectuals launched an internet campaign to apologize for the World War I-era slaughter of Armenians in Turkey. Significantly, the "apology campaign" did not employ the highly disputed term "genocide" (*soykırım*), opting instead for a Turkish translation of the term commonly used in the Armenian language, the "Great Catastrophe" (*Meds Yeghern* or, in Turkish, *Büyük Felaket*). Signatories to the apology declared:

My conscience does not accept the insensitivity [shown in] 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.

By July 26, 2009, more than 30,000 members of the Turkish public had signed the online apology. As journalist Suzan Fraser noted, the apology campaign appeared to be "a sign that many in Turkey are ready to break a long-held taboo against acknowledging Turkish culpability for the deaths." At the same time, many in Turkey criticized the campaign; a group of nearly 60 retired diplomats called it "unfair, wrong, and unfavorable to [Turkey's] national interests."

In Turkish intellectual circles and society as a whole, a fierce intellectual struggle has begun, and a schism is now developing with regard to the treatment of the Armenian genocide. The predominant group, which corresponds to the political right wing, uses the Turkish term "deportation" (*tehcir*), a publicly acceptable concept, for the 1915 events.

Representing this view, the Turkish Historical Society insists on a particular account

of the events. First, there were ethnic cleansings during World War I, in which 450,000 Armenians perished, largely as a result of illness contracted during the deportation. Second, these victims were not shot in an organized manner, nor did they all die at once. Third, the persecution was not centrally coordinated, refuting allegations that it was a policy organized and executed by the Turkish government. Finally, killings took place on both the Turkish and Armenian sides, and, therefore, cannot be considered genocide. By comparing Turkish social realities in 1915-23 with the practices of the Third Reich, Turkish historians have concluded that the two tragedies simply do not represent the same phenomenon.

Perhaps as a sign that a post-national narrative of Turkey's history is developing, a group of Turkish scholars have come to represent another branch of critically thinking Turkish intellectuals – the so-called “critical left wing.” One of the pioneers of critical discourse is Taner Akçam, the first Turkish historian to openly study the Armenian genocide. In Akçam's view, according to Elizabeth Kolbert of the *New Yorker*, “the key to understanding the Turks' refusal to discuss [the events] of 1915” is the linkage between those events and Turkey's formative nation-building process from 1920 to 1923. Kolbert explains that the Armenian genocide was:

a campaign of ethnic cleansing [that] changed the demographics of eastern Anatolia....For the Turks to acknowledge the genocide would thus mean admitting that their country was founded by war criminals and that its existence depended on their crimes. This, in Akçam's words, ‘would call into question the state's very identity.’

“What the World Knows and Turkey Does Not”

In 2005, three Turkish universities cosponsored a conference entitled “Ottoman Armenians during the Decline of the Empire: Issues of Scientific Responsibility and Democracy.” The conference, which was open only to Turkish scholars, was the first in Turkey to address the issue of the Armenian genocide. Ninety years after the tragic events of 1915, the participants, Turkey's own academics and intellectuals, were ready “to collectively raise their voices [which] differ from...the official [state version of history], and put forth their own contributions.”

The conference, however, was postponed due to government pressure. As Suzan Fraser noted, the postponement may have been an indication that Turkey was not yet “ready to tolerate dissenting voices on sensitive subjects.” It might also have been considered a blow “to Turkey's efforts to join the European Union, which is pressuring the country to adopt greater freedoms.” The conference was criticized by Turkish officials such as then-Justice Minister Cemil Cicek, who said it “went against government efforts to counter [the] Armenian campaign to have the killings recognized as genocide.” He went as far as to call the organizers of the conference “traitors” and the conference itself a “stab in the back to the Turkish nation” in a session of the Turkish parliament.

Though the conference was ultimately held at a private university amid rowdy protests, it prompted the creation of Article 301, which made it illegal to denigrate Turkey, “Turkishness,” or Turkish state institutions. Author Orhan Pamuk was charged

under this new law after a February 2005 interview with a Swiss newspaper in which he said, “30,000 Kurds and a million Armenians were killed in these lands and nobody but me dares to talk about it.” The target of a hate campaign, Pamuk temporarily left Turkey, although the charges were subsequently dropped. Many Turks believe Pamuk was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2006 for political reasons.

Pamuk was only one of some 60 writers and publishers to face such charges in 2005. Another Turkish author, Elif Safak, ran into trouble after a character in her novel *The Bastard of Istanbul*, declared that her grandparents had “lost all their relatives at the hands of Turkish butchers in 1915, but she herself had been brainwashed to deny the genocide.” As Kolbert writes, the charges were eventually dropped after Safak successfully argued that a “statement by a fictional person could not be used to prosecute a real one.”

Turkey’s efforts to join the European Union have increased the attention of external observers to problems of ethnic minorities’ rights, cultural diversity, political Islam, and freedom of expression in Turkey. The charges against Pamuk elicited an international reaction and led many to question Turkey’s readiness to join the EU. Camiel Eurlings, one of five members of the European Parliament who observed Pamuk’s trial, remarked:

Freedom of expression is one of the fundamental rights Turkey has to respect. This is essential for Turkey’s accession to the EU. The cases as filed against Orhan Pamuk, Hrant Dink, [and] Ragıp Zarakolu [among others] are not in line with the European Convention on Human Rights and could have a negative effect on Turkey’s accession process.

That said, EU membership no longer holds the same appeal in Turkish society as it once did. According to the *Journal of Turkish Weekly*, just 52 percent of Turks support EU membership. For many Turks that oppose membership, especially among nationalist, conservative/traditionalist, and political Islamist circles, denying the Armenian genocide serves an eminently practical political purpose – helping prevent Turkey from ever becoming a serious candidate for EU membership.

The January 2007 assassination by an ultranationalist Turkish youth of Turkish-Armenian newspaper editor Hrant Dink, a vocal advocate of Turkish-Armenian dialogue, proved a turning point in the freedom of expression in Turkey. At his funeral, tens of thousands of mourners marched through Istanbul to condemn the assassination, chanting, “We are all Armenians” and “We are all Hrant Dink.” A series of workshops were launched by Sabanci University in 2008 and 2009 in memory of Dink. After his murder, criticism of Article 301 increased substantially, leading to parliamentary proposals for its repeal.

The end of the taboo against discussion of the Armenian tragedy has led to unprecedented turbulence in Turkish society and an avalanche of admissions that many contemporary Turks are actually closely related to Armenians. Many more have admitted that their great-grandmothers were Armenians who secretly married Turkish or Kurdish men and converted to Islam after 1915. This subject has lent extreme gender sensitivity to the discourse about the genocide. Confessions have poured out in

autobiographical novels recounting the lives and confessions of grandmothers and great-grandmothers.

An Armenian Response

Marginalization and isolation, largely products of the post-Soviet transition, have contributed to a continuously growing identity of victimization in Armenia. Among Armenians, a fierce debate rages about the legitimacy of Turkey's preconditions for reconciliation. After a year of pronouncements anticipating an improvement in Armenian-Turkish relations, some Armenian analysts believed that the two countries' efforts at so-called "soccer diplomacy" had "stalled." This seemed especially true, according to an analyst for the *EurasiaNet* website, after Ankara "expressed its intent to link the reopening of its border with Armenia [to] a comprehensive solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict." Yerevan, for its part, has asserted, as a reporter for *ArmeniaNow* put it, that "Armenian-Turkish rapprochement must take place without preconditions and should not be linked [to] either the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict" or the campaign for genocide recognition.

In this context, the reaction to the Turkish "apology" initiative in Armenia, Nagorno-Karabagh, and the diaspora has been ambivalent. On the one hand, Armenians of all classes and social strata have recognized and are grateful for what they have been waiting 90 years to receive; on the other hand, Armenians continue to feel vulnerable thanks to the "preconditions" Turkish politicians have established for opening the Armenian-Turkish border.

The Armenian intellectual critique of the apology campaign has been articulated the best by Laurent Leyeikian, executive director of the European Armenian Federation (Armenian National Committee of Europe), in a May 2009 speech published in the *Armenian Reporter*. Critiquing both Turkish intellectuals and Kemalism as a social phenomenon, Leyeikian notes a wide range of anti-Kemalist intellectuals in Turkey, some of whom "oppose the Turkish state system" while others "simply want to improve its image." Regardless of where they stand, Leyeikian says that most of these Turkish intellectuals share the political priorities of the ruling AK Party: support for Turkey's European Union membership; support for institutional reforms (democracy and the rule of law); and respect for human rights and minorities.

At the same time, Leyeikian observes that even Turkish intellectuals critical of Kemalism still share "the national goal of getting rid of unwelcome questions or at least their political significance." They approach the Armenian genocide less as a "political crime in need of an international legal response" than as something that should be dealt with "solely within the Turkish nation and in a way that will be painless for [it]."

Leyeikian outlines five methods Turkish intellectuals employ for this purpose. He calls these methods a discourse of humiliation and strategies of containment, formal empathy, rejecting of extremes, and deprivation. A discourse of humiliation "plays upon the Europeans' guilty conscience toward the Muslim world" and implies that the focus on genocide recognition is a convenient cover for the West's shabby treatment of Turkey. The strategy of containment seeks to frame the issue of genocide solely within the confines of academic discourse. Strategies of formal empathy and the rejection of

extremes seek to establish that Armenians and Turks all suffered together and that all manifestations of extremism should be rejected equally. Finally, the strategy of deprivation seeks to keep Armenians themselves out of the Turkish debate about genocide. Leylekian concludes by saying that he really sees only two preconditions to dialogue: recognition of the genocide, “not only as a historical fact but also as a political problem today,” and the “acceptance of the political, legal, and moral responsibility of the present Turkish state” as the successor to the one responsible for the genocide.

In the end, unfortunately, the discourse among nationalist circles in Turkey and Armenia is essentialist and one-dimensional. For Turks and Armenians both, the Armenian genocide (“catastrophe” or “tragedy”) is directly connected to fundamental questions of collective identity. In Turkey, this fact combines with complex processes involving a desperate battle between the ruling Islamists, who are eager to join Europe and attempting to overcome their problems with neighboring countries, and the military-patriotic establishment. For Armenians, the Karabagh war and its consequences of isolation and dependence represent a kind of continuation to genocide, a perception which is reaffirmed by Turkey’s biased defense of Azerbaijani interests in the reconciliation process. Whatever victory Armenians have obtained in Karabagh represents a resolution to this victimization complex, making Turkish preconditions to normalization appear nonsensical and pushing Armenians to be suspicious of the apology movement altogether. In the end, symbolic values and traumatic memories continue to exert a pull on both state policy and social relations.

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