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5

ARMENIAN DEPORTATIONS AND MASSACRES IN 1915

FIKRET ADANIR

Why did the Armenian tragedy occur in 1915? Why is it viewed by many in the West as the first genocide of the 20th century, whereas the prevailing opinion in Turkey is that it resulted from legitimate state action in dire necessity against a rebellious people? An answer to these questions necessitates the clarification of further questions regarding the general conditions of the period, the nature of the Turkish–Armenian conflict, as well

as the specific goals pursued by the actors chiefly involved.

Obviously, such an analysis should begin with a brief description of the place the Armenian community occupied within late Ottoman society. Armenians lived dispersed over a large territory partly within the Ottoman realm, and partly in the neighboring Russian and Persian Empires. Compact Armenian peasant populations could be found in the eastern and southeastern provinces of present-day Turkey. Moreover, substantial Armenian communities existed in urban centers such as Istanbul, Izmir, Bursa, and Adana. These groups were engaged mostly in handicraft production but also included merchants, commissioners for European companies, and bankers, as well as members of liberal professions such as physicians, lawyers, architects, and the like (Atamian, 1955).

The Armenian population within the Ottoman Empire was traditionally organized, just like other non-Muslim groups, in an autonomous religious community, called in the Ottoman context a millet (for further information on the millet system, see Braude & Lewis, 1982). This was a system that left not only the civil affairs of the Armenian community to be settled by its own institutions under the leadership of the Armenian patriarch of Istanbul, but also the developments within the cultural sphere, such as the education of children, fell under Armenian communal responsibility. In the course of the 19th century, significant changes occurred affecting the individual's civic status in society. Within the framework of a comprehensive

program of reforms, the non-Muslim populations were granted legal equality with Muslims, including equal access to public office. Under these conditions, non-Muslim professional and commercial elites could secure by the last quarter of the century a predominant position in the socioeconomic life of

the empire.

Conversely, the Muslim element became more and more concerned about their diminishing influence; in Istanbul, for example, where the Muslims represented the majority, they controlled only 25% of the retail trade, 15% of the wholesale business, and a negligible 3% of the transport companies. More interestingly, the non-Muslim elites of the period—and among these the most prominent the Armenians-also dominated Ottoman cultural life. Of the 47 newspapers and journals published in Istanbul in 1876, only 13-including official publications-were in Turkish; 9 newspapers appeared in Armenian. Of some 90 printing houses in the Ottoman capital at the end of the 19th century, only 23 were owned by Muslims, but 32 by Armenians. Also modern theatre and opera were introduced to the Turkishspeaking public by Armenian artists (Adanir, 1998).

EMERGENCE OF THE ARMENIAN QUESTION

In view of this successful integration, at least of the upper layers of the Armenian population in the Ottoman social fabric and of the growing Muslim awareness of their own inferiority, the question as to why and how it came to a shift toward a catastrophic development in Turkish-Armenian relations starting in the 1880s deserves careful consideration. A decisive factor was the upsurge of ethnic nationalism during the second half of the 19th century. The European romantic idea that a Volk was an organic community of shared destiny, a community, as it were, with a collective soul articulating itself through the medium of language, had become the focus of interest for educated circles in the Ottoman Empire as well. Intellectual energies were concentrated upon promoting "national awakening." Uprisings and guerrilla activity in the Balkans and especially the developments subsequent to the Ottoman defeat in the war with Russia in 1877-1878 were heavy blows to the fraternal union of Ottoman peoples, the slogan of the reform era. Hundreds of thousands of Muslims fleeing from the Russian armies or, later on, expelled by Christian successor states sought refuge in the empire (Dumont, 1980; Karpat, 1990; McCarthy, 1996; Turgay, 1991).

Impressed by these developments, Sultan Abdulhamid II (1876–1909) elaborated a new approach to the questions of Ottoman reform. He no longer stressed the idea of a multireligious and multicultural empire but instead the solidarity among his Muslim subjects as the basis for political ity ns, ast coffee of ned lusade, ipaong cul-376, pers pital 2 by

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loyalty. Parallel to this change of mood, a new concern about Islamization and/or Turkification of the empire could be discerned, which was reflected not least in efforts to shape the geographic pattern of settlement of Muslim refugees arriving in Asia Minor. Actually the sultan demanded nothing less than a reversal of the demographic balance, especially in strategically important areas, such as Thrace, the districts in the vicinity of the Straits, and from the 1880s on, also in the eastern and southeastern provinces of Anatolia. The problem of the refugees thus became a hotly disputed issue of nationalist politics.

A similar development directly affecting the sociopolitical fabric of the countryside was the sedentation of tribes, initiated already in the 1840s. A growing number of tribesmen occupied lands traditionally considered by Armenian villagers to be theirs. Local courts were unable to settle the conflicts, not least because it had always been imperial policy to turn the unruly tribesmen into taxpaying agriculturists. But also the fact that toward the end of the century a Cossack-type Kurdish militia was established, ostensibly to be used against the Russian enemy but in reality with the potential to exercise pressure upon the local population, and made the situation of the Armenians in the east more precarious (Deringil, 1998; Duguid, 1973; van Bruinessen, 1978).

The beginnings of Armenian revolutionary activity can be traced back to 1885, when local initiatives in the province of Van were coordinated in a resistance movement against Kurdish tribesmen (Nalbandian, 1963, p. 100). A more radical approach was taken by the Hunchakian Revolutionary Party that was founded in 1887 by Armenian students in Geneva. It propagated the need for the destruction of the Ottoman State by means of revolution; whatever the cost, the political and national independence of Turkish Armenia was to be achieved (Nalbandian, 1963, pp. 108–111).

The Hunchak Party viewed terror as a legitimate weapon. Terrorist actions would provoke retaliation by the Ottoman State and/or the Muslim population and thus induce the European powers to intervene on behalf of Armenian interests. Several spectacular actions were carried out, and rebellions instigated by the Hunchakist Armenian revolutionaries during the decade from 1887 to 1897 turned Ottoman urban centers as well as parts of the Anatolian countryside into a virtual battleground. More often than not the suppression of these activities was accompanied by large-scale massacres, because in many places the local Muslim irregulars participated in suppression campaigns and took revenge. It was the period when the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire appeared imminent, with the sultan insisting on his right to protect the territorial integrity of his realm. Among the liberal statesmen of Europe, however, the opinion was widespread that "every breach in the integrity of the Ottoman Empire was so much gain for mankind" (Langer, 1950, p. 360).

The most important Armenian political organization was founded in 1890 in Tiflis; it was called "Dashnaksuthiun" or "The Armenian Revolutionary Federation." The Federation aimed at uniting all Armenians within a single independent state, in other words, not only the Ottoman Armenians were to be liberated, but also those living in the Russian Empire (Nalbandian, 1963, p. 156). Another important difference from other Armenian organizations was that the Federation's program stressed the need for reconciliation with the Muslim populations who represented the majority in the prospective Armenian territory. The party made considerable efforts to persuade Kurdish opinion to take joint political action against the Ottoman State. This pragmatic approach to the national question in the Ottoman and Russian Empires explains also why the Dashnaksuthiun eventually found itself ready to cooperate with the "Young Turk Party of Union and Progress" (usually just called "the Young Turks").

Who were the Young Turks? By this term we understand an oppositional movement that had developed after the 1890s as an expression of the deep frustration and embitterment felt by Ottoman intellectuals. Politically, it was a desperate effort to halt the dissolution of the Ottoman State by means of a reconciliation of disparate nationalist strivings within the framework of a bureaucratically controlled constitutional regime. In their political thinking, most Young Turks were influenced by the positivism of Auguste Comte, as well as by social Darwinist ideas of the period. The positivist motto "l'ordre et progrès" found its way even into the title of the leading Young Turk organization, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP). Under the influence of the positivists, the Young Turks had a mechanical concept of society. The solution to the basic problem of the Ottoman State, its backwardness, was to be sought in the establishment of a "scientific" form of government. The religious conservatism of the masses appeared in this perspective as an obstacle to such progress. A complementary influence in this regard emanated from Gustave Le Bon; consequently, the Young Turks believed that progress was to be expected only from the guidance by a select few-an elitist worldview that characterized their mentality well into the 20th century (Hanioğlu, 1995; Mardin, 1983).

The "Revolution" of 1908 was the result of an effective cooperation between the Young Turk movement and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation. Both groups were united in their aversion to the Islamist regime of the sultan. In their common program, which is a remarkable document of political compromise, the following points deserve attention: (a) The CUP promised, among others, to alleviate the distress of the Armenian peasantry, and, in a concrete fashion, the Young Turks pledged to return lands appropriated by Kurdish tribesmen; (b) as for the Armenian Federation, it pledged loyalty to the Ottoman Constitution and thus promised implicitly that it

would no longer appeal to Europe for intervention on behalf of the Armenian national cause (Ahmad, 1982, pp. 401–434; Kansu, 1997, pp. 61–66, 78–81).

However, the liberal atmosphere of 1908 did not last long. Secessionist aspirations, especially in the Balkans, put their mark on politics. The government resorted to authoritarian measures, suppressing civic liberties, and even manipulated elections. Protracted uprisings in Albania and Yemen starting in 1910 undermined the trust in the future of the multiethnic empire further. Politically discredited and socially alienated from the masses, the CUP was totally deprived of its political influence by the time of the Italian invasion of Ottoman Tripoli (Libya) in 1911. It was the military debacle of the Balkan War of the following year, which resulted in the loss of practically all of "European Turkey," that signaled a new chance for the Young Turk cadres to seize power in Istanbul. In early 1913 the CUP staged a coup d'état, introducing a single-party dictatorship that was to last until 1918.

POLITICS OF CONFRONTATION

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The Balkan Wars of 1912-1913 serve as a watershed in the development of the Young Turk-Armenian relations. Two shifts of policy seem significant in this regard. The first shift can be observed in the new approach of the CUP to the national question. Faced with a new wave of Muslim refugees from the Balkans, most Young Turks abandoned their Ottomanist egalitarian attitude and began to instrumentalize Muslim grievances in a campaign of defamation against non-Muslim populations. Thus, already in the first half of 1914 about 100,000 citizens of the Kingdom of Greece as well as Greek-Orthodox Ottoman subjects were compelled to leave Western Anatolia. Once World War I broke out, the deportation of Greek-Orthodox Ottomans continued, this time to places in the Anatolian interior (see Adanir, in press). The second shift occurred within the Armenian camp. In view of the catastrophic Ottoman defeat in the Balkan War as well as the fact that some Young Turk promises such as the one regarding the Armenian land issue had not materialized, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation decided to put the solution of the Armenian Question once again into the hands of the Great Powers (Hovannisian, 1967, pp. 30–32).

These changes led to a severe crisis in the Young Turk–Armenian relations in 1913 and 1914 when, upon a renewed great power intervention, the issue of the autonomy for the "Armenian provinces" became the subject of diplomatic bargaining. The Armenian insistence that only the sedentary population should be granted civil rights in the prospective autonomous region—a demand the fulfillment of which would have amounted in the CUP perspective to an unwarranted affront to the largely nomadic Kurds—

was the core of the dispute. The Armenians also wanted to keep the Muslim refugees out of the future autonomous province (Hovannisian, 1967, p. 33).

Already in December 1913, Djemal Pasha, the third man in the CUP leadership, warned his former Armenian colleagues that if they persisted in trying to get their way with the help of the Great Powers, "the Moslem population . . . will rise in arms, and three hundred to four hundred thousand Armenians will be massacred" (cited in Garo, 1990, p. 184), as was recorded in the memoirs of Garo Pasdermadjian, a member of the Ottoman parliament and the leader of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation in the Ottoman Empire. At the end of June 1914 the same Garo Pasdermadjian quarreled with the future Grand Vizier, Talat Pasha. Again the issue was the political rights of the nomadic Kurds. The Armenian leader shouted the following at Talat:

Our national consciousness is so far advanced that we will prefer to demolish this great edifice called the Ottoman Empire, rather than permit you to see Armenia without Armenians. I know we shall remain under these ruins and suffer heavy losses. But in the last analysis, we shall emerge better off than you will We are the Armenian revolutionaries of yesteryear and we tell you what we have always said: We will not permit you to drive our working people out of our ancient land, for the benefit of nomadic Kurds. (cited in Garo, 1990, p. 191)

On the eve of the World War I, Armenian autonomy within the Ottoman Empire had become a reality; two European Christians were appointed as governor generals of the eastern provinces. But the internationalization of the Armenian Question boded ill for the future. The political leaders of the Armenian millet (the Patriarch, the Armenian communal assembly in Istanbul, the Armenian representatives in the Ottoman Parliament) were well aware of the gravity of the situation. Only a few weeks before the arrest of Armenian political leaders (April 24, 1915), Enver Pasha asked the Armenian Patriarch in a letter to use his influence with the nationalist leaders, so that these would show more moderation in such a critical time, as the Ottoman eastern front had collapsed, and the Entente navies were about to force their way into the Straits. According to what a close collaborator of the Patriarch reports, the matter was discussed in the Armenian communal assembly. But the majority disregarded the advice of the Patriarch and decided not to heed Enver Pasha's warnings of moderation. The prevailing mood was that the Armenian leaders could not afford losing favor with the Entente powers, whose entry into Constantinople was deemed a matter of a few weeks (Kévorkian, 1995, p. 286).

POLITICS OF "NATIONAL ECONOMY"

This catastrophic development should be seen against the background of Young Turk determination to replace the non-Muslim commercial groups with a Turkish national bourgeoisie, according to a policy inspired by the "national economy" of Friedrich List (see Ahmad, 1980, pp. 329–350; Alp, 1915; Landau, 1986, pp. 94–103). As early as 1904 a Turkish author, Akçura (see Akçura, 1981), had argued that Ottomanism as a viable policy had failed and that the future belonged to nationalism based on ethnic identity. Just as all other societies were involved in a "ceaseless conflict," the Turks too should aspire to increase their power even if this was detrimental to other groups (see also Georgeon, 1980, p. 21).

Such Darwinist perception of social relations became characteristic of mainstream Young Turk thinking, especially during World War I. It explains how a set of administrative measures could be elaborated as a comprehensive plan with a view to precipitating the Turkification of economic life: the compulsory use of Turkish as the language of business; a state-sponsored cooperative movement that worked against the non-Muslim merchant classes, state intervention in foreign trade, in currency transactions, in banking, and mass deportation of populations (see Göçek, 1996, pp. 108–116; Keyder, 1987, pp. 71–90; Toprak, 1982).

Thus in 1917, when the deportation of Armenians was an accomplished fact, Akçura expressed the view that

just as the Jews and Germans constituted the bourgeoisie in Poland, in Turkey it was the native Jews, Greeks, and Armenians who were the agents and middlemen of European capitalism If the Turks fail[ed] to produce among themselves a bourgeois class. . . the chances of survival of a Turkish society composed only of peasants and officials [would] be very slim. (Akçura & Yurdu, cited in Berkes, 1964, p. 426)

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However, we discern an equally Darwinist line of reasoning on the Armenian side as well. In the same year, 1917, Boghos Nubar Pasha, acting as the representative of Armenian national interests, demanded in a memorandum to the French government the creation of an Armenian state that should comprise the whole territory from the Caucasus to the Mediterranean. He justified this rather extravagant claim by using arguments that reflected the general intellectual, moral, and cultural climate of the era: Bogos Nubar pointed out that, before World War I, 2.1 million Armenians lived in the Ottoman Empire. Even though a relatively small minority (about 10% of the total population), the Armenians controlled 60% of the import business, 40% of the exports, and over 80% of the domestic trade. Hence one should not, he urged the French, be blinded by the quantitative aspect of population

statistics but must rather recognize the "economic and moral" significance of the Armenian element (Beylerian, 1983, pp. 358–361).

THE ARMENIAN TRAGEDY IN RETROSPECT

The CUP decision to deport the Armenian population of Anatolia (Istanbul and Izmir being the only exceptions) was taken, to quote an American historian of Armenian background, "in desperation and panic. Not only were the Russians advancing in the east and the British and French navies threatening the capital, but the Armenians in Van had risen in revolt" (Suny, 1983, p. 16). As we have seen, there was also an ideological motivation behind that decision, as the Young Turk leadership was determined to preserve a territorial basis for the future Turkish nation-state. Muslim populations of Anatolia, in turn, feared expulsion; they could not help but be aware of the example of other Muslims who had been evicted from their Balkan or Caucasian homelands. In these circumstances, the CUP could rely on effective popular support, and consequently the deportation of the Armenians into the southern provinces of the empire was carried out under very hostile conditions. The deportees were plundered by local officials or antagonistic neighbors, were murdered by secret "Special Organization" agents, were attacked by bands of army deserters, or they fell victim to epidemic diseases. About half of the population deported perished on the way.1

What happened in 1915 is considered in retrospect as genocide. However, scholarly opinion is divided over the question of whether there was a premeditated plan to exterminate the Ottoman Armenians. The majority maintains that there was such a plan and that the genocide resulted primarily from racial and religious persecution of the Armenians by the Muslim Turks. If true, this would make the Armenian case appear quite similar to that of European Jewry under the Third Reich (see Dadrian, 1988b; Melson, 1992). A minority, however, is of the opinion that "the Genocide was, rather, a contingent event, initiated at a moment of imperial near-collapse," and that the catastrophe of 1915 "could be understood in the context of imperial decline, a fundamental re-conceptualization of the nature of the state along more nationalist and Pan-Turkish lines, and the radicalization of Young Turk policies in the fierce context of the First World War" (Suny, 1998, pp. 17–18; see also Dadrian, 1998a).

¹Bogos Nubarian wrote in 1917, "Malgré le grand nombre des victimes des massacres et déportations, la majeure partie des Arméniens a pu s'échapper ou survivre à l'oeuvre d'extermination" [Despite the great number of the victims of the massacres and deportations, the majority of the Armenians managed to escape or survive the work of extermination.] (cited in Beylerian, 1983, p. 361).

The view taken in this chapter is obviously closer to this second interpretation. Looking at the matter from a historical angle, I have tried to focus on the progressive character of the development of Turkish–Armenian relations during the late Ottoman period. For those who espouse rather a postmodernist discourse, for those who consider history primarily the culture of remembrance whereby "memory has priority over what is remembered" (Ankersmit, 1989, p. 152), the approach of this chapter might seem inadequate.

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