

# THE PAST AS A PRISON, THE PAST AS A DIFFERENT FUTURE

*The essay explores some of the socio-political realities underlying one of the most difficult historiographic problems of the twentieth century, the opposing views on the treatment of Armenians in the waning years of the Ottoman Empire. The author considers the politics of Genocide recognition and denial to entrenched social and political structures, tracing it to a battle of identities. The author argues that identities are dynamic phenomena; pointing to recent changes in the Turkish and Armenian environments and to a new level of a dialogue, he finds reason to hope that Turkish-Armenian relations may still improve.*

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The past dominates the general perception of Turkish-Armenian relations. At least it appears so. The past dominates that perception because these relations ended tragically in the Ottoman Empire and because we have perceived it in more ways than one and invested so much in each. Some questions suggest themselves: Can we take responsibility for the way in which we have recreated that past, just as it has created us? What have the two sides invested in the battle for the recognition of their version of the past? And, what is to be done with two different, disparate and more often than not conflicting perceptions of the past, if and when there is willingness to transcend it?

By and large for the Armenian side the difference can be resolved if and when the Turkish side acknowledges the Genocide perpetrated by the Young Turk government during World War I. This expectation of the victim has encountered the official Turkish view, which places its own victimization by the Great Powers at the center of its own perception of history, a perception that makes what happened to Armenians an almost irrelevant detail, a nuisance at best, a past that should be denied, trivialized, or explained away. For decades the official Turkish position has been to do all three, at the same time.

Clearly, we are not dealing with a mere academic disagreement between scholars of different persuasions or schools. The entrenched position of each side is now part of their respective identities, identities that not only define the boundaries of the ethno-cultural self-definitions but also the socio-political context within which they see their present and project the future. We have learned that conflicts that deeply engage identities often produce the bloodiest wars and are the most difficult to resolve, especially when the parties to the conflict seek the affirmation of their identities by the rest of the world as an integral component of their strategy.

To understand what has been a stalemate for some time, to change gears, so to speak and, in fact, to make the best use of history, each side must understand some basic realities about the other.

The Turkish side, and especially officials and policy makers must realize that, however the events of 1915-1917 are characterized, there is no doubt that they brought to an end the collective existence of the Armenian people on their ancestral homeland. The violent, abrupt and permanent break in the long history of a nation, the sheer finality of it, was apt to make survivors feel death for generations. The passage of time has only deepened the sense of a collective death, even if the survivors themselves were paralyzed by the personal tragedies they endured and were unable to sense and articulate adequately the full extent of the tragedy. For the less traumatized progenies of the survivors in lands nearby and distant, the past is the present. Denial of the genocide is a denial of not only their past but also their present.

Furthermore, the sustained policy of denial of that past by successive Turkish governments only infuriates the new generations of Armenians; it makes it more difficult for them to focus on the historical context in which these events took place or to generate a desire to understand the position within which Turkish society finds itself. This is true

even for those Armenians who would like to transcend the limitations imposed by a self-definition as a victim nation. Attempts by Turkish officials and official historians to equate Armenian actions against the Ottoman regime before the war or the Turkish state since with the policies of the *Ittihad ve Terakki* during the war only leads the new generations to think of the Turkish state as an unreformed and hopeless entity. The more the Turkish state denies the past, the more adamant the new generations are in asserting it. That part of the collective memory tends to take over as the determinant of their identity, more difficult to transcend, more important to have others recognize it. There are good reasons why the use of the term “genocide” has become so important for the Armenian side.

These are some of the immovable realities worth a moment of reflection on the Turkish side, setting aside the defensive wall that is best characterized as a fear of knowledge. Almost twenty years ago a promising young scholar—now a well known and respected historian in Turkey—related to me the story of his dying father who asked him not to become a historian. When he realized his son was set on his course and did not want to become a doctor or an engineer, the father begged him to at least not engage himself in the “Armenian issue.”

There are many ways to deal with conflicting perceptions of history. Ignoring history is not one of them. Not for a healthy society.

What the Armenian side must realize is that, first, the Turkish position is based on willful ignorance, one that is promoted by the state for reasons that must also be understood. There is an ideology of statehood and nationhood that is at the foundation of the central value of the Turkish War of Independence in Turkish collective memory. That ideology relies on a well known theological model: No sins were committed during the process, and the purpose of the newborn was to save the world, in this case the world of Turks. This is a most comfortable past, a most blissful birth.

Ideologies have a coherence and are, therefore, fragile. Removing one stone in that foundation threatens the collapse of the whole system. Under the circumstances to integrate a sin as serious as genocide in that theology is asking too much from a state, as well as from a people.

Second, the Armenian side must recognize that the Great Powers did in fact prey upon the Ottoman Empire; until the rise of the Kemalist Movement the rivalry between Great Britain and Russia was probably the main reason why Anatolia did not suffer the same fate as Africa in their hands. The importance of the centrality of Great Power threat to the Ottoman state cannot be underestimated; nor can one underestimate the role of that threat in the rise of the modern Turkish state and in Turkish perceptions of the past.

That such historical facts are also used to justify a security oriented state, the role of the military in Turkish politics, and the use of force to settle political conflicts, is very much part of the ideology, just as the Genocide is at the basis of territorial demands from Turkey for some Armenian political parties. Such territorial demands feed into the logic

of denial: recognition of the Genocide, Turkish officials argue, will result in the demands for reparations, including territorial ones. Whether Turkey will face a real threat in this area is immaterial; what matters are that such fears find a receptive audience, are embedded in the political psyche, and are easily manipulated in a society educated in the historical threat of dismemberment.

When looking back from what Turks and most of the world take for granted today, Turkish statehood within its present borders, and given that generations of Turks since have been taught to accept the primacy of the state over society as the foundation of that statehood, one should not be surprised at the resistance to injecting into one's pristine history a series of horrors.

The Armenian side should take a moment and look at these realities. There are many ways to deal with conflicting perceptions of history. Force feeding one is not of them, not if there is to be genuine recognition and reconciliation, especially now when Armenia, a neighbor of Turkey, is a sovereign state.

This long running conflict has its own history, as well as politics and sociology. Until the rebirth of independent Armenia in 1991, the battle was between Turkey, a well defined nation-state with boundaries and policy making institutions, on the one hand, and an Armenian Diaspora outside Turkey, a transnational entity made up of communities defined extraterritorially and endowed with many structures but not a single structure that could speak for it and act on its behalf in a single voice. The battle was asymmetric; it allowed for little direct interaction. Not only were the Turkish state and Armenian Diaspora totally alienated from each other, but also the logic of the position of each evolved almost independently from each other, neither having to account for the failures or successes of their policies against the other's means and resources. After all, beyond the stated the goals of compelling or rejecting recognition, the battles were their own justification, since they served to affirm the battlers' identities.

The arena for the battle was the international community to which each addressed itself. The rare encounters between Turkish and Armenian scholars were not meant to promote understand of each other's position, but to state positions and satisfy their own audiences. The one known meeting between officials of the Turkish Foreign Ministry and representatives of the *Dashnaktsutiun* (Armenian Revolutionary Federation) in the late 1970s, still shrouded in mystery, does not seem to have served any other purpose. And the series of terrorist acts by secret Armenian groups against Turkish diplomats and institutions could hardly have been construed as encounters of mutual understanding.

Most Armenians in the Diaspora had never met a Turk. The "Turk" had become an abstraction in the Armenian mind, easier to hate than to know. Any and each Turk in this context represented the invader of a thousand years ago, the killer of a hundred years ago and the denier of today, all in one. Turks had no other characteristics. For Turks, the "Armenian" was the friendly and harmless baker in the neighborhood at best, a discomfiting thought from the past pushed to the recesses of the mind, a troublemaker, slanderer, and terrorist at worst. For each, the other was "the other."

This skewed process had serious consequences for both.

Part of the legitimacy of historical Armenian institutions in the Diaspora such as the Church and political parties is based on their pre-genocide existence. They are part of the patrimony that has survived and must be kept alive. This is a powerful argument in the Diaspora, where the fear of assimilation pushed Diasporans to find anchors that reconfirm their identity. Thus the battle for genocide recognition has become an organizing concern and unifying principle. It connects the past and the future: the future consists of the recognition of the past. The present is just the moment where the struggle occurs.

Yet identities are not frozen. They evolve and adapt as a result of internal dynamics and external stimuli. They also change as a result of conscious choices, whether cultural or political. While the name of the ethnos remains the same, history shows that in fact some attributes of ethnicity become less important and others become more poignant over time. Even collective memory undergoes mutations to project new sensibilities; contemporary needs seek different dimensions of the past; new research and more critical history seep into the domain of the general public. Sensibilities change with regard to perceptions of the past and of the future. In an anecdote ascribed to the ubiquitous Radio Yerevan, a listener asks the radio commentator if he knows what the future will look like. The commentator's answer is indeed telling: "The future is not a problem; we know what it will look like. Our problem is with the past. They keep changing it."

The advent of Armenia's independence created another level of interaction in Turkish-Armenian relations, state-to-state. Neither the Ter-Petrossian nor Kocharian administration in Armenia made the recognition of the Genocide by Turkey a precondition for the establishment of diplomatic relations with its neighbor, although the second did raise the issue. Soviet Armenians too knew their history, many of them progenies of survivors of the Genocide, including a number of the founders of the Republic who in the 1960s had organized street demonstrations against Turkey in Yerevan. The difference is that state to state relations, particularly with neighbors, require a different logic since leaders of states, especially those just born, must take into consideration a host of overwhelming issues. The Armenian National Movement that led the country to independence also considered the genocide-led national agenda and the psychology behind it as factors that had justified Armenia's subservience to the Soviet Union and the oppressive Communist rule. Now citizens of a sovereign republic, Armenians in Armenia did not resist this change away from the primacy of the genocide issue, a change in strategic thinking which was nothing less revolutionary in Armenian political thought. Besides, as citizens of a state, they did not need an organizing principle: the state is that principle. The present forces its own agenda and priorities and the future must resolve other problems for the citizens of Armenia who are, nonetheless, keenly interested in the recognition issue.

The normalcy, if not yet normalization, of relations between Turkey and Armenia lifted the taboo in the Diaspora as well. Sovereign Armenia without barriers for Diasporans

represents a new reference of identity, one that can absorb as much energy from the Diaspora as it can emit.

For the Turkish governing elite the control of the past is a justification for the present form of government and an insurance policy for its perpetuation. The future, indeed, would look different if the past was tampered with. If the Soviet Union changed the past to justify shifts in policy, the Turkish state held a firm grip on it to guarantee that the future does not change. Here the denial of parts of history is the affirmation of that future. A Turkey that has matured enough to recognize that history would have to be a very different Turkey than the one they know and cherish, the one they present as the indispensable form without which Turkish identity would be denied and Turkish security threatened.

But here too there have been changes. An expanding civil society and a more inquisitive and critical intellectual class feel secure enough in their identity to question the hegemonic ideology of the state and its hold on history; they can imagine a different and better future for Turkey. They, therefore, can also imagine a different past. This development constitutes a tribute to Turkish society.

The coming to power of AK Party not so much beholden in its ideology and legitimacy to the nationalist past has also offered new possibilities. Prime Minister Erdoğan's offer to leave history to historians is, to say the least, a valiant recognition of the possibility of a history differently conceived, as he too imagines a Turkey differently construed.

The dynamics of the confrontation has changed as a result. Turkish and Armenian societies have now come to interact in more ways than one. More Armenians travel to Turkey now and visit their ancestral towns and villages. While not influential enough, the Turkish Armenian Business Council is a reflection of newly emerging interests. Turkish journalists have visited Armenia and have developed contacts in the Diaspora. Armenian journalists from Armenia and the Diaspora have visited Turkey and established contacts there.

But two undertakings deserve special attention. The well intentioned but badly conceived Turkish Armenian Reconciliation Commission (TARC) provided a forum where the issue of whether the past would determine the future was discussed. Even in its failure that forum contributed to the acceptance of a dialogue.

The more successful forum has been the less ambitious yet more fruitful Workshop for Armenian and Turkish Scholarship (WATS), initiated in 2000 by a small group of scholars of Armenian and Turkish origin at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. WATS aims at developing the historical context within which Turkish-Armenian relations evolved. The scholars involved did not feel the need to start with terminology and focused on the necessity to understand the context offering perspectives on events, processes, policies and causation. The four sessions of WATS have involved over a hundred scholars from various disciplines and countries. The Workshop is based on the principle of respect for the intellectual integrity of the participants whose scholarship is

recognized by universal standards. WATS has already had a major impact on both the quantity of scholarship produced and the quality of the dialogue. A larger picture of the period in question is emerging, a picture that recognizes the calamities that the *Ittihad ve Terakki* policies produced, the ideologies and mechanisms involved, the engagement of Armenian political parties and the Church as actors in Ottoman politics, and the role of the Great Powers. The number of conferences and colloquia addressing the issue have multiplied, the most prominent being the Istanbul conference in September 2005 organized by Turkish scholars and with the exclusive participation of Turkish scholars, despite vehement opposition by some quarters in Turkey.

Genuine scholarship freed from the burdens of legitimation of power, political leadership freed from the need to preserve the status quo, and a re-humanization of the “other” are making it possible to redefine identities, challenge identity politics as we know it. Turkish-Armenian relations may yet have a future.