

TURKISH CIVIL SOCIETY: DRIVING THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Over the last decade, during which the discussion of memory was opened in the Turkish public sphere, Turkish civil society has taken part in initiatives that go well beyond those launched by the state and the political elite, especially concerning policies related to memory, culture, and the environment. In this regard, the December 2008 campaign, which apologized for the Great Catastrophe inflicted upon the Ottoman Armenians in 1915, constituted an important milestone. This article examines the role of Turkish civil initiatives in dealing with official state narratives of history, and particularly their prospects in paving the way for a healthy return of memory through the opening up of space for discussion in Turkish public sphere.

Cengiz Aktar*



* Prof. Cengiz Aktar is a Senior Scholar at the Istanbul Policy Center and columnist for *Taraf* newspaper. He also spearheaded the “I Apologize” campaign discussed in this article.

During the last decade, Turkish civil society has taken part in initiatives that go well beyond those launched by the state and the political elite, especially concerning policies related to memory, culture, and the environment. These include campaigns to draw attention to the situation of non-Muslim and Muslim minorities, demonstrations of a global scope to promote cultural and artistic potential, and protests requiring a superhuman effort for the protection of Turkey's environment and cultural heritage. Especially those self-examining civil initiatives pertaining to the minorities and ostracized groups challenge existing mental borders and involve in-depth and long-term work. They are thus both more substantial and sustained over longer periods than state initiatives.

Amongst them the “Apology Campaign” of December 2008¹ addressed and apologized for the Great Catastrophe inflicted upon the Ottoman Armenians in 1915. It led to the adoption of a new perspective in the approach to the very traumatic process of nation building, which in the Turkish case affected primarily non-Muslims, but to a certain extent Muslim groups as well. The apology campaign also included a significant involvement of Kurds, as they remembered the role their ancestors played in the Armenian Genocide. While many Kurds acted in collusion with the Young Turk-led government in the massacres, others refused to take part, while still others actively chose to take home and raise surviving children. Many accounts have appeared on the fringes of the campaign, often reminding us that each Kurdish family had at least one Armenian grandmother, as those who were spared were predominantly young girls. This Kurdish recollection was all the more profound, since a similar logic of homogenization was doggedly implemented toward them too, after the Armenians had been “taken care of.”

The apology campaign triggered yet another “bad memory.” The flight of Muslims from the pogroms and massacres of the Balkans and the Caucasus to Anatolia, from the middle of the 19th century onwards, undermined the social equilibrium of the region in which they sought refuge. This caused dissatisfaction among Anatolia's indigenous groups – the Armenians being one of them. The evocation of the Armenian Genocide hence aroused another memory, not only troublesome in itself, but all the more painful because it has been kept in the subconscious. Indeed, those Muslims have not been able to fully mourn the massacres and forced displacement they themselves had to endure, nor the effects of their “voluntary” assimilation and their state-assigned roles of becoming the backbone of the Turkish nation. This context

¹ See www.ozurdiliyoruz.com The full text reads: “My conscience cannot accept the ignorance and denial of the Great Catastrophe that the Ottoman Armenians were subjected to in 1915. I reject this injustice and – on my own behalf – I share the feelings and pain of my Armenian brothers and sisters – and I apologize to them.”

might explain the lack of empathy among the descendants of the refugees towards Armenians. However, open recognition by Turkish Muslims of the painful –and painfully similar– past experienced by Armenians could eventually open up ways towards an emphatic consciousness.

Likewise, memory recall could open up unexpected horizons by also giving a voice to the Muslim peoples of south-east Europe who were driven from their

homelands, stripped of their belongings, and murdered during decades between the signing of the Berlin Treaty of 1878 and outbreak of the First Balkan War in 1912. Such a recollection would also constitute a significant step forward in the relocation of Turkey within European memory – from which it has been excluded since the end of WWI in 1918.

On the other hand, the evocation of the horror experienced by the Armenians paved the way for a questioning of many other mainstays of modern Turkey. Together with the Greek Orthodox (the *Rum*), Armenians formed the driving force of Anatolia's economic activity. Whole sections of the economy collapsed after their disappearance and/or departure. These regions were never able to recover from the consequences of what must be called the Great Catastrophe, a common disaster, the memory of which remains to be shared. Qualifying the Genocide with the idiom “Great Catastrophe” (*Medz Yeghern* in Armenian) aims to identify and express the disastrous experience common to many groups during this genocidal period of Anatolian history, as some Muslims and Kurds are beginning to acknowledge.

As has been the case for the Kurds, the Apology Campaign also inspired many Turkish citizens to search for memories rooted in their families' pasts. Narratives have re-emerged regarding direct and indirect victims of the genocide, as well as righteous people who saved lives, directly opposing orders from the Young Turk government to deport or annihilate their Armenian neighbors. Apart from a few cases, the brave acts of these individuals are hardly acknowledged in the otherwise rich historiography of the genocide accumulated outside of Turkey (some 26,000 publications). Unable to talk about massacred Armenians, the survivors who had to convert to Islam to stay alive and those who were saved and Islamized by force were also

“Unable to talk about massacred Armenians, the survivors who had to convert to Islam to stay alive and those who were saved and Islamized by force were also disregarded.”

“*Are we at the dawn of the construction of a new language for the genocide, a language that would include more than the direct victims and thus pave the way to a shared memory?*”

disregarded. Although these suppressed narratives all represent self-induced, conscious forgetting, these people did exist and their grandchildren live today. In the absence of public remembrance, the responsibility falls today upon the grandchildren of the victims.

The search for truth, of which the Apology Campaign was a decisive milestone, has probably not broken down the wall forged by taboos and positions of denial widely held in Turkey,

but it has certainly opened some wide breaches. These developments constitute the first steps towards mutual dialogue and a learning process at home and abroad. In addition to the victims themselves, the above-mentioned social, economic, and human devastation that followed the deportations and massacres of Armenians and other non-Muslim groups from Anatolia also deserves to be seen in a new light.

In Turkey, public self-introspection is certainly at the beginning of a long educational journey, during which much will have to be done to first learn and understand, and then testify, remember, confront, and grieve. This is true for citizens of Turkey, including those of Armenian origin, as well as for the Armenians of the Diaspora and of Armenia.

Lawyer Fethiye Çetin, granddaughter of an Armenian orphan girl who was forced to convert, and author of the bestseller *My Grandmother: An Armenian-Turkish Memoir*, reported during a conference held in 2009 in Istanbul her encounter with a French person of Armenian origin in Paris who said that, after all, he may well have a relative in Turkey too.²

Are we at the dawn of the construction of a new language for the genocide, a language that would include more than the direct victims and thus pave the way to a shared memory?

Additionally, a public call for forgiveness concerning such a traumatic event—which, in the space of 20 years, did away with a 4000 year-old civilization in Anatolia—not only constituted a historical first, but also created new prospects for

² Fethiye Çetin, *My Grandmother: An Armenian-Turkish Memoir* (London: Verso, 2012).

an (as yet) non-existent culture of forgiveness in Turkey. In a country where the collective conscience is struck with amnesia, an amnesia that is equal only to the sheer size of the crime and where a sickly feeling of innocence –as the corollary of the crime– reigns together with a paranoid feeling of victimization, one does not apologize. This explains the shock created among the public at large by linking in the same sentence the words “Armenian” and “apology,” as in the text of the Apology Campaign.

“It should be noted that the process of change and transformation has not only taken place thanks to external dynamics or the government’s early reformism.”

We will see over time the tangible consequences of this quest for understanding within Turkish society – a quest, as mentioned before, in which the Apology Campaign constituted an important milestone. Already, public actions –perhaps not so numerous, but certainly significant– are accumulating at all levels. While supported by the authorities from time to time, such actions rely primarily on voluntary citizens’ initiatives.

Where do We Go from Here?

For the civil society of Turkey that is remembering its heterogeneity, learning history other than the bogus official narrative and comparing conflicting memories does not necessarily mean scratching the wounds and having the ethnic/exclusivist/egocentric/nationalistic demands rise from the grave. Re-reading the past, mutually opening up the memories to each other, means empathy and acknowledgment of the sufferings that different religious, ethnic, and linguistic entities inflicted upon one another for the sake of nation building and resulting in a huge transfer of wealth.

The foundations of a new approach to “nation” and “patriotism” may be laid by lessening the excessive self-centricity of the historical nation model, but without going back to the legalist and amnesiac nation model that refuses to face history. A healthy return of memory can address that challenge.

Liberals have two assets that can help them face this challenge. One is the maturation and empowerment of society. There is now a society acquainted with free speech, one that raises objections, enjoys the state of freedom, and is slowly abolishing the

“Between a segment of diaspora Armenians and their Turkish counterparts, a mutual discovery process is underway, since both, being from similar intellectual backgrounds, speak very much the same language.”

guardianship of the former elite, thanks to government’s reformist actions of 2002-5. This society stands against the lies and taboos imposed by the former elite – and this is happening for the first time. Is it easy to control a society that enjoys democracy and controls its own fate? It should be noted that the process of change and transformation has not only taken place thanks to external dynamics or the government’s early reformism. Turkey’s society has also paid a substantial price for it, as symbolized by the murdered Armenian Turkish journalist Hrant Dink.

The other asset is related to pious people realizing that the founding national ideology not only alienated non-Turks, non-Sunni Muslims, and non-Muslims, but also Sunni Muslims. The more they assume a leading role in revealing past suffering, addressing injustices, and distancing themselves from the founding ideology, the more Turkish democracy will be consolidated and will allow for increased empathy. In fact, today we can observe an emergent and very promising re-assessment by Sunni Muslim intellectuals of the founding ideology that ethnically, religiously, socially, and economically engineered and remodeled the whole of Anatolia over the course of a century.

On the other hand, civil society needs interlocutors with whom to interact. Indeed, there is no sufficient interface to Turkish civil actions in post-Soviet Armenia, where some sort of official party line still prevails. Actually, the most engaging elements among the Armenian activists are from the Diaspora. Between a segment of diaspora Armenians and their Turkish counterparts, a mutual discovery process is underway, since both, being from similar intellectual backgrounds, speak very much the same language.

A final word on the respective roles of the state and society in shaping policies related to memory is unavoidable. Society is the natural actor in the politics of memory. In order to be perennial, substantial, and coherent, policies of memory need societal dynamics, whatever the capacity of society to influence the lawmaker may be.

In the Turkish case, this assertion is especially tangible for three reasons. Firstly, a society cannot be healed so as to recover its memory by precisely the actor, the state of the Republic of Turkey, that lobotomized it. Secondly, large chunks of Ottoman and later Turkish elites have happily adhered to de-memorization works proposed by the official denialist narrative in order to justify the massive seizure of property and wealth, as well as to excuse the ethnic cleansing of Armenians for sacred “national interests.” Thirdly, a review of societal sub-consciousness needs to be anchored in the very core of society to bear any value, by a symmetry that is not dictated by the cold and selfish interests of a state. A telling example is the public reaction to Federal Chancellor Willy Brandt’s apology for Nazi crimes in Warsaw in 1970 – the famous *Kniefall von Warschau* (Warsaw Genuflection). German public opinion largely disapproved of the Chancellor’s act despite the official responsibility of the Federal Republic.

Thus, although so slow as to force the limits of one’s patience waiting for due recognition of crimes committed during the Ottoman era, the development of a memory policy growing out of a painstaking, yet convulsive, societal recollection remains a healthy and ongoing endeavor. And though the road for civil activism is largely clear, the “State Highway” is still obstructed by structural roadblocks.

There is now an ever-growing awareness regarding the bad as well as the good memory. Public actions, perhaps not so numerous, but certainly momentous, are building up at all levels. So far unhampered by the authorities, they primarily rely on voluntary citizens’ efforts. These memory initiatives take place in four major areas: academia and publishing, individual and collective memory search, public awareness and visibility, and religious and cultural discovery.

Regarding academic interest, following pioneering publishers, many publishing houses now print known works in connection with the painful memory, but also in relation to the rich cosmopolitan past of the Ottoman Empire.

On the individual and collective memory search, many people proudly seek, discover, or rediscover ancestors of non-Muslim origin in their families.

Public awareness and visibility is growing by the day. Non-Muslims literally discover themselves and are “discovered” by society. 24 April has been commemorated since 2010, each year in more and more cities. Moreover, accounts of righteous people who saved their neighbors’ lives, and the descendants of Armenians who had to convert to Islam to save their own lives, are also made public.

In the religious and cultural area, remnants of monuments that survived are painstakingly restored, masses are celebrated again in Anatolia, and cultural heritage is engaged.

All in all, we are in the presence of a fascinating journey almost entirely mastered by society and worth following up on...