

TURKISH-ARMENIAN RELATIONS IN THE PROCESS OF DE-OTTOMANIZATION OR “DEHISTORICIZATION”: IS A “JUST MEMORY” POSSIBLE?*

The greatest injustice that has been visited on both history and to any two nations is to set aside their previous rich centuries of shared history and to begin instead with traumatic events like war and conflict, or to reconstruct the previous centuries by making traumatic events the center of everything. The “unjust memory” created around the events of 1915 constitutes the most important example of this phenomenon as it mortgages the shared past and future of the Turks and Armenians. The initiative that Turkey launched with Armenia in 2009 is premised on eradicating this sort of mentality. The “just memory” concept that we have frequently employed during this process is critically important as it highlights the necessity of not viewing history with a one-sided memory.

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De-Ottomanization or “Dehistoricization”

The nation-state experiences that took place in the lands ruled by the Ottoman Empire have had a negative and double-sided impact on the perception of history. The first negative impact is related to efforts by these states to legitimize their own formative processes. This search for legitimacy gave birth to a need to settle accounts with the pre-nation-state Ottoman era, which was based on a radically different paradigm of political organization. There was an attempt to create an exclusionary and reductionist ideology of history using historical method and theory developed specifically to meet this need. Each national ideology of history that was developed not only separated these societies from the history of neighboring societies and regions, but they also resulted in their own problem of historical continuity. On the one hand, these societies were horizontally alienated from the history of neighboring regions, while vertically they experienced a dismissive disconnect with almost four centuries of their own history. The result was they found themselves face to face with psychology of dehistoricization.

The second negative impact occurred in the proper positioning of Ottoman history as a whole within the flow of human history. The individually developed perceptions



of national history led to a perception of the Ottoman era as an archaic construct that represented the pre-modern era. This perception made it even more difficult to understand the whole of Ottoman history from its own perspective.

This historical perception resulted in the peoples of the Ottoman Empire viewing everyone else as the “other” and was based on an anachronistic psychology of settling past accounts. Cyclical confrontations and hostilities

were couched in terms of hostilities that had been alive for centuries. The national identities created by the modern era were retrospectively revised as political categories. For Christian elements, in which this perception first emerged, these anachronistic conflicts manifested as the East-West, Christian-Muslim/Turk distinction. For Muslim elements this paradigm was founded more on backwardness and isolation to explain the problems that had come about. Over time, this approach was adopted by the Muslim-Turkish element that was recognized as the founding element of the Ottoman Empire. The historical past was viewed as being responsible for what had transpired and was summoned to the witness stand.

The emergence of a new subject-historian/intellectual who sometimes served as the spokesman for and sometimes as the builder of these emerging national identities, transformed Ottoman history into an object with which accounts must inevitably be settled. The new subject-intellectual prototype that assumed the role of spokesperson for the national awareness of Christian elements, attempted to equate itself with the Euro-centric understanding of history constructed on the foundation of Christianity. It was this identification that turned elements which had for centuries lived in the same region, in the same cities, and even in the same villages into representatives of opposing camps.

The national leaders of Christian elements viewed the Ottoman centuries as the history of the opposing side’s political domination while the national leaders of Muslim elements attempted to portray this same time period as a historical burden that they had difficulty explaining in terms of their own understanding of national history. The birth of a new subject that tried to give meaning to the existence of its own nation and the attempt to find for itself and the nation to which it belonged a meaningful place within a new Euro-centric understanding of history led this new

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historian subject to develop an ideology of history that transcended/excluded the Ottoman barrier between the pre-Ottoman era and the modern national era. The result was profound shifts in the understanding of identity and historical perception which pit people who had shared the same geography, the same cities, the same villages against each other.

This new perception of history was based on two fundamental assumptions: the assumption that the awareness of collective national identity that vertically intersects the Ottoman period was continuous and a new historical flow/dispensational assumption that made the Ottoman era the polar opposite. These two assumptions naturally laid the foundation for two important intellectual and political problems: continuity and alienation.

To use the conceptual framework of Benedict Anderson, the appearance of nations on the stage of history as *imagined communities* made it necessary to redefine their identity.¹ The most striking examples of the transition from old holistic/eclectic identities to modern discriminatory/homogenizing nation-identities, and which created the greatest disconnect took place in the Ottoman region. These new identities formed around a national identity that took the small-scale feudal identities in Western Europe to a higher level of identity awareness. Whereas it unraveled the holistic organic structures and identities that had formed over centuries in the Ottoman melting pot.

The most fundamental assumption of this new account of history is the view that an awareness of collective national identity that existed prior to the Ottoman era, was suppressed during the Ottoman era, became strong and rose up in resistance to the Ottoman Empire, and found the opportunity to reassert itself as a state after the Ottoman era has always been present. A retrospective interpretation of this understanding of identity led to the formulation of a new hypothesis about the flow of history: “collective identity – collective repression – collective resistance – collective awakening”.

One of the most striking examples of reducing complex historical processes to a comprehensive revision of history on a simplistic foundation of hostilities for the purpose of creating a perception of unified imagined community is the process of transition from the Ottoman Greek people to an independent Greek nation. The fact that the account of national history excluded a strong intellectual-religious-political aspect (that stretched from Gennadius II, who served as Patriarch after the conquest of Constantinople, to the tradition of Ottoman Greeks serving in important positions

¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 2006), pp. 5-6.

within the Ottoman state apparatus, Kostakis Mousouros, who supported the integrity of the Ottoman State in the face of Greek revolt and who defended the integrity of a multiconfessional, multiethnic state against the idea of national separation as the ambassador to Athens, and the New Greeks movement which formed after the Reorganization and Reform imperial edicts, to the representatives of the “Helenottomanism” movement which supported the idea of an Istanbul-Athens Eastern empire, and also viewed the Ottoman Greek-Helen identity as a part of the East represented by the Byzantine-Ottoman tradition and not as a part of the Catholic-secular West) is a natural consequence of reconstructing history on the basis of ideological needs on behalf of an “imagined community”. This example was valid for other revisions of national history as well, though methods and styles were different.

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Ottoman-Armenian Identity from Pluralistic Reality to the Perception of Unified Community

The fact that the diverse Armenians living throughout Anatolia were able to maintain a common identity and unity despite of all their differences, was not in spite of



the Ottoman Empire; on the contrary, it was to a large extent because of the eclectic identity which formed the basis of the Ottoman order. What helped Armenians under the Armenian Apostolic Church (Gregorian) maintain their identity within a single religious hierarchy was the fact that Fatih Sultan Mehmet formed the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul (*Badriarkaran Hayots Bolso*) in 1461. The Ottoman Empire viewed this newly formed Patriarchate as the spiritual leader of not just Armenians settled in Istanbul but of all the Armenians living in Ottoman lands. The Patriarchate was granted all of the rights and privileges given to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate. Actually, this is evidence that the Ottoman order did not suppress Armenian identity; on the contrary it guaranteed its existence by including it in the melting pot and integrating it within official structures.

Gerard Libaridian states that even in the last century of the empire, Armenians had formed three different self-images regarding their understanding of their own identity and he emphasized that when Armenians in Cilicia, Istanbul, and the other provinces described their relationship with the Ottoman Empire in terms of their own self-perception they possessed very different understandings, which opens the way to the questioning of the one-dimensional, monolithic perception of national identity based on opposition to the Ottoman state.² Libaridian describes the two fundamental political approaches within the Armenian community at the end of the Ottoman era. He points out the polemics between rural Armenians and the Istanbul Armenians (Patriarchate and Amiras), who supported the *status quo*. He says that these two different identities affected views of Ottoman administration. According to him, there were also differences between the liberal, intellectual faction which started the enlightenment movement and the revolutionary Armenian organizations in terms of national identity and consequently how they viewed the Ottoman state. These different perceptions of identity which were observed even at the end of the Ottoman era, when social communication within the Empire was relatively advanced, demonstrate the reductionist character of the perception of identity awareness which nationalistic historical accounts assume had existed for centuries.

These diverse perceptions of identity held by ordinary individuals applied to the elites as well. The change in the elites of different elements experiencing the process of forming a nation involves complex psychological, social, and political processes that are extremely difficult to account for within monolithic frameworks. While the Greek Pashas Alexandros Karatodori (1878-79) and Sava (1879-80) as well as the Armenian statesman Gabriel Noradunkyan (1912-13) served as Ottoman Foreign Affairs Ministers, the connection they naturally made between cultural identity and

2 Gerard J. Libaridian, "The Changing Armenian Self-image in the Ottoman Empire: Rayahs and Revolutionaries," in Richard Hovannisian (ed.), *The Armenian Image in History and Literature* (Malibu: Undena Pub., 1981), pp.155-7.

political representation challenges the assumptions regarding the persistence of an identity that is one-dimensional, monolithic, and unchanged. In addition to serving as ministers of Foreign Affairs, two of these men authored works that would become classics in their field; Sava Pasha wrote *A Study of the Doctrine of Islamic Law* and Noradunkyan authored *International Agreements of the Ottoman State*, which demonstrates that the sense of belonging they had in Ottoman society and identity was not merely professional/political in nature. The appeal made by Istanbul parliamentarian Seragiotis in the first Ottoman Parliament with regard to the election law in the 1st Constitutional Period is remarkable as it demonstrates how misleading nationalist, monolithic categories can be in understanding historical events: “With your permission, let’s forever blot out the terms Muslim, non-Muslim, Greek, and Armenian. Let’s put an end to these distinctions. We are all Ottomans.”³

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Vartan Pasha, a member of the Privy Council (*Encümen-i Daniş*), which was the first Ottoman-Turkish academy, wrote a novel entitled *Akabi’s Story*.⁴ The topic, language, and style all fundamentally undermine the assumption that identities based on ordinary hostilities were a constant factor. This work chronicles the romance between Gregorian Armenian Akabi and Catholic Armenian Hagop which ends in grief due to sectarian dogmatism. It has all of the emotional appeal of *Kerem and Aslı* or *Ferhat and Şirin* and is recognized by many literary historians as the first Turkish novel. It was printed in Turkish using Armenian script. The fact that a work illuminating Armenian identity and relating their sectarian differences –one of the most fundamental problems for Armenian society– was written in beautifully descriptive Turkish but printed with Armenian characters is a literary reflection of the fact that social elements of identity were extremely intertwined. In addition to *Akabi’s Story*, there are references to extensive publishing activities in Turkish with Armenian characters in the areas of literature, linguistics, history, law, religion, and the Enlightenment in Ottoman lands from 1850 to 1870.⁵

3 Foti Benlisoy and Stefo Benlisoy, “Millet-i Rum’dan Helen Ulusuna (1856-1922),” [From Ottoman Greeks to Greek Nation (1856-1922)] *Modern Türkiye’de Siyasi Düşünce*, Vol: 1 (2001), p. 371.

4 Vartan Paşa (Hovsep Vartanyan), *Akabi Hikayesi*, [Akabi’s Story], prepared by Andreas Tietze (Istanbul: Eren Yay., 1991).

5 Karin Karakaşlı et al., *Türkiye’de Ermeniler: Cemaat-Birey-Yurttaş*, [Armenians in Turkey: Community-Individual-Citizen] (Istanbul: Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2009), pp. 67-9.

The fact that Armenians extensively used the Armenian alphabet when writing Turkish even if they did not know Armenian, demonstrates just how intertwined these cultural elements were. It can also be interpreted as evidence that there was a desire to maintain Armenian identity. After all, the Armenian alphabet is recognized as the most important factor in maintaining Armenian identity through the centuries. Again, this is evidence that they preserved different cultural elements not “in spite of the Ottoman state” but “with the assistance of the Ottoman state”. The crisis which the rich Armenian literature of the late Ottoman era underwent during the early Republican era was caused by the pressure exerted on different identities because of nationalist approaches and the events of 1915.

The fact that Armenians were prominent in not only literature but also in architecture and art throughout Ottoman lands is an important indication of the diversity of culture and identity during the Ottoman era. The Armenian Balyan family made the greatest contribution to Istanbul’s Islamic architecture, most notably in the Yıldız, Nusretiye, and Ortaköy mosques, while Edgar Manas did the orchestral arrangements for the Turkish National Anthem. These examples refute retrospective historical interpretations based on the assumption that identity conflicts polarizing Muslim-Christian and Turkish-Armenian distinctions were a constant reality.

“Just Memory” and Rebuilding Turkish-Armenian Relations

The greatest injustice that has been visited on both history and the peoples in question is setting aside the shared history of the two peoples and the previous rich centuries, and beginning instead only with traumatic events like war and conflict, or reconstructing the previous centuries by making these traumatic events the center of everything. The “unjust memory” created around the events of 1915 constitutes the most important example of this phenomenon as it mortgages the shared past and future of the Turks and Armenians.

The initiative that Turkey launched with Armenia in 2009 is premised on eradicating this sort of mentality. The “just memory” concept that we have frequently employed during this process is critically important as it highlights how history must not be viewed with a one-sided memory. In order for Turks and Armenians to understand what each of them has experienced, it is essential that they respect one another’s memory. For the Armenians, 1915 was a year of relocation during which exceedingly great tragedies took place. The years prior to and after 1915 were also a time of tremendous tragedy for the Turks in Anatolia. It was at this time that Turks fought for their very survival in the Balkan Wars, at Çanakkale, and in the War of Independence. Actually, this was a time of “shared pain”.

The events that led to 1915 and how the “Armenian Question” became an inextricable problem as a result of external intervention by the Great Powers from 1877 to 1914 must be analyzed well. The language used by France’s ambassador to Istanbul Paul Cambon in the letter he wrote to the French Minister of Foreign Affairs on 20 February 1894, is extremely important in terms of seeing how the

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problem was devised. “A high-ranking Turkish official said two years ago that there is no Armenia problem, but we will create one.”⁶ The report published by Prime Minister’s Office General Directorate of State Archives and entitled “A Short History of the Political Phases through which the Armenian Issue Has Passed” (1877-1914), completed by Münir Süreyya, who was then Tbilisi Consul General, as well as the “Armenian-British Relations”, “Armenian-Russian Relations”, “Armenian-French Relations”, and “Armenian-American Relations” papers in the Ottoman Documents prepared by State Archives clearly demonstrate the multifaceted nature of the issue.

There are most certainly shared memories on every street we live on in Anatolia. As Prime Minister Erdoğan has already stated in his historic message on 23 April 2014, “*having experienced events which had inhuman consequences –such as relocation– during the World War I, should not prevent Turks and Armenians from establishing compassion and mutually humane attitudes among towards one another*”. When a retrospective understanding of history centered upon the relocation is adopted, the emergence of two collective understandings that despise one another is inevitable. The time has come to question these two collective understandings; in fact, it is long overdue.

If intellectuals and politicians do their part to overcome the psychological barriers on both sides and to build a “just memory”, we can expect a new, more grounded era of peace. Otherwise, both sides will inevitably be exploited by those who benefit from a sector that feeds off the *status quo*.

6 The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Documents Diplomatiques, Affaires Arméniennes, Projets de Réformes Dans L’empire Ottoman* (1893-1897), [Diplomatic documents, Armenian affairs, Reform projects in the Ottoman Empire] (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1897), p. 10; referenced in: Münir Süreyya Bey, *Ermeni Meselesi’nin Siyasi Tarihçesi (1877-1914)*, [Political history of the Armenian question (1877-1914)] (Ankara: Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü, 2001), p. 23.

The aim of the Protocol process between Turkey and Armenia in 2009 has been to establish good neighborly relations between Turkey and Armenia, to eliminate exploitation between the two peoples based on past suffering, and to resolve the problems between the two countries by preserving Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. The formation of a joint commission to seek the truth has also been envisioned.

The objective in this initiative is, of course, not merely to open the Turkish-Armenian border but to create a state of affairs that will open the way to peace in the Caucasus. Within this context, the future of (1) Turkey-Armenia relations, as neighbors (2) peace and stability in the South Caucasus, and (3) Turkish-Armenian relations wherever they live in the world is extremely important. In order for the process to move forward peacefully, it is important that these three elements move forward in parallel without detrimenting each other.

Common ground must be found regarding the issue between Turks and Armenians whether it is in Los Angeles, Paris, Moscow, or elsewhere. In this regard, Turkey frequently voices its desire to contact members of the Armenian diaspora. Turkey does not view the Armenian diaspora as a homogenous group. After Hrant Dink's death, I heard about how touched prominent members of the diaspora attending his funeral were that the Turkish people took ownership of Hrant Dink. In this context, we view all of the communities that emigrated from Anatolia as our diaspora, not just the Turks living abroad. The discussions I have held with members of the diaspora that support the initiative process on visits abroad have served this same purpose.

Open and continuous dialogue is extremely important if mental images are to ever change. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's 1915 condolence message on 23 April 2014 is a bold step in this direction. I believe that Armenia and the Armenian diaspora will take similar bold steps and that Turkish-Armenian relations will enter a new era. Erdoğan's message of condolence should not be seen as a conjunctural step. It should be seen as a prelude for transformation of minds and memories because this is not only an offer of condolence but also a sincere invitation to all parties to ensure a common future based on lasting peace.