

The Turco-Armenian Tragedy, 1915

Mehmet Ozay

For years the Armenian nationalists have claimed that there was a premeditated Ottoman policy of exterminating Armenians in Eastern Anatolia in 1914-6. First the term “massacres” was used; after the Second World War, “genocide” has been adopted. The basis of this claim is a book by Aram Andonian published in 1920 in French, English and American editions. The title of the English version is the *Memoirs of Naim Bey: Turkish Official Documents Relating to the Deportations and Massacres of Armenians*. According to this book, an Ottoman official, named Naim Bey, supposedly Chief Secretary of the Ottoman Settlement Office in Aleppo (now in Syria), gave Andonian copies of Ottoman documents substantiating the charge of Armenian massacres. These documents include telegrams attributed to Talat Pasha, the wartime Ottoman Minister of Interior, charged with ordering the policy of Armenian massacres. Talat was assassinated in Berlin on 15 March 1921 by an Armenian named Tehlirian.

The Andonian Forgeries

The Andonian telegrams have constituted the backbone of the Armenian claim of “genocide”. They have appeared in numerous books and countless ar-

TURKISH REVIEW

ticles. Until recently, however, no one has subjected Andonian's work to serious investigation.

Now this has been done and it turns out these Andonian documents are forgeries. This is the finding of careful archival research by two Turkish historians, Orel and Yuca, who have examined each one of the 48 Andonian documents (raised to 50 in the French edition of the Andonian book). Orel and Yuca show that these documents, written in the Ottoman script in use at the time, contain fake signatures, fictitious officials, wrong dates, and numerous other inaccuracies. For example, exhaustive research of the relevant Ottoman registers failed to uncover "a single reference to Naim Bey" (p.25). The Andonian documents are written on unofficial stationary and do not follow the normal Ottoman style used invariably in authentic official documents. In particular, Orel and Yuca demonstrate that these documents do not contain anything signed by Talat Pasha ordering massacres.

The documents which Andonian claimed to have in his possession have never been seen or produced for observation. Not even at the Tehlirian trial in 1921. Neither were they used by the British authorities who occupied Istanbul at the end of the First World War, who had full control of the Ottoman archives, and who rounded up the top Ottoman officials and sent them to Malta to await trial for war crimes including mistreatment of Armenians. The British even asked the American government's help for documentary evidence of the guilt of these Ottoman officials who were held in Malta for almost two years. In the end, these officials were freed for lack of evidence.

The fact that Andonian documents are forgeries does not mean that there were no atrocities in Eastern Anatolia in 1914-6. But it does mean that there was no premeditated Ottoman policy of genocide. Furthermore, atrocities and reprisals involved both the the Armenians and the other Ottoman subjects. Clearly, the Armenians cannot claim to be the "innocent victim" similar, for example, to the case of the Jews in Nazi Germany. This is well demonstrated by any balanced reading of the relevant history.

The Historical Context

The book by Salahi Sonyel, based on extensive archival research in Turkey, Britain and elsewhere, is an important historical contribution because it provides the historical context of the tragic event of the First World War. It is a rich complement to such books as Kamuran Gürün, *The Armenian File*, *The Myth of Innocence Exposed*, 1985, Erich Feigl, *A Myth of Terror*, *Armenian Extremism*:

Its Causes and Its Historical Context, 1986, and Justin McCarthy, *Muslims and Minorities: The Population of Ottoman Anatolia and the End of the Empire*, 1983. The last study is by far the most definitive study of the demographics of the "Six Vilayets" which clearly shows that the Armenians were a minority in a heavily Moslem/Turkish region.

The Ottoman Empire was a Non-National, multi-ethnic Empire which lasted about 700 years. Its durability was, in a large measure, due to the Millet system of administration. Under the Millet system, each ethnic community (e.g. Greeks, Armenians, Jews, Serbs, etc) was recognised as an autonomous, self-governing group under the jurisdiction of its respective religious leaders. This system worked well until the coming of the European nationalism in the 19th century. Nationalism, along with the economic and military decline of the Ottoman Empire, contributed to the final dissolution of the Empire in the violent and destructive years of the First World War.

For years, the Ottoman history has been presented (actually misrepresented) in the West as a Sick Man of Europe. This is a biased view. Now historians are starting to appreciate the achievements of the Ottoman Empire. Here is a quote from a recent book:

"Though each of the nation-states of the fallen Ottoman Empire became independent at a different time, all were influenced by secular, European nationalism. One may argue that the rise of this virulent nationalism is a primary cause for the strife and hostility in the former provinces (of the Empire): Turk against Greek, Kurd against Iraqi, Israeli against Palestinian, Egyptian against Libyan, to mention only the more obvious. Those of us who are students of the area secretly wish the Ottoman Humpty Dumpty could be put together again." *Nationalism in a Non-National State, The Dissolution of the Ottoman Empire*, edited by William W.Haddad and William Ochenswald, Ohio State University: Columbus, 1977, p.23).

One, but by no means the only one, of the Millets who suffered heavily in the destruction of the Ottoman Empire was the Armenian Millet. Sonyel demonstrates that Armenian nationalists at the dawn of the First World War were the chief architects of the Turco-Armenian Tragedy in 1914-6. The campaign for an independent Armenia, violence as an instrument of this campaign, and active support of Russia against the Ottomans in times of war to achieve this objective had a long history. Not the least merit of the Sonyel book is the

TURKISH REVIEW

use of the label “Turco-Armenian Tragedy” (chap. 8) reflecting the fact that large-scale suffering occurred on both sides.

Armenians Join the War

According to Sonyel, the historical context of the Turco-Armenian Tragedy was as follows:

On 1 November 1914 Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire. The Armenians of Russia pledged loyalty to Tsar Nicholas, who promised to free the Turkish Armenia. The Russian Armenians, in addition to contributing more than 200,000 men to the regular Tsarist armies, formed 7 volunteer contingents specifically to assist in the liberation of Turkish Armenia. The Ottoman Armenians, who had supported Russia in previous wars, once again sided with the Russians. As soon as World War I started, Karekin Pasdermadjian, the Erzurum deputy in the Ottoman Parliament, known by the revolutionary name of Armen Garo, crossed the frontier and joined the Russian forces together with all the Armenian officers and men in the Ottoman Third Army. Huge amounts of arms and ammunition were stored all over Turkey, particularly at Olti, Sarikamis, Kağızman, and Iğdır, and these were used in arming the Armenians living in border villages and towns. Many Armenian citizens of the Ottoman state living in Eastern Anatolia defied the call for enlistment, and escaped to Russia, where they joined the Armenian organisation working against the Ottoman Empire. The Russians relocated the Moslem population in the Caucasus (Azerbaijan). Meanwhile many Russian weapons were discovered in the houses, schools and churches of the Armenians in the “Six Vilayets” and Armenian bands, consisting of army deserters began to attack and murder Moslem communities. The Armenian nationalists had sided with the Russians in three previous Russo-Turkish Wars (viz. 1827, 1856 and 1878).

After these developments, the Ottoman Third Army command began to realize that the Armenians were plotting a rebellion, principally in Van, Bitlis, Erzurum and Karahisar. Between November 1914 and May 1915, numerous such rebellions and insurgencies took place.

On 4 April, 1915 the Dashnaks from the Caucasus organized a revolt in the city of Van, calling on the Armenian citizens of the Ottoman state to show their loyalty to the Tsar by helping drive out the local Moslem population. The Russian army of the Caucasus began an offensive toward Van with the help of a large force of Armenian volunteers which contained large numbers of Ottoman

Armenian refugees and deserters. Leaving Erivan on 28 April, they reached Van on 14 May and set up an Armenian state under Russian protection, and during the next two days they carried out a general slaughter of the local Moslem population. The Armenian newspaper, *Gochnak*, published in the United States, reported on 24 May that "only 1,500 Turks remain in Van, the rest having been slaughtered." After Van, the Armenian and Russian forces drove into Bitlis vilayet.

Finally, on 27 May 1915 Talat Pasha, the Ottoman Minister of the Interior, in response to repeated appeals by the Army, put into effect a provisional law for the relocation of Armenians from the war zone to prevent a fifth column. This is what the Russians had done previously with their Moslem population in their border region. During these relocations many lives were lost due to starvation, disease, reprisal killings and excesses in the hands of certain officials who abused their powers. The Ottoman authorities tried and punished almost 2,000 officials who broke the official instructions calling for the safe passage of the the Armenians in transit.

Statistics and Propaganda

Armenian nationalists claimed initially that over one million Armenians were massacred during the war, a number which has been raised subsequently to 2 million, 2.5 million, etc. In fact, the total number of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire was not more than 1.3 million. At the end of the war about one million Ottoman Armenians were alive and accounted for: many had moved into what subsequently became the Soviet Armenia, and many who survived the terrible conditions of relocation ended up in Lebanon and Syria.

Estimates of Turkish losses are significantly higher. This is verified by Boghos Noubar, the chief Armenian delegate at the Peace Conference in Paris, quoted by Sonyel:

"... Although the losses of the Armenians are very great, those of the Turks in the course of the war have not been less. A German report gives 2,500,000 as the total losses of the Turks by war, epidemic, and famine which have caused terrible havoc owing to the improvidence and shortage of hospital personnel and medicine. At least half of these losses have been sustained by the population of the Armenian provinces... which have been invaded by both the Russian and Armenian armies..." (p.301).

TURKISH REVIEW

The book by Oke is a fine piece of scholarship which examines the Armenian Question from the perspective of international relations. Using extensive Turkish and European archival documents, it presents a convincing case that the road to the Relocations of 1915 was the end product of a long process of Great Power realpolitik. During the 19th century when the Concert of Europe was supposed to preserve the integrity of existing powers, the Great Powers systematically interfered in the Ottoman Empire by insisting on "reforms" ostensibly to resolve the Eastern Question. In fact, the Great Powers had their own agendas and territorial aims. They fuelled Armenian nationalist aspirations so long as destabilizing the Ottoman Empire from within was in their interest. But whenever Armenian national aims got in the way of Great Power objectives, the Armenians were quickly abandoned. This happened at the Treaty of Berlin in 1878 and again at the Paris Conference in 1919/20.

Oke's analysis of the Armenian Question in the 1919 Peace Conference is fascinating. He shows that during and immediately after the First World War Armenian Massacres were used as propaganda by the Allies to support the claim of Armenian independence. Yet, there was little justification for this claim as verified by the Harbord commission appointed by President Wilson to investigate the possibility of an American mandate over Armenia. The real objective of the Allies was to destabilize and dismember the Ottoman Empire. At the height of the Allied support for the Armenian cause at Paris in 1919, the Armenian nationalists "were giddy with a victory they had been unable to win" and began to make "unbelievable demands" (p. 152): Bogos Nubar, leader of the Armenian National Unity faction prevailed over rival Armenian delegations also present to push for not just the "six vilayets" in Eastern Anatolia, but Adana, Antakya and Hatay provinces in the Mediterranean, plus Trabzon on the Black Sea as well as part of Caucasia, to establish an "Armenian Empire". These demands conflicted with the territorial ambitions of Britain, France, Italy and Russia. Abandoned by the European powers, the Armenian hopes turned to the USA, but in the end these, too, were dashed when the Congress rejected the mandate project on grounds of demographic realities and military impracticability.

One of the important and little known facts, highlighted by the Oke book is the Turkish-Armenian friendship which developed briefly in 1918 when the Turkish forces were victorious in Eastern Anatolia in the wake of the Russian Revolution. This short-lived friendship is significant in as much as it demonstrated that, far from practising a policy of exterminating the Armenians, the Ottoman

Turks actually facilitated the only gain which Armenian nationalists were able to achieve, viz. the creation of the Republic of Armenia which the Ottomans had hoped would act as a buffer against the Russians. In the words of the contemporary Dashnak newspaper Hayrenik: "The Armenian Republic owes its establishment to Turkey." (p.150).

These three new books deserve to be read by all with a serious interest in this Ottoman tragedy. Hopefully, these works will contribute toward a more objective and balanced understanding of the history of the Armenian Question. The West has largely heard only one (i.e. Armenian) side of what actually took place in 1915. These books provide a useful beginning in redressing this imbalance. The final evidence on this human tragedy is not yet in. The recent announcement by the Turkish government to open the Ottoman archives to scholars will go a long way to establish the historical truth.

Footnotes

Şinasi Orel and Süreyya Yuca: The Talat Pasha 'Telegrams' Historical Fact or Armenian Fiction?, K.Rustem and Brother, Nicosia, P.O.Box 239, Northern Cyprus, 1986 (Printed at the Oxford University Printing House, Great Britain).

Salahi R.Sonyel, The Ottoman Armenians, K.Rustem and Brother, Nicosia, 1987. Mim Kemal Öke, The Armenian Question 1914-1923, K.Rustem and Brother, Nicosia, 1988.

