

TURKS AND ARMENIANS: THE OTTOMAN EXPERIENCE

If one seeks to characterize the six hundred year history of the Ottoman Empire (1299-1923), i.e., to define the Ottomans' *Weltanschauung* relative to their treatment of ethnic and religious minorities, the first word that comes to mind is toleration. In an early-modern world sharply divided by religion, the Ottoman attitude of tolerance towards peoples of all faiths seems remarkably modern. When Catholic Spain expelled her citizens of the Jewish faith and gave her Muslim inhabitants the choice of conversion or death, it was the Ottoman Empire, which opened its doors to tens of thousands of persecuted refugees. In fact, this was not an isolated phenomenon. In the following centuries, the Ottoman doors were thrown open to a wide variety of groups including Russian Old Believers, who refused to conform to the orthodoxy imposed by Peter the Great, and Polish refugees fleeing their homeland following the 1848 Revolution. In short, throughout its history, the Ottoman Empire remained a haven for religious and political refugees.

This policy of toleration was not without its costs for the Ottoman polity. Many scholars have noted that had the Ottomans followed a policy of forced assimilation and forced religious conversion (as they are mistakenly portrayed in much of Western literature as having done), they would have eliminated those very seeds of destruction that were to be fanned in the 19th century by currents of nationalism which emerged from the French Revolution. Stated differently, had they not guaranteed religious freedom to all the subject peoples and, instead followed a policy of forced conversion to Islam, by the beginning of the 19th century there would have been a band of Turkish-speaking Muslims stretching from the shores of the Adriatic Sea to the Indian Ocean. Nor would this have been an atypical pattern of behaviour in an era when European and North American Christians were busily spreading throughout the world their missions of conversion.

This, however, was not the Ottoman approach to the rule of subject peoples. To the contrary, the Christians and Jews of the Ottoman Empire were encouraged to preserve their own religious and social institutions. Consequently, it was the ethnic churches of the Serbs, Greeks, Bulgarians, and, later Armenians, which were to serve as the vehicles for the nationalist movements of all these Ottoman subjects.

This Ottoman tradition of religious tolerance did not die out with the empire. When the persecution of the German Jews began in the 1930s, hundreds of Jewish scholars were invited to Turkey where they were provided employment and a safe haven throughout the period of the *Holocaust*. Likewise, Turkish officials in Europe and Turkey were responsible for the rescue of thousands of Jewish refugees fleeing from Nazi persecution. Though relatively unknown in the West, this Turkish sense of hospitality, extended to visitor and refugee alike, is an aspect of the Turkish character well known to anyone who visits Turkey today.

It is against this historical background that one must measure the Turkish reaction to the claims that their forebears perpetrated 'genocide' against their Armenian citizens in the course of the First World War. For a people justly proud of their long history of religious and ethnic toleration, these claims strike into the very essence of the Turkish character as, on the one hand, patently ridiculous, and, on the other, as totally unjust.

In short, today we face a situation where large segments of Western public opinion have come to accept as genuine a version of history disseminated by former citizens of the Ottoman Empire, which bears little relation to the actual realities of the past. How did this situation develop, and what are the actual facts of the matter in question? These are the questions we must answer.

There can be little doubt but that the failure of successive post-World War I Turkish governments to respond to Armenian allegations has led to the current situation, i.e., for close to eighty-five years the Armenian version of Turco-Armenian history enjoyed an unchallenged audience in Western Europe and the United States of America. This occurred, not because Turks had no answer for these allegations, but rather as a conscious policy of the founders of the fledgling Turkish Republic, one of the many nation-states to emerge from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire in the wake of the

First World War. This attitude, perhaps best expressed in the well-known dictum of Mustafa Kemâl Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic: "*Peace at home, peace in the world*", stressed the future of the Turkish people, rather than their past. It did so for very specific reasons. A glance at the population of the newly founded republic in 1923 serves to illustrate this point. In 1923, close to a quarter of the inhabitants of Anatolia were refugees, Muslims, who as a result of the ever-increasing series of Ottoman military reverses culminating with the First World War had left their homes and all they owned in areas which today comprise parts of southern Russia, the Caucasus, the Crimea, Greece, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Rumania, etc., and fled to the heartland of the Ottoman state, Anatolia. Nor had their losses been confined to material goods. Millions of Muslims, most of them Turks, had been killed as a direct result of the nationalistic fever that attacked Ottoman territories in the decades between 1880 and 1923. All this suffering had culminated, with the Greek invasion of Anatolia in 1919 and the large-scale massacres of civilian populations, which accompanied it. This threat, overcome only by the complete mobilization of the Anatolian Muslim population, had created wounds and scars of enormous proportions among the survivors of this carnage. To heal the traumas thus created, Mustafa Kemâl and his associates consciously downplayed the sufferings of Turks at the hands of their former countrymen. The scope of this effort can be gauged by an examination of the contents of the history textbooks used in Turkish schools during the 1920s and 1930s. One may search long and hard to find any references to the well-documented Turkish suffering throughout this period. It is as if there was a conscious attempt to downplay any and all Turkish claims to former territories of the Ottoman state, even regions that had been part of the Ottoman polity for hundreds of years. Instead, the focus was always on the boundaries of the republic as established in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne and upon the future of the Turkish people.

As a corollary to this policy, an attitude of ignoring the claims of former Ottoman peoples outside the confines of the newly created state was also adopted. This was particularly true relative to the claims of the Armenians. These claims, however, did not fall on deaf ears in the West. Frequently packaged in a manner to appeal to Western prejudices, i.e., in Muslim versus Christian wrappings, they continued to circulate. Ironically, while having

little effect on the Westerners they were designed to influence, they had a major impact on subsequent generations of young Armenians. Indeed, with the passage of time, young Armenians in the Middle East, Western Europe and the United States began to accept as 'historical fact', what their forebears had promulgated as 'political propaganda'. Gradually, the nature and scope of such Armenian allegations grew in volume as well. Thus, the post-World War I Armenian claim that 600,000 Armenians had died in Anatolia during the war (this was the figure presented by leading Armenian spokesmen, such as Boghos Nubar Pa a, at the Paris Peace Conference), grew to a million, then a million and a half and, on occasion, even as high as two and a half million. One can not help but speculate that this growth stemmed from the fact that the *Holocaust* of about six million Jews in Western Europe during the Second World War was viewed by Armenians as having been a pivotal event in the establishment of the state of Israel, i.e., that Armenian propagandists may have deemed their own failure to realize their territorial ambitions as resulting from the fact that the 'scope' of their suffering was not sufficiently large to appeal to a Western audience accustomed to thinking of losses in the millions. Whatever the reasons, Armenian claims, unchallenged throughout the post-war period by Turkey, continued to expand.

Ultimately, these claims began to bear a deadly fruit. While failing to generate the desired effect among non-Armenians, they served to radicalize several groups of young Armenians in the 1970s. Misled by their elders into accepting propaganda claims as 'historical truth', these youth turned to terrorism as an outlet for the frustration they felt over the world's failure to respond to their 'cause' in what they deemed to be an appropriate manner. Throughout the second half of the decade of the 1970s and the early 1980s, several Armenian terrorist organisations struck out wildly at a wide variety of Turkish targets. Close to forty Turkish diplomats, most of who were not even born at the time of the alleged events, were assassinated in the name of 'justice for the Armenian cause'. While some felt a twinge of sympathy for the misguided perpetrators of these atrocities, the same cannot be said for their elders who knowingly sowed the seeds of lies and deceit, which bore the fruit of terrorism. While the perpetrators of the actual violence may be viewed as victims themselves, those who created the milieu that fostered them are as guilty of the crimes

they committed as if they had wielded the weapons of assassination.

What were the results of this terrorism? In addition to the human suffering it was responsible for, it created a certain interest in the Western media (an interest which the elder generation of Armenian spokesmen were quick to take advantage of), i.e., it created media opportunities for Armenian leaders to repeat their allegations against the Ottoman Empire on the television screens of North America and Western Europe. To the extent that these media opportunities may have exposed a larger number of non-Armenians to the Armenian 'claims', the senseless assassinations are indeed viewed by certain Armenian circles as having contributed to the overall aims of the 'Armenian cause'.

It was in another area (one totally unanticipated by the terrorists or their spokesmen), that the most important results of Armenian terrorism were to bear fruit. Namely, the unprovoked violence led to a Turkish reevaluation of the 'policy of silence' in the face of Armenian allegations, a silence that had existed for over seventy years. For the first time, awareness began to develop in Turkish academic circles, as well as governmental circles, that the Turkish policy of ignoring Armenian charges as unworthy of responses must be reconsidered. What had begun as an attempt to 'bury the past' and thereby close the wounds of the Turkish people in the aftermath of World War I, was being widely misinterpreted (and sold to the Western public opinion) by Armenian propagandists as a tacit Turkish acknowledgement of guilt, i.e., Armenians went so far as to claim that Turkish silence equalled Turkish guilt. This was the *bardağ ta ran son damla*, as is said in Turkish or 'the drop that made the cup run over'. Stated differently, the seventy-year old policy of "turning the other cheek", rather than leading to a healing of past wounds was now being cited in support of the contentions advanced by those who sought *via* violence to keep the past alive. To counter this situation was no easy task. Literally, hundreds of books and articles espousing the Armenian claims (the overwhelming majority of them by Armenian authors) had been published in the decades following the First World War. Anyone interested in the topic of Turco-Armenian history had to search a long-time to find a single study questioning the basic Armenian allegation that their forebears had been the victims of a premeditated 'genocide', planned and carried out by their Ottoman rulers under cover of World War I. Even the neces-

sary infrastructure for scholars wishing to pursue the study of the period was not in place. The vast archives of the Ottoman state, comprising well over one hundred million documents, were largely not catalogued. In particular, those documents from the closing decades of the 600-year Ottoman history were still not-catalogued and, consequently closed to scholars. The process of making these materials available to disinterested scholars was also hampered by the absence of sufficient numbers of archivists trained in Ottoman Turkish (note: Ottoman Turkish written in the Arabic script was replaced in 1928 by the Latin script in which modern Turkish is written), plus a lack of a sufficient budget to allow the archives to employ additional staff. In the past twenty years an infusion of funds has radically altered this situation for the better.

Today, the Ottoman archives (known as the *Ba bakanlık*, or the Prime Minister's Archives) are housed in a newly-built modern facility, several hundred additional staff have been trained as cataloguers, and close to 20,000 documents specifically relating to Turco-Armenian history during the First World War have been catalogued and are currently available to all scholars. Numerous volumes of these documents, with facsimiles of the original texts and translations into western languages, have been published under the editorship of archivists and Turkish experts on Ottoman history. In short, the foundations for the study of the real history of Turco-Armenian relations have been laid, and it is now up to scholars from all nations to reconstruct the actual history of the events in question. Turkey's political leaders have filled their responsibility to the past. The next step, that of utilizing these materials for the writing of an accurate version of the history of the period, must rest in the hands of scholars who are specialists in the study of Ottoman history. While politicians may well figure in history, and while they clearly have a debt to ensure that the raw materials out of which it can be written are made available to qualified experts, they have no function in its writing. The judgment of history is for others to make. In this case, for those scholars whose professional expertise encompasses the history in question.

Already, in the past two decades, a number of distinguished Turkish and foreign scholars have ventured into the hitherto uncharted waters of Turco-Armenian history. In this respect, names such as Türkkaya Ataöv, Nejat Göyünç, Kâmuran Gürün, Yusuf Halaçoğlu, Heath W. Lowry, Justin McCarthy, M. Kemâl Öke,

inasi Orel, Stanford J. Shaw, Salâhi Sonyel and Süreyya Yuca, come to mind. In the writing of this introductory essay I have benefited enormously from the pioneering studies penned by these experts, as well as from the opportunity to discuss the issues involved with several of them personally.¹ I feel the resulting profile to be a general outline of the parameters within which what will ultimately be accepted as the history of Turkish-Armenian relations is beginning to develop. What is emerging may be summarized under the following topic headings.

Background to Turco-Armenian History

As any student of the history of pre-Turkish Anatolia is well aware, the Armenian inhabitants of eastern Anatolia have had a long and troubled history. Situated primarily in the rugged mountainous areas of eastern Anatolia directly astride the invasion routes in and out of the region, the Roman, Persian, Byzantine, and Seljuk Empires successively ruled what Armenians traditionally call their 'homeland' prior to the establishment of Ottoman administration in the area in the 16th century. Under each of these ruling states the Armenian fate was similar. They served as mercenaries guarding the highlands, and as a reservoir for manpower. To illustrate this role, a case study of the part played by Armenians under Byzantium is germane. Divided by conflicting interpretations of Christianity (Armenians were Monophysites, i.e., they emphasised the 'divine' nature of Christ at the expense of the 'human', whereas the Orthodox Byzantine view was that in Christ there had occurred the union of the 'human' and 'divine' natures), repeated conflicts occurred throughout Byzantine history as the state attempted to enforce ecclesiastical union on the unruly Armenians. This state of affairs was to culminate in the mid-11th century when Kakig Bagratouni refused in 1065 to submit to union. He declared war on the Greek clergy and population of Anatolia and slew the Archbishop of Kayseri. He himself was killed before he could fulfil his announced intention of joining together with the invading Turkish forces.

A few years later, the Greeks of S vas (Sebasteia) complained to the Emperor Romanus IV that they had suffered more from the Armenians than from the Turks, and the Byzantine leader was forced to take great care to ensure that the Armenians did not

¹ I am especially indebted to Professors Türkkaya Ataöv (International Relations) and Heath W. Lowry (Turkish Studies). My thanks to both.

attack his armies. Indeed, when the Seljuk Turks established their initial foothold in eastern Anatolia *via* a decisive victory over Romanus IV at the Battle of Manzikert (Malazgirt) in 1071, they did so aided by the fact that all of the emperor's Armenian troops, as a result of religious animosity, deserted to a man on the field of battle.

Ironically, in light of later history, whenever the Byzantine rulers felt particularly threatened by the Armenians of eastern Anatolia they frequently resorted to a policy of forced resettlement, i.e., deportations, in an attempt to control their Armenian subjects. This phenomenon, particularly in the 10th and 11th centuries, resulted in the transfer of large numbers of Armenians into central Anatolia and along the littoral of the Black Sea coast in the Trabzon (Trebizond) region.

It is no exaggeration to state that Armenians played a not unimportant role as mercenaries in helping to establish Turkish rule in Anatolia. Armenian contingents served first in the Seljuk armies and later joined with Timur in defeating the Ottomans at the Battle of Ankara in 1402.

With the entry of the Seljuk Turks into Anatolia any Armenian claim of ruling in the eastern highlands came to an end. By the late 11th century, a number of Armenian princely families and their retainers had migrated south into the Cilician plains (Çukurova) where they established a series of border states which remained in conflict with the Syrian Mamelukes until the Ottomans incorporated the area in the second decade of the 16th century under Selim I.

Ottoman-Armenian Relations: 14th-15th Centuries

In all likelihood, the first real contacts between the Ottoman Turks and Armenians occurred following the conquest of Bursa in 1326, i.e., with the Ottoman acquisition of this key (Bithynian) Byzantine city that is known to have had a sizable Armenian community. The Armenian element in the Ottoman population was to further expand in the 15th century with the incorporation of the Byzantine capital of Constantinople (Istanbul) and the Black Sea coastal region of Trabzon into the Ottoman polity. In the following years as the Ottomans increased their hold over central Anatolia, the Armenians of cities such as Konya, Kayseri, and Sivas likewise joined the Ottoman state.

This sequence of events is highlighted in order to stress a key factor which is generally overlooked in the history of Turco-Armenian relations, namely, given the fact that during the first two hundred years of their history, the Ottomans encountered Armenians only as a numerically insignificant element spread thinly throughout the urban centers of their ever-expanding state. From the outset Turco-Armenian relations took a different form than Ottoman relations with conquered subject peoples in the Balkans. In the case of the Balkans, Ottoman rule necessarily consisted of a thin veneer of a ruling class superimposed over a predominantly non-Turkish Christian subject people. Be these subjects Greeks, Bulgarians, Rumanians, or Serbs, they were to remain a majority, or enjoy a plurality, of the local populaces to the end of empire, while the Turkish-Muslim ruling class was always a minority, though substantial, in the Balkans.

In contrast, a far different situation existed in Anatolia, much of which had already been under Turkish/Muslim rule for two centuries prior to the advent of the Ottomans on the scene of history. Here, the Ottomans inherited a well-established version of the classical system of Muslim rule in connection with the non-Muslim 'peoples of the book', i.e., Christians and Jews. According to the tenets of this system, non-Muslims who submitted to Muslim rule were to be treated with kindness, and their religious beliefs were to be protected by the Muslim ruler.

It is against this background that we must examine the relations between Turks and Armenians that developed in the 14th through the 16th centuries. Tradition affirms that by the mid-15th century the Ottoman ruler Mehmed the Conqueror established an Armenian Patriarch (religious head of the Armenian community) in his newly conquered capital Istanbul. Further, among the peoples he ordered brought to repopulate the shell of Byzantine Constantinople were Armenians from throughout central and western Anatolian towns and cities. These Armenians, together with Turks, Greek-Christians, and Jews, formed the ethnic blend of Ottoman Istanbul, remnants of which may still be seen in the city today.

Indeed, in the resulting amalgam of 'ethno-religious' groups that came to comprise the Ottoman body politic, the Armenians were to occupy a special place. The signs of this relationships, while too plentiful to be enumerated in their totality here, were

many: perhaps the most significant was that, alone of all the Ottoman subject peoples, a majority of Armenians (while retaining their religion) became predominantly 'Turcophonic', i.e., spoke Turkish as their first language. According to 19th century missionary reports, perhaps half of the Armenian population of Anatolia spoke only Turkish.

Another factor setting aside the Armenians from their fellow Christians in the Ottoman Empire was that they alone were exempted from the *devirme*, or periodic conscription of rural subject Christian boys into the *Kap Kullar* (Janissary Corps). These exemptions may well have stemmed from the point made earlier relative to the nature of early Ottoman-Armeno contacts, i.e., in the 14th century when this Ottoman institution was developed, the Armenians under Ottoman rule were primarily an urban population.

Key to our understanding of Turco-Armenian relations in the period of the 14th-15th centuries is recognition of the fact that during their climb from frontier emirate to world empire, the Ottomans never conquered any territories 'claimed' by Armenians. In point of facts, throughout this period those Armenians who did become Ottoman subjects did so as a minority population in regions added to the Ottoman domains at the expense of initially Byzantium, and later, of other Turkish emirates that replaced the Seljuk authority in Anatolia.

Turco-Armenian Relations in the 16th Century

It was with the Ottoman conquest of the Arab heartlands of the Islamic world, under Selim I in 1516, that Ottoman Turks and Armenians first came into contact with one another on the battlefield. However, they did so not as enemies but as allies, for the petty Armenian rulers in south-eastern Anatolia supported the Ottoman armies in their war against the Mamelukes of Syria, with whom these same Armenian dynasties had long been fighting.

Throughout the preceding half a millennium, the so-called Armenian homelands, the highlands of eastern Anatolia, had been more or less continuously devastated by a never-ending series of wars, invasions and raids. The initial entry of the Seljuks had been followed by the Mongol invasions, which in turn were supplanted by the conquest of Timurlenk in the late 14th and early 15th centuries. Then, the *Türkmen* dynasties of the Black and White

Sheep carried out their quarrels with negative demographic consequences in the region. Throughout these centuries, large numbers of the Armenian inhabitants had been depleted through death, emigration, and enslavement. More importantly, their place had been filled by enterprising Kurdish tribes from the south and south-east who entered the region turning it into an area as much Kurdish as Armenian in population. This was the status quo when Selim I added eastern Anatolia to his realm in the second decade of the 16th century. Here too, he did so, not by defeating Armenian armies, but by his victory over the Persian Safavids at Çald ran in 1514.

In short, a thorough search of the pages of history fails to establish any Ottoman expansion at the expense of anything resembling Armenian states, kingdoms or principates. To the contrary, the establishment of Ottoman suzerainty in areas where Armenians represented an element in the local population, far from representing a disruption in Armenian life, restored a stable central authority within which Armenians together with the other inhabitants were able to flourish and prosper.

Turks and Armenians as Citizens of the Ottoman Empire

Any attempt to come to terms with Turco-Armenian relations within the context of the Ottoman state must do so within the framework outlined above. That is a framework shaped by the historical realities of the period in question, rather than one viewed through the prism of 19th and 20th century Armenian nationalist rhetoric. It is also within this framework that we must weigh the validity, or lack thereof, of the Armenian claim that the Ottoman Turks who lived side by side with their Armenian neighbours for close to six hundred years suddenly decided to carry out a policy of racial extermination against their fellow citizens.

To make this evaluation we must weigh the claims of Armenian nationalists against the facts of the situation. First and foremost in this respect is the charge that the Armenians were a persecuted and mistreated non-Muslim minority in a Muslim polity that simply had no ability to tolerate such 'unbelievers'. Contrary to this assertion is the fact that the urban Armenian communities expanded and prospered as a result of the toleration and freedoms granted them by the Ottoman rulers. Indeed, over the centuries, they gained a status unequalled by any ethnic group (including, it might be argued: Turks) in the eyes of the sultans. It was as a

reflection of the special status enjoyed by this community that the oft-repeated title of 'the loyal community' (*millet-i sâd ka*) was frequently used in Ottoman sources to describe the empire's Armenian population. Nor was this situation one that flourished in the 16th century at the apex of Ottoman power and then completely disappeared by the 19th century. To the contrary, it was in the 19th century that a whole series of Ottoman Armenian families were to rise to prominence in the service of the state. Names such as the Duzians who held the key position of superintendents of the Ottoman mints, the Dadians who managed the imperial gunpowder factories, and the Balian, the family of architects who built numerous palaces, mosques, public buildings, and garrisons (many of which still grace the skyline of Istanbul today) come to mind when one considers the role played by Armenians in the final century of Ottoman rule.

Other Ottoman Armenians rose to prominence as wealthy bankers, merchants, and industrialists but it was in governmental service that this community was to make its real mark. The scope of Armenian contributions in this regard may be judged by the following breakdown of 19th century Armenian office holders:

- * Twenty-nine Armenians achieved the highest governmental rank of *pa a* (civilian generals);

- * There were twenty-two Armenian governmental *naz rs* (ministers). Among the posts they held were the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Finance, Trade and Posts;

- * Numerous Armenians headed governmental departments concerned with a variety of functions including agriculture, census, and economic development;

- * In the post-1876 *Meclis-i Mebûsân* (Parliament) there were thirty-three elected Armenian representatives;

- * In the provincial administrative apparatus there were literally hundreds of Armenian officials at all levels;

- * In the Ottoman diplomatic service there were a total of seven Armenian ambassadors and eleven Consul-Generals and Consuls;

- * In the academic community there were eleven Armenian university professors.

Far from being subjected to discrimination, relative to their numbers in the total population, Armenians may be said to have

enjoyed a favoured status in the 19th century governmental service.

It was in the cultural arena, however, that the full extent of Turco-Armenian symbiosis was to manifest itself. In the spheres of music, the performing arts, and the plastic arts Turks and Armenians developed a common cultural tradition. So deep was this co-operation that it is almost impossible to discuss Ottoman music, opera, or the performing arts without emphasizing the key role played by countless Armenians in their developments.

Again, this was not a tradition that disappeared with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Even today, Turkish music, arts, theatre, and photography all benefit from the contributions of members of Turkey's about 80,000 Armenian citizens.

Likewise, in the urban crafts and trades Turks and Armenians worked side by side. One only has to look at the surnames of prominent Armenian-Americans today (almost all surnames of western Armenians are Turkish in origins) to recognize this fact. As a case in point we may cite the name of California's former Governor George Deukmejian, i.e., in Turkish: George, son of the foundry man.

In short, within the framework of the Ottoman city Turks and Armenians lived and worked as one people. It can even be argued that in some areas of life Armenians benefiting from the traditional Ottoman attitudes of toleration enjoyed a favoured position.

As for the rural countryside, here too, Armenians were on parity with their Turkish neighbours. Both lived in poverty, both suffered from the exactions of the ever-hungry tax collectors, both were looked down upon by their city cousins. Here, however, the Armenian peasants enjoyed two very important advantages over their Muslim neighbours. First, their exemption from military service in return for a nominal tax. In the last century of Ottoman rule when being drafted into the military meant an enlistment of some ten years, and when the mortality rate in the Ottoman army was extremely high, this was a not insignificant advantage. Second, and perhaps even more important throughout the course of the 19th century, an ever-increasing number of foreign missionaries, consular officials and travellers began to interest themselves in the 'plight' of the Armenian peasant. Unfortunately for their equally destitute Muslim neighbours, no such foreign intervention operated on their behalf.

Stated differently, at a time when no one, Turk or foreigner, interested themselves in the plight of the Muslim peasants, a whole variety of sympathetic Christian voices were increasingly making themselves heard on behalf of the poor, persecuted rural Armenians.

No one can deny that the lot of peasants in the 19th century Ottoman Empire was far from pleasant. While not as harsh as that of the Russian serf to the North, when measured by the standards of the late 20th century, Ottoman peasant life was harsh enough. One can and must, however, deny the allegation that Armenian peasants enjoyed a worse fate than that of their Muslim neighbours. Both suffered equally, the only significant difference being that voices of indignation were raised on behalf of the Armenians while the plight of the Turks remained unsung.

It is against this background that we must examine the fate of the Ottoman Armenians in the period between 1860 and 1923, which may be described as an era of collapse.

Armenian Nationalism and the Ottoman Collapse

While a detailed analysis of Turco-Armenian relations in the half-century preceding World War I is outside the scope of this paper and indeed must await the writing of a number of scholarly monographs by experts in the 'fields', it is possible at this time to set forth in skeletal form the parameters within which these questions must ultimately be approached.

Key to our understanding of the problem at hand is recognition of the effect upon the Ottoman psyche, of the steady loss of territories and consequently revenues, resulting from the pattern of successful Balkan nationalist uprisings throughout the course of the 19th century. One by one, long-held Ottoman provinces such as Serbia, Greece, and Bulgaria underwent separatist nationalist movements, each of which contributed to the further weakening of an already crumbling empire. The pattern of these uprisings were almost monotonous in their similarity to one another: a resurgence of national feelings, the origins of which are traceable to the various national churches; claims of Ottoman oppression, which were designed to secure the sympathies of a Christian Europe, were invariably couched in terms of Muslim persecution of innocent Christian peoples; organisation of revolutionary nationalist committees, each of which ultimately

utilised selective terrorism against Muslim targets knowing full well that the cycle of massacres and counter-massacres thus inspired would serve to buttress their claims of persecution; European support in the form of political pressure *vis-à-vis* the weakened Ottoman Government on behalf of the national group in question; armed uprisings, generally also with the support of one or another European state against Ottoman authority; Ottoman defeat with the consequent suffering of the Muslim inhabitants of the region in question; the ultimate establishment of a new nation-state in what had long been Ottoman territory; and finally, the retreat into Anatolia of thousands and thousands of embittered Turkish Muslim survivors, again eventually adding up to millions, each of whom had experienced first hand what was meant by the granting of national rights to Ottoman Christian subject peoples, namely: widespread death, suffering, and financial loss for the Muslims of the region.

This recurrent cycle of successful Christian nationalism and subsequent Turkish suffering could not help but scar the psyches of, not only those who experienced its effect first hand, but also of those who witnessed the steady stream of homeless refugees who descended initially on Istanbul and then ultimately found their way to other regions of Anatolia. In short, by 1880 there can hardly have been a Muslim in Anatolia who was unaware of what was to be expected when a subject Christian ethnic group gained their 'independence'. The pattern had been established, and all the players knew the rules.

Significantly, throughout this period of upheavals one, and one alone, of the Christian ethnic groups in the empire remained largely unaffected by the rising tide of nationalism: this was the *millet-i sâd ka*, the faithful Armenians. Three factors seem to have contributed to this situation: (a) the commingling of Turks and Armenians which existed in almost every city and town of the empire, i.e., the *de facto* geographically dispersed nature of the Armenian people, which meant the lack of a homogeneous population base in a specific region of the state; (b) the relatively economic well-being of the 'urban' Armenian population, which shared a common culture and language with the Muslim Turks; and, (c) the integration into the Ottoman ruling class (the bureaucracy) of large numbers of Armenians between 1850 and 1880. In short, the fact that large numbers of the educated urban Armenians had reason to be satisfied with the *status quo*.

This was a fair approximation of the prevailing situation up to the decade of the 1890s. While throughout the period of the *Tanzimat* (Reform era) there were numerous Armenian voices raised with demands for improved conditions and a lessening of measures viewed as restrictive, these were the same kind of demands being made on behalf of the empire's Muslim population as well. That is, the Armenian desires were formulated as part and parcel of the same sentiments found in all segments of the population and, rather than assuming a nationalist guise, they fell under the category of a demand for increased human rights.

It was with the creation of two revolutionary Armenian committees, the Hinchag Committee formed in Geneva, Switzerland in 1887, and the Dashnag Committee, organised in Tiflis (Tbilisi), Georgia in 1890, that Armenian national aspirations began to assume the more classical form which the Ottomans had come to know and fear in the previous half-century. From the outset both the Hinchags and the Dashnags adopted 'terror' as a primary tactic in their struggle, the ultimate aim of which was the 'liberation' of the Armenian 'homeland' of eastern Anatolia from Ottoman rule. In retrospect, one factor emerges which seemed to have preordained the efforts of these youthful revolutionaries to ultimate failure: namely, their inability to comprehend the demographic reality that what they viewed from a historical perspective as the 'Armenian homeland', was, by the end of the 19th century, the 'homeland' for a great many peoples the absolute majority of whom did not happen to be Armenians. This lacuna, an awareness of which is markedly absent in all the published 'revolutionary' writings of the period, meant that tactics developed in the Balkans (where the Christian ethnic groups had been a majority in the territories they sought to 'liberate' from Ottoman rule) were doomed to fail when applied in a region where the ethnic group in question was but a Christian minority in a Muslim sea.

A second factor, which seems to have escaped the youthful revolutionaries, was the build up of fear that the earlier Balkan nationalist movements had engendered in the Ottoman body politic. This fact, in conjunction with the stark reality that the Armenian revolutionaries sought the liberation of not a far-flung appendage of the dwindling Ottoman territories, but, rather a significant piece of the Ottoman homeland of Anatolia, likewise, does not seem to have entered into the calculations of either the Dashnags or the Hinchags.

Yet another element missing from their calculations was a comprehension of the fact that a growing spirit of Turkish nationalism was beginning to take root among certain segments of the Ottoman population, in particular among the ever-swelling refugee groups. Increasingly, these efforts were focusing on a vision of Anatolia as a Turkish homeland.

Blindly, the Armenian revolutionaries embarked on the precedent established by their earlier Balkan counterparts. Propaganda and terror were the two key elements in this already proven successful formula. Attacks on Ottoman officials (including Armenian ones), isolated strikes against Muslim villages, forming of armed revolutionary cadres throughout Anatolia, were all implemented with the desired result. In the face of these activities, Muslims struck out blindly in response, and the revolutionaries gained fuel for their anti-Turkish propaganda efforts in Europe and North America. Gradually, the stage was set for the next act of the drama: European intervention on behalf of yet another poor, persecuted Christian minority– ‘the victim of untold atrocities as a result of their religious beliefs at the hands of fanatical Muslim Turks’.

There was, however, one miscalculation of the Armenian revolutionaries yet remaining: specifically their failure to factor into their equations the outbreak of what was to become the First World War. This event, more than any other single miscalculation, was to signal the collapse of Armenian nationalist aspirations *vis-à-vis* the Ottoman state.

In the decade preceding the beginning of the war, the Dashnags, who had emerged as the most significant of the Armenian revolutionary committees, had been working hand in hand with the Young Turks, i.e., the *tihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti* (Committee of Union and Progress), the very group now ruling the state, and likewise the proponents of the growing spirit of Turkish national consciousness. In short, these two groups of revolutionaries knew one another very well. Prior to the outbreak of the war in August of 1914, the Young Turk leaders met with the Dashnags in the eastern Anatolian city of Erzurum in an effort to gain their pledge of support when war did come. Contrary to their pledge of not to act against Ottoman interests, a secret Dashnag party congress held two months earlier had already determined to use the anticipated conflict as an opportunity to mount an all-out

attack on the Ottoman state. In the words of the Armenian historian, Louise Nalbandian, the Armenian revolutionary committees considered that "[t]he most opportune time to institute the general rebellion for carrying out the immediate objective was when Turkey was engaged in a war".²

Indeed, in keeping with this plan, no sooner had Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire, than the official organ of the Dashnag's **Horizon** declared that the Armenians had taken their place on the side of the Entente states without showing any hesitation whatsoever. It added that they had placed all their forces at the disposition of Russia, and they had also formed volunteer battalions.

Nor were the Dashnags merely talking. When in March of 1915 the Russian armies began their invasion of eastern Anatolia, the Armenians of Van rose against their state on 11 April 1915. It was this armed rebellion, which led to the Ottoman decision to relocate Armenians away from the war zones. Within weeks of the Van uprisings, the genesis of the relocation plan is seen in a secret communiqué on 2 May 1915, from Enver Pa a, the Deputy Commander-in-Chief, to Talât Bey, the Minister of the Interior:

"The Armenians around the periphery of Lake Van, and in other regions which are known to the governor of Van, are engaged in continuous preparations for revolution and rebellion. I am of the opinion that this population should be removed from these areas and that this nest of rebellion be broken up.

"According to information provided by the commander of the Third Army, the Russians, on April the 20th, began expelling their Muslim populations by pushing them without their belongings across our borders. It is necessary, in response to this action, and in order to reach the goals that have been outlined above, either to expel the Armenians in question to Russia or to relocate them and their families in other regions of Anatolia. I request that the most suitable of these alternatives be chosen and implemented. If there is no objection, I would prefer to expel the creators of these centers

² Louise Nalbandian, **The Armenian Revolutionary Movement: the Development of Armenian Political Parties through the Nineteenth Century**, Berkeley, Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1975, p. 111.

of rebellion and their families outside our borders, and to replace them with the Muslim refugees pushed across our borders”.³

The importance of this document should not be overlooked, for it clearly establishes that the purpose behind what became the Ottoman decision to collectively relocate the Armenians was one based on military and security needs and not an attempt to annihilate the Armenian population of Anatolia.

Was there reason for the Ottoman authorities to fear the spread of the Van uprising? Indeed, there was. The Russian army units, which were advancing at that very moment towards Van, were accompanied by Armenian units led by the former Ottoman Parliamentarian representing Erzurum, Karekin Past rmac yan (Gareguine Pasdermadjian), who now assumed the revolutionary name of “Armen Garo”. Other Armenian parliamentarians, including Hamparsum Boyac yan (Hambartsum Boyajian) and Yetvart Papazyan, were likewise leading Armenian guerilla forces in eastern Anatolia.

It is important to recollect at this point that the Ottoman decision to close the offices of the revolutionary committees throughout the towns and cities of Anatolia was likewise taken in the aftermath of the Van uprising. Just two weeks after the beginning of the Armenian rebellion in Van, orders were issued on 24 April 1915, to close the committee headquarters and to arrest the leaders of these groups.

Yet another month was to pass before the suggestion advanced by Enver Pa a, relative to relocating Armenians away from the war zones was implemented, that is, before the transfer of people began.

One thing should be clear at this point: the relocations and the resultant human suffering which ensued stemmed not from a “premeditated plan for the extermination of the Armenian inhabitants of Anatolia”, as is repeatedly alleged by Armenian propagandists, but as a direct result of the activities of several groups of misguided Armenian revolutionaries, chief among whom were the Dashnags. Ironically, it is the political descendants of these same Dashnags, who, still today propagate the Armenian claims of

³ **Askeri Tarih Belgeleri Dergisi** (Journal of Military History Documents), 81 (December 1982), Document No. 1830.

“genocide”. There can be little doubt that their intent in so doing is partially designed to cover the enormity of their own crimes against their fellow Armenians.

Was there no Ottoman guilt in the resulting fate of the Anatolian Armenians? Perhaps, there was. But not the guilt of having designed and carried out a planned “genocide” of their Armenian citizens; it was the guilt of not having been able to protect *all* Ottoman citizens, including all Muslim groups, during the carnage of the First World War. Certainly, in retrospect it is easy to fault the Ottomans for having ordered the relocation of several hundred thousand Armenian civilians at a time when they had neither the manpower nor resources to ensure that they safely reached their intended destinations. Likewise, they may be faulted for having embroiled the Ottoman state in a world war, without having the necessary means at their disposal to ensure that hundreds of thousands of Muslim and Christian inhabitants alike were fed, were not subject to cholera and typhus epidemics, etc. However, in retrospect, one thing is clear: enormous numbers of Anatolian Muslim and Armenian non-combatants lost their lives in the years between 1915 and 1923. One cannot focus only on the sufferings of the Armenians while totally ignoring the fate of the Muslims.

In the final analysis, we must insist on viewing the question of Turco-Armenian relations within the context of the political developments of the period. One cannot in all fairness ignore the effects successful Balkan nationalist movements had on the attitude with which the Ottomans responded to what they justly understood to be yet another attempt at ethnic independence. They were likewise aware with the outbreak of World War I that the Ottoman state was engaged in a life and death struggle. Consequently, it is within this framework that we must place the Turkish reaction to the treasonous activities of the Armenian revolutionaries. At times, the Ottomans failed to distinguish between actual revolutionaries and innocent peasants. But this must be weighed against the fact that they were engaged in a world war on about half a dozen simultaneous fronts. Here one can not help but cite the Japanese-American resettlement of the Second World War to illustrate the manner in which even an enlightened 20th century democracy can overreact to perceived threats in wartime. Unlike the West coast of the United States in the 1940s, where not a single Japanese-American was involved in treasonous

activities, eastern Anatolia in 1915 was torn by rebellion on the part of large numbers of native Armenians who actively collaborated with the invading Russian enemy. With neither modern means of transport, communication or supply at hand it was easy for officials living in Istanbul to fall back on the traditional Ottoman policy of *sürgün*, forced relocation, as a solution to a political military problem. In the same way these officials ordered hundreds of thousand of Muslim civilians to evacuate the region in the face of the impending occupation (without giving adequate and detailed consideration to such basic questions as how these refugees were to sustain life), they too ordered the deportation of the Armenians. In both instances, the effect upon the deportees was tragic. Death came in many ways: at the hands of pillaging tribesmen, as a result of lack of proper nutrition or simple starvation, and, perhaps most significantly, as a result of repeated epidemics of cholera and typhus which swept the deportee and refugee columns alike. None of these causes of death cared whether their victims were Muslim or Christians, none distinguished between Turk and Armenian.

In closing, we must not lose sight of the fact that two conflicting nationalisms, vying for a single piece of real estate came into conflict in Anatolia during the period of the First World War. In the words of Bernard Lewis, the great contemporary Middle Eastern historian, "it was a struggle, however unequal, about real issues". As might have been anticipated by any objective observer, the winner in this struggle was bound to be the fourteen million Anatolian Muslims not the (less-than) one-and-a-half million Anatolian Armenians. Unfortunately for all concerned, the Armenian revolutionaries who precipitated the foment of rebellion, and henceforth must bear the brunt of the responsibility for its outcome, were neither objective nor observers. They were, as are their ideological descendents today, protagonists who actively sought to implant their skewed dreams on what had been for hundreds of years the *Anatolian homeland of the Turks*.

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