

REMOVING MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT TURKISH-ARMENIAN RELATIONS

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The White House statement, 22 April 1997, on Armenian-Turkish relations during the First World War, apparently publicised on the occasion of what is portrayed as 'Remembrance Day', needs comment and correction through academic probing.

24 April was the day when the Ottoman authorities arrested 235 Armenians in Istanbul, then the Ottoman capital. These arrests were made in response to an Armenian revolt in the far eastern Anatolian city of Van. They were followed by the massacre of Muslims in Van and the Armenian co-operation with the approaching Russian army, and the eventual relocation of groups of Armenians believed to have committed seditious acts in what was, after all, wartime—conduct which we call today terrorism or treason.

The US president's selectively focussed and inaccurate statement does not include, even for purposes of some semblance of fair treatment, the following: that there was armed revolt in several strategic places; officials were being assassinated; Muslim quarters and villages were being attacked; the blood of other ethnic and religious groups was being shed; homes of peaceful citizens were being burned; arsenals were being looted; telegraph lines were being destroyed, and the like.

There is ample evidence of the existence and the recurrence of such outrageous crimes, summarily condemned by domestic and international law, not only in the singularly rich Ottoman archives, but also in the writings of various Western witnesses and analysts, and even in the confessional memoirs of Armenian leaders. Some of the latter put up a big front boasting that they have caused bloodshed. Most of this material is printed in the USA. In any case, the Government of the Republic of Turkey presented microfilms of pertinent Ottoman documents to the leading libraries of the world, including the US Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. Non-Turkish sources attesting to armed Armenian assaults and the slaughter caused are also available in the same libraries. Some of them, such as the celebrated 'Manifesto' of Hovhannes Katchaznoui, the first prime minister of the independent Armenian Republic in the early 1920s, on account of their criticism of Armenian policies and actions, have been systematically eliminated from these centres of public service, and probably destroyed.

It is important to remember that Armenian terrorism cannot be placed side by side with the American suspicions that led to the apprehension of citizens of Japanese ethnic background on the eve of the Second World War. The White House statement's reference to the "noble response" of the Armenians is an even more extreme position than the expressions of some other writers to the effect that the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire "had not been all angels." Allow me to remind that some US citizens have presented scholarly papers in international fora on the ingredient of continuity between nineteenth and twentieth century Armenian terrorism. They have underlined in academic frameworks that historians who venture into reality long enough to examine the activities of Armenian terrorists were immediately struck by the high degree of similarity between the stated aims, tactics and rhetoric of later terrorist groups and those of the earlier epochs.

Knowing the official American stand against contemporary terrorism, one hopes that a lack of proper reference to the role of terrorism and bloodshed does not feed the young who perceive in such behaviour national heroism and role models. History is not repetition, but contains some lessons. The failure to openly condemn Armenian terrorism of the last decades of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century contributed to the Armenian terrorist activities that started in 1975, -by the way, in Los Angeles, U.S.A. In both cases, Armenian terrorism was rooted in a false view of history. In addition, references to ever-growing figures of massacred Armenians, at times quoted by the same author in successive articles printed within a short span of time, indicate a seemingly incurable inclination to bias and the distortion of information.

The Armenian-Turkish controversy is part of Ottoman history, and as such, Turkish material is indispensable. If one wishes to establish what Turkish policies had been in respect to the Armenians some eight decades or more ago, the Ottoman archives constitute the primary sources, just as American documents are essential for the treatment of US positions on any issue or country. But linguistic and historical training are imperatives for proper utilisation of such relevant material, and in the case of Turkish studies that involves serious preparation encompassing decades.

Some of us, on the other hand, seized the opportunity of studying American history and share the thought that an appropriate date for a Remembrance Day on American soil might be either 29 November, which marks Colonel Chivington's attack on a Cheyenne encampment near Fort Lyon in 1861, striking without warning, in spite of a signed treaty of peace, taking no prisoners but even scalping screaming women and children pleading for mercy. Or the last days of December, after US soldiers opened fire in 1890 on Oglala Sioux dancers at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, killing not only them, but also the hopes of the original inhabitants of the Americas. Rather than describing this process as part of "Manifest Destiny", one may treat the demotion of the original Americans to the status of the poorest and the most depressed ethnic group in the United States as "one of the darkest chapters" in history, a description unfairly attributed to the Turks in the White House statement.

Focussing on the events of 1915 within the Ottoman Empire, one may also correct in passing that the channelling of Armenians to a new place was not deportation, but a relocation (both of which may nevertheless be unpleasant), because all new destinations were within the frontiers of the Ottoman state. A great majority of the relocated Armenians reached their destinations, and that crucial fact is admitted by some Armenians such as Bogos Nubar, the head of the Armenian delegation at Versailles, in his official letter to the French foreign minister in 1918. Some of them, supposedly massacred by Turks, had willingly become immigrants in Tsarist Russia.

One should also note that the Ottoman census of 1914, which a number of American historians consider as reliable, indicates that there were 1,294,851 Armenians living on Ottoman soil. This total figure is less than the figure that the White House statement selected to quote, a figure allegedly indicating the loss of Armenian lives. It should be significant that almost all of the opinion-forming leaders of various societies make no reference to Turkish losses. This "egoism of victimisation", coined as such by John E. Mack, leaves little or no room for empathy for one's enemy's losses.

Moreover, it is unscientific as well as unfair to describe Armenians as mere victims and the Turks as brutal victimisers. There is also a history of Turks as victims, a role in which they are not usually seen but is scholarly treated by an American professor- Justin McCarthy. For about a whole century (1821-1922), it was the Turks who were the main victims. The Turkish losses began with the Greek revolt, which set a pattern for the rest of the Christians in the Ottoman Empire. It is a historical fact that some of the other Christians followed the Greek example of creating a nation-state through the process of massacring or expelling Turks and other Muslims. The policy of ridding regions of their Turkish population through mass killings and forced migration in the name of national independence, was repeatedly witnessed in successive wars.

Creating a new nation-state by eliminating the Turks and other Muslims in the vast territories of the Balkans, the Crimea and its hinterland, and the Caucasus was a principle followed by the Greeks, Bulgarians, Russians and Armenians. The suffering of the Turks was ironic because had the Turks been the same kind of nationalists as the Greeks or the Armenians, they would in their days of power have driven the Christians out and all these lands would have remained Turkish or Muslim. Had the Turks not been tolerant in the fifteenth century and indulged, on the contrary, in ethnic cleansing, they would have survived on lands where they had stayed for about five centuries. In each of the nineteenth and twentieth century wars in the region, the Turks were massacred and forced from their homes. Millions of them died, and millions more were exiled. No understanding of Armenian, Balkan, Caucasian, Crimean and Turkish history is possible without presenting the fate of the Turks and other Muslims in an objective manner.

It is certainly true that the Armenians established "vibrant and prosperous communities throughout the world." The influence of the Armenians, talented and hard-working wherever they may be, on

American life is also noteworthy. I had the pleasure of personally meeting some of them, for instance, the late nuclear physicist and Armenian-American Vazken Parsagian, and it is not just a coincidence that I have rendered into Turkish and published some of the works of William Saroyan.

But it should also be noted that the Armenian-American community is a powerful group, which wants to use its preponderance for aims of its own. Interest groups translate economic power into social power and share with parties and formal state structures the function of transforming social power into political decisions to serve particular and selected purposes. Political parties rely on the support of such groups to make their appeal to the electorate effective. They need various pressure groups for growth and sometimes for mere survival. One may add that the association between militant Armenian-American circles and the formal decision-making bodies in the United States are of such a reciprocal character.

The same Armenian circles pursued an intense campaign to enter the halls of the Holocaust museum in Washington, DC in early 1993, on the coat-tails of world Jewry. The Armenian drive to set into motion a connecting link with the Jewish genocide was unfair both to the Jews and the Turks. The former had truly suffered a genocide and the latter stood out as a nation stretching a helping hand to the Jews in the most distressing periods of their history.

It is also true that the Armenian dream of a "free and sovereign Armenian state" has become a reality. In connection with this dream one may refer as well to the three United Nations Security Council resolutions, which are highly critical of each step of Armenian aggression and occupation of neighbouring Azerbaijan's territories, including Nagorno-Karabakh. It may safely be assumed that the "commitment to peace and stability in the Caucasus" that the White House statement refers to, requires respect for territorial integrity and discouragement of such aggression and occupation.

It is generally acknowledged that historically the Americans have a strong sense of fair play—even in war. They are known to have insisted on their rights but granted the same to others. They do not want to be seen in the position of aggressor. The American Civil War could not begin until each side decided by itself that it was not the one to have started the aggression. The Americans have treated General Lee, the Confederate commander, as one of their heroes, but the US president who started the Mexican War on the doubtful assumption that American blood had been shed on the country's soil went down in history as 'Polk the mendacious'. When General G.E. Pickett, who had served the Confederate cause had a child, the Yankees lit bonfires, and when the famed Irish Brigade of T.F. Meagher charged up Marye's Heights to inescapable death, the Confederates cheered their gallantry.

It is regrettable that the text of the White House statement joins the group of widely-circulated but unacademic statements that reflect only a one-sided victimisation in Armenian-Turkish relations. Such persistence, not only fails to reflect historical fact, even during the year 1915, but also prevents reconciliation. Cure demands impartiality and fairness.