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A Unique Experiment on Understanding Turkish/Armenian Relations

By Gerard Libaridian and Fatma Muge Gocek →

During the winter 2007 term the two authors of this article offered a course titled “Turkish/Armenian Relations since the 19th Century.” Co-teaching, even across departments, is not new, nor is teaching on Turkish and Armenian history. The novelty consisted in the experiment to tackle this—one of the most difficult and politically and emotionally loaded historical and historiographic problem—as a single course, taught jointly by an ethnic Turkish and ethnic

Armenian scholar.

To the best of our knowledge, this was the first time such an experiment had been made and not only at the University of Michigan, but anywhere and anytime. And for good reason. It takes more than scholarship to engage in such an experiment.

The study of Turkish-Armenian relations has been consumed by the fateful events that took place in the Ottoman Empire during World War I when, as a result of the policies of the Committee of Union and Progress Party, somewhere around one million Armenians perished and the rest became refugees in neighboring lands. Armenians, most scholars of the period, and genocide specialists recognize these events as genocide or characterize them as genocidal. Official Turkish history, promoted by the state, disagrees. Most Turks are unaware of the events or know only what the state conveys to them. This dimension, touching upon identities and collective memory, has deepened the scope of the problem. For some time now, the academic and the political have intersected and interacted on so many levels as to make it almost impossible to have a normal discussion on the subject without feeling entrenched in a battlefield where the vital interests of two irreconcilable entities—and identities—are in a state of constant conflict. These battles have also been internationalized and moved to the halls of the U.S. Congress, the European Union Parliament, and the many legislative houses of Europe, Canada, and the Middle East. The international press has an unusual number of articles on the attempts of Diasporan Armenian communities to have states recognize the events as genocide or criminalize denial and on the Turkish state's counter attempt to block such actions. Interest in the issue was intensified with the assassination in Istanbul of the highly respected Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink and the use and abuse by Turkish prosecutors of a Turkish law that has criminalized "insulting Turkishness." A full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* called on the Turkish government to recognize its past and the two sides to seek reconciliation. The ad was signed by dozens of Nobel Laureates led by Elie Wiesel.

One of us, Gocek → (Sociology Department), has been engaged in the subject for some time. She started to question the silences in the official ideology of the Turkish state when, upon her arrival in the United States, she was confronted with questions by American-Armenians as to why she had massacred their great grandparents; she did not know how to respond. Rather than getting emotional

about this prejudiced reception, she decided to research what was going on and eventually decided to write a book on Turkish state denial. She is currently researching the memoirs of some 400 contemporaries to the fateful events that brought to an end the Ottoman Empire as well the three millennia long existence of Armenians on most of their historic homeland.

The other, Libaridian (History Department), had taught a course on Turkish/Armenian Relations at Tufts University in 1987 and, again, at Michigan in 2005. He had tried to present all sides of the issue in both courses, but was still dissatisfied, despite many years of research and a large number of publications on the subject. He felt that what he was doing was little more than juxtaposing opposite views; his was a step forward, but did not amount to the integration of the two separate narratives that had evolved over decades. History had happened in the same place and at the same time to peoples who had lived—and died—together for so long. The son and grandson of survivors, he grew up with the stories of his grandfather and how, as an Armenian soldier in the Ottoman army, the grandfather survived that killing machine.

As difficult as these journeys had been, nonetheless, they were not sufficient in and of themselves to produce such a unique experiment.

We met for the first time in 1986 at Princeton University where Gocek → was a graduate student; Libaridian presented a paper at a conference organized by the newly established Institute for Turkish Studies in Washington, D.C. He was the token Armenian at the conference titled “Minorities in the Ottoman Empire.” Libaridian’s approach to the problem offered a political and economic explanation for the genocide—beyond the ethnic dimension. That was the first encounter—both personal and intellectual.

The second encounter occurred some 13 years later, at the first meeting of what is now known as the Workshop for Turkish/Armenian Scholarship (WATS), at the University of Chicago. Gocek → and Ronald Suny, currently Charles Tilly Collegiate Professor of Political and Social History at U-M, played a major role in convening that first, very tentative workshop. WATS, the winner of the 2006 Academic Freedom Award of the Middle East Studies Association, has continued meeting almost annually and is one of the most successful Turkish-Armenian joint efforts attempted in the last 15 years. At that meeting, Libaridian was an invited speaker. Since then, Libaridian has joined the University of Michigan

faculty and, together with ← Gocek → and Suny, he has been a co-organizer of WATS meetings. The organization of such meetings between Turkish, Armenian, and Western scholars on the subject year after year has shown that no progress is possible without the respect that each organizer and participant has for the intellectual integrity of the others.

Yet, even such close cooperation was not sufficient to think of teaching a jointly-taught course or making it a success. (And how would one define success, anyway?)

The first issue was how to organize such a course. We started by tackling the list of topics for the lectures, what needed to be covered. Somehow we ended up with roughly an equal amount of topics between the two of us. Then we decided on which one of us would cover a given topic, depending on our areas of knowledge. Finally, we agreed on the following formula, given the two 90-minute sessions per week: the main lecturer of the session would make a 50-minute presentation; the other would reply, question, contradict, or complement what the main lecturer had said for another 15 minutes, and then discussion would ensue.

The pedagogical experiment consisted in testing the possibility of producing the principles of a “common body of Turkish-Armenian history.” Within the context of WATS, the two of us had started designing a mini-project: Could we write the history of a town such as Agn (in Armenian) or Egin in Turkish (currently named Kemaliye), a not-so-important place in central Anatolia with no history of otherwise controversial events, where both Armenians and Turks lived and where there are no Armenians left today? While the latter would be a study on the micro-history level, the course would test our intellectual and scholarly progress on the macro-history level.

The course turned into an intellectual experience of the highest magnitude. Even before the first lecture was ever delivered, each of us knew the two narratives, agreed on the major outline of history. We knew history, in a general sense.

Or we thought we knew. It was not so much a struggle over the use of the term “genocide” which characterizes battles elsewhere; Libaridian uses it, ← Gocek → does not feel comfortable with it. Rather, it was when one of us considered an event a “detail” or disregarded a phenomenon altogether, and the other considered the

same detail or phenomenon as having a major impact. One such example was the 1896 takeover of the headquarters of the Ottoman Bank in Istanbul, the symbol of Western capitalist interests, by Armenian revolutionaries who wanted to attract the attention of the great powers to massacres of Armenians taking place in the Eastern provinces of the Empire. The Ottoman Bank incident may have constituted the first incident of urban guerrilla warfare in modern times. Libaridian failed to mention this in his lecture; it was one of many acts in the history of revolutionary parties. ← Gocek →'s commentary pointed to the incident as a turning point in the thinking of ruling Ottoman-Turkish leaders, given the impact it had on their thinking regarding the actions of Armenian revolutionaries. In her mind, this was a turning point. The cumulative impact of these "subtle" differences turned the course into an experience for us, a wrenching intellectual and emotional experience. It had been one thing to meet and discuss issues thematically or randomly; it was another thing to cover the long period systematically, week after week, in detail. This is where we started finding the levels of interconnectedness, at least in terms of our reconstruction of that tragic history.

Students, registered at full capacity, found the course to be as exciting and enlightening, although not necessarily for all the reasons we did. To witness two distinct narratives beginning to intersect and complement each other in a classroom was a first for them, too.

As for the two of us, we are still trying to come to terms with the impact of the course. We had all the lectures videotaped; we will need to go over that painful yet exhilarating experience to make the most of it for the future. But we have no doubt that the experiment was successful; what we ourselves learned is evidence of success.

Gerard Libaridian is Alex Manoogian Visiting Professor of Modern Armenian History. Professor Libaridian was a high-ranking member in the administration of Armenia's first post-Soviet president.

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