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Discussing Genocide: Contextualizing the Armenian Experience in the Ottoman Empire

Ronald Grigor Suny and Fatma Muge Göçek

The short twentieth century (1914-1991) was an era of the greatest mass killing in any period of human history. State violence against its own citizens in Stalin's Soviet Union and Mao's China, the Nazi Holocaust and the post-World War II ethnic cleansings and genocides in Cambodia, the Balkans and Rwanda have in some ways their most immediate predecessor in the deportation and massacres of hundreds of thousands of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in 1915-1916. To understand what happened and why, two dozen scholars gathered at the University of Michigan to discuss topics that have led Turks and Armenians, not only to question what constitute the facts about the past, but also to engage in the most violent forms of scholarly and political attacks.

The workshop began with the premise that in order to understand why the massacres occurred, the larger historical context-the tensions between the Armenians and the Turks, the ways in which the Turks constructed the Armenians as subversive and dangerous elements, the defeats and threats of the world war-had to be explored. **Ronald Suny** opened the proceedings with a review of the Armenian and Western historical writing on the massacres and deportations of 1915, followed by a parallel paper by **Fatma Müge Göçek** on the Turkish historiography. Suny proposed that the standard accounts left little room for understanding the complexity of the events. Existing histories attempt to explain the massacres by reference to religion or nationalism without fully considering that the Young Turks were secular modernizers dedicated to preserving an empire. Until now, much of Armenian historiography blamed the Turks, gave little active role to the Armenians and linked all of Ottoman history into a story that led inexorably to genocide. The official Turkish view, promoted by the state and its supporters claimed, "There was no genocide, and the Armenians are to blame."

Suny proposed that not all repressions of Armenians by Turks were part of a single teleological process that led inevitably to genocide, that Ottoman governments had a variety of policies and ambitions vis-à-vis the Armenians and that their attitudes toward Armenians radicalized as World War I broke out. By the time the Young Turks went to war with Russia in late 1914, there was nothing that the Ottoman Armenians could do to prevent the leaders of the empire from carrying their evolving plans to eliminate one of their subject peoples.

Göçek proposed a new periodization of the historiography on the Armenian deaths and massacres of 1915, from the investigative Ottoman to the defensive Republican and critical Post-nationalist periods. The late Ottoman narrative on 1915, recognizing that massive killing had taken place, was transformed in the Turkish Republican period into a defensive one under the impact of escalating nationalism. The Republican scholars did not aim to understand what actually happened; rather, they hoped to prove the Turkish thesis that focused on protecting the interests of the state. As a consequence, they selectively employed historical material and conflated deaths and massacres of the populace at different points in time to conclude that just as many Turks as Armenians had died. They thus dismissed the events of 1915 as an act of Turkish self-defense. Göçek showed that the official Turkish nationalist narrative put primary blame for the events on the imperialist Western powers

that wanted to partition the empire and used the Ottoman minorities as an instrument in their plans. This historiography was also part of a state project to counter the Armenian allegations of genocide, which in the 1970s led to the assassination of Turkish diplomats by Armenian militants.

In recent years, however, a few Turkish scholars, including Halil Berktay, Taner Akçam and others, have moved to a "post-nationalist" narrative, despite official political pressure, and are attempting to write a more objective and critical account. Göçek ended her presentation with the optimistic expectation that "the future integration of the Turkish Republic into the European Union" could be identified with "the beginning of the demise of Turkish nationalism and of the subsequent recognition of the wrongful Armenian deaths in 1915."

The veteran scholar of the genocide, sociologist **Vahakn Dadrian**, disputed Suny's decoupling of the genocide from earlier Turkish massacres and his downplay of the significance of Islam as a cause of the violence. Dadrian claimed that Islam is a dogma that does not change and that the majority of massacres occurred on Fridays after Muslim services when clerics called for jihad against Armenians. **Fikret Adanir** (history, Ruhr University, Bochum) countered to point out that Islam is not monolithic, but that it was "instrumentalized" by some and turned into a weapon against Christians at times. He was followed by a young Turkish scholar, **Soner Çagaptay** (history, Yale), who reiterated that there is no single Islam. Islam can be a faith, an ideology, a culture or an identity. Particularly lethal in the Ottoman Empire was the coming of "modernity," when older religious notions were threatened. There had been no annihilation of Armenians in Turkey before the nineteenth century. **Stephan Astourian** (history, Berkeley) mentioned that thousands of Armenians were saved by Muslims. **Aron Rodrigue** (history, Stanford) added that Islam provided a "discursive divide" between Muslims and non-Muslims; it gave people a way at looking at those who were different.

Eric D. Weitz (history, Minnesota) looked at the general phenomenon of twentieth-century genocides and linked them to the dark side of the Enlightenment. Following arguments made by Hannah Arendt and Zygmunt Bauman about the pernicious aspects of modernity-new technologies of warfare, enhanced state powers of surveillance, ideologies and governmental practices that categorized people according to race and nation-he argued that genocides occur

when "the normal rules of human interaction are suspended and the practice of violence is honored and rewarded." Race thinking was central to the genocides of our own time, said Weitz, and when it is taken up by revolutionary transformative regimes with powerful visions of the future, the potential for intentional, state-initiated mass killing is enhanced. War, revolution and racism created a culture of killing that marked the last century as horrifically different from its predecessors.

Rodrigue also engaged comparisons with the Jewish Holocaust, beginning with an elaboration of the particularities of the Ottoman social system and its breakdown in the nineteenth century. Defined by religious difference, Muslim and non-Muslim were always unequal in the fixed hierarchy of the Ottoman world, with Muslim as the governing element and Islam the governing religion. But the coming of Western influence and pressure, the new alternative vision of nationalism and the modernizing and centralizing practices of the Ottoman state disturbed profoundly the established relations between religious communities. Western domination, both internationally and in domestic economic life, led many Muslims to perceive non-Muslims as collaborators of the foreigners, whose ultimate aim was the destruction of the empire. In the view of the Ottoman rulers, the Armenians, who had been inferior, now appeared to be acting superior, an alien element bent on forming an independent state of their own.While Turkish nationalism inspired the Young Turks, they were primarily out to save their empire, not to build a nation-state. According to Rodrigue, "By 1915 a particularly fatal combination of resentment, humiliation and revengeful sentiment animated the ruling elite," which had suffered losses in the Balkans, defeat at the hands of the Russians at Sarikamis and faced an Allied landing at Gallipoli.

Fikret Adanir made the essential point that the military disasters of the Balkan War of 1912-1913, in which the Ottomans lost almost all of "European Turkey," were a major turning point in the history of Ottoman policies toward minorities. The defeat led to the establishment of the one-party dictatorship in January 1913, the essential abandonment of the pluralistic Ottomanist project and its replacement "by an aggressive nationalism that aspired to a new mobilization along Turkish-Islamic lines." A heightened panic about losing Anatolia gripped the Young Turks. At the same time, the Armenian political leaders turned from working with the Young Turks to appeals, once again, to the Great Powers as a way to solve the Armenian Question. The attempts by the Young Turks to

mobilize Christians into the Ottoman army met with resistance from the non-Muslims, particularly the Greeks, and the early defeats in the Balkan Wars were seen by many, including foreign observers, as the result of defections by Christian soldiers. Ottomanism as a multicultural project, said Adanir, ended on the battlefields of Thrace.

Clearly influenced by Holocaust scholarship that has proposed an increasingly radical policy of the Nazis toward the Jews, **Donald Bloxham** (history, Southampton, England) presented a controversial paper on cumulative radicalization during the events of 1915. He argued that war was a key ingredient that led to mass killing of civilians. The Turkish policy became progressively more radical as the government saw the Armenians as a dangerous "fifth column" within their country. It was not until June of that year, he claimed, that the policy became genocidal, that is, deportations turned into systematic mass murder.

The late Ottoman rulers faced the central problem of how to create a "national" consensus, a shared sense of Ottoman identity, in a multinational empire. Several papers made the case that as Turkish nationalism developed, it left no place for non-Muslims. A non-Muslim could not be a "Turk," Rodrigue claimed. This problem remained acute even in the new Turkish republic of the 1920s. **Marc David Baer** (history, Chicago) demonstrated how a small group of Jews who had converted to Islam in the seventeenth century found themselves marginalized, even threatened, as a narrow, racialized idea of Turkishness prevailed among many intellectuals. In a fascinating parallel to nineteenth-century German racial "science" discourses about German Jews, the "Salonikans" or Dönme were seen as a threat to the Turkish nation, as foreigners who led secret lives and had inordinate financial power.

Using oral history and a recovered diary, **Leyla Neyzi** (anthropology, Sabanci University, Istanbul) reconstructed the story of Yasar Paker, born Haim Albükrek, a Turkish Jew who was conscripted into the nationalist army to fight during the Greco-Turkish War. Unlike the Christians, Jews were not seen as a threat by the Turks, but as a distinct group. Albükrek was reluctant but willing to fight with the Kemalists, and in later life he readily assimilated into Turkish national life.

Similarly, **Soner Çagaptay** looked at the surviving Armenians in the republican period when conflicting definitions of belonging to

the Turkish nation and being a Turkish citizen coexisted. Atatürk's Turkey had a civic idea of citizenship: "The People of Turkey, regardless of religion and race, are Turks as regards Turkish citizenship." But at the same time it conceived of the "Turkish Nation" as a cultural and linguistic community, and, as Çagaptay emphasized, even in the secular Kemalist republic Islam was part of the definition of the nation. "Turkish nationalism nurtured an aversion towards the Christians." Under pressure from the state, the non-Muslim communities renounced the rights granted them in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. Their political situation deteriorated significantly during the 1920s. Their religious institutions were threatened, and many of the thousands of Armenians left in Anatolia began to emigrate. Armenian nationalists abroad organized resistance to Turkish policies, even playing a significant role in the Kurdish rebellion of 1930, and this deepened the existing Turkish suspicion of Armenians. Even Armenians who had converted to Islam were suspect. In Çagaptay's words, "Religion created an ethnic boundary between the Armenians and the Turks," and the Kemalist continuity of millet attitudes rendered Turkey's Armenian citizens an alien nation within the polity.

One of the most outspoken and courageous Turkish historians of the events of 1915, **Taner Akçam**, showed how Ottoman archival documents directly contradict the official Turkish state narrative. He argued that the Young Turks implemented a general resettlement plan for ethnic and religious minorities in Anatolia between 1913 and 1918 and that a decision to cleanse Anatolia of non-Muslim elements was made at the beginning of 1914. These plans applied, not only to Armenians, but also to Arabs, Kurds, Albanians, Bosnians and others, and were directed at the Turkification of Anatolia, which after the Balkan Wars was conceived as the heartland of the Turks. Armenians, however, were thought of and treated differently from other minorities. There were no qualms about killing Armenians, and Akçam stated that the documents suggest "a genocidal intention on the part of the ruling party."

Stephan H. Astourian proposed that a social, even ecological, dimension must be added to the more ideological and political explanations for genocide. During the last Ottoman half-century, millions of Muslim refugees from the Caucasus and the Balkans migrated into eastern Anatolia and Cilicia, regions inhabited by large Armenian populations, increasing pressure on the limited resource of arable land. Beginning in the 1870s, Armenians began to complain to the Ottoman Porte about land seizures and other oppressive acts

they were suffering at the hands of Kurds, Turks, Circassians and other Muslims in the eastern provinces.

When the government did little to redress these grievances, Armenians appealed to foreign powers, and the internationalized "Armenian Question" was born. Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876-1909) aimed at the systematic de-Armenization of eastern Anatolia, which was carried out by usurpation of land, settlement of Muslims in the region, emigration of Armenians from the empire and the devastating massacres of 1894-1896 in which an estimated 150-200,000 Armenians were killed. The Young Turks, who came to power in 1908, essentially continued the sultan's demographic and land expropriation policies. Astourian concluded that the patterns of state centralization and modernization, demographic engineering and economic competition, particularly over land, as well as the political choices made by Abdulhamid II were at the root of the catastrophe of 1915.

Continuing the investigation of Cilicia, historian **Aram Arkun** turned to the genocide in the regions of Zeytun, Marash, Hajin and Sis, where miscalculation and deception led to the first deportations. At first, Zeytuntsis were sent in caravans to Konya in central Anatolia, and only later were the deportations rerouted to the deserts of Syria. Arkun documents the mood of ordinary Muslims, whom foreign observers noted were hostile to the Armenians and easily mobilized to carry out killings. At the same time, several Turkish governors in the region were opposed to wholesale deportations and killings, but they were eventually removed from office and replaced by men more determined to carry out the orders from Istanbul.

Hans-Lukas Kieser (history, University of Basel) told the story of one of the Turkish governors, Dr. Mehmed Reshid, a dedicated Young Turk who carried out the massacres in Diyarbekir. A Circassian by origin, Reshid Bey was, like many of his generation, influenced by right-wing European political and nationalist writers. He was driven by the question of how to save the empire. Though earlier he had condemned the Hamidian regime for its massacres of Armenians, he was radicalized after the Balkan wars to see Greeks and Armenians as an internal danger to the empire. By his own admission, as governor of Diyarbekir, he supervised the "removal" of 120,000 Armenians, most of whom were massacred or died from exhaustion. Captured after the war, Reshid Bey committed suicide rather than face trial.

Dadrian spoke on the practice of genocide denial and laid out the essential theses of the official Turkish position: that there was no intention to deport or kill Armenians; that the atrocities were beyond the control of the authorities; that the killing was regional, not general; that the numbers killed are far lower than Armenians claim, and Turks suffered as much if not more than Armenians; that the unfortunate events were the result of a civil war between Turks and Armenians; and that the events were provoked by Armenian treachery and rebellion. As in his voluminous writings, so in his oral presentation, he went on to demonstrate that each of these propositions was false and that staggering amounts of evidence have been published, most convincingly in Turkish and German sources, which show the widespread practice of deportation and massacre and the direct role of the Young Turks.

Richard G. Hovannisian (history, UCLA) reminded the workshop that while Young Turks were both the initiators and the dynamic behind the Armenian genocide, there were also officials and ordinary Turks who refused to participate even at the risk of their own lives. In a paper that discussed intervention and altruism during the massacres, he shared material from hundreds of oral histories of Armenian survivors, many of whom testified to self-sacrificial acts by Muslims. Although others exploited the vulnerability of Armenians to take economic and sexual advantage of their former neighbors, the motivations of those who helped victims ranged from sympathy and pity to the most opportunistic effort at economic betterment. Altruism, however, often successfully competed with economic self-interest.

A final session of the workshop turned to contemporary issues. **Baskin Oran** (political science, Ankara University) used the story of the Armeno-Turkish newspaper Agos to illustrate the revival of Armenian identity in today's Turkey. Until the appearance of Agos, the Istanbul Armenian community was subjected to attacks in the Turkish media and had few avenues to express its own views to the larger Turkish public. Agos began publication, in Turkish, in 1996 and cautiously attempted to present a Turkish-Armenian position different from that of the Armenian diaspora and the Republic of Armenia. On the genocide issue, Agos editor **Hrant Dink** argued, "Turkish-Armenian relations should be taken out of a 1915 meters-deep well." That topic should be depoliticized and dealt with by historians.

In a similar spirit of opening up dialogue between Turks and

Armenians, a number of leading public figures established the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission (TARC) in July 2001. **Razmik Panossian** (political science, London School of Economics) related the short five-month history of this abortive effort. The principal cause of TARC's demise, according to Panossian, was not the genocide issue per se, but the commission's confusion about how to deal with it. TARC was designed as a private "civil society" initiative with no formal links to governments, and was largely promoted on the Armenian side by the Armenian Assembly, a Washington-based advocacy organization. Turkish commissioners saw TARC as an alternative to European efforts at acknowledging the genocide through parliamentary resolutions. None of the Turkish commissioners considered the events of 1915 to be genocide, while those on the Armenian side did. Instead of dialogue, there was an impasse.

In his exploration of the "sorrows of early Turkish nationalism," **Halil Berktay** (history, Sabanc? University)-whose paper was read by G Ö Çek-characterized the mood of many in the late Ottoman period as "a pent-up and frustrated, vengeful sort of Turkish nationalism," which "played its part as one of the vectors in Enver's and Talat's precipitous rush to the unprecedented decisions of 1915." Berktay argued that demonology of enemies precedes the constitution of a pantheon of gods and heroes in nationalism and orients the incipient nation in contested space providing a program that can justify violence, ethnic cleansings, and settling accounts. What he calls "the event" of 1915 was not primarily ideologically pre-meditated, but was made possible by "a hateful and vengeful Turkish nationalism" that was "at least present in the air" by that time.

Berktay cautioned against over-attachment to the word "genocide" and suggested that if the Holocaust was the event that gave rise to the word, then the Armenian killings might be referred to as a "proto-genocide." Inevitably the work of historians has political implications and effects, but there is a difference between the critical activity of scholars, their search for truth and more directed political activity, which should be left outside the academy.

In a comprehensive survey of Armenian Turkish relations in the 1990s, **Jirair Libaridian** explicated the policies of the governments of the Republic of Armenia toward Turkey and their connections to the issue of genocide. Early on, President Levon Ter Petrosian, with whom Libaridian worked as a principal advisor, attempted to establish diplomatic relations with Turkey. But even as

the two countries nearly reached agreement, events such as the conflict over Karabakh prevented formal relations. At first, Armenia was willing to separate the issue of genocide from the question of diplomatic relations, but with the coming to power of Robert Kocharian, Armenia stated that it would not give up genocide recognition but that it had no territorial claims on Turkey.

Summing up some of the discussion, Libaridian pointed out, "We don't know everything, and we haven't decided everything. This is a healthy attitude." The workshop demonstrated that the very word " genocide" has become a battlefield, but that it is possible to talk sensibly about what happened. Facts can be established, arguments can be made and the old stories, the "master narratives," can be changed.

While some participants were wary that by explaining the genocide, it might be "explained away," **Paul Boghossian** (philosophy, New York University) pointed out that a distinction must be made between causation and justification. Identifying the cause of an event is not necessarily to justify it. Since nothing can justify what happened, no one should fear that an honest investigation of the role of the Armenians in the events of 1915 could lead to a justification of the tragedy that befell them. Commenting on Bloxham's claim that there was a cumulative radicalization of Turkish policy towards the Armenians culminating in deportations and massacres, Boghossian pointed out that there is a distinction between "causes" and "triggers." A cause of an event is something without which that event would not have occurred, whereas a trigger is simply an opportunity for a cause to bring about a given event. Bloxham, he argued, had shown that wartime conditions, rather than causing the massacres of 1915, had merely provided triggers for them. Finally, to those who recoil from the use of the word "genocide" for strategic or emotional reasons, even while acknowledging the terrible events, he said that it was incumbent upon them to come up with their own terms, ones that would not distort the factual reality that have been established by the workshop-that intentional mass killing, directed against a specifically named ethno-religious people, had been ordered and executed by a government in 1915.

After three intense days of productive discussions, the workshop adjourned to a public session at which, Suny, Göçek, **Michael Kennedy** (sociology, II director and vice provost for international affairs, University of Michigan) and two journalists from Turkey-**Cengiz Çandar** and **Hrant Dink**-gave their impressions of the

workshop. Suny and Göçek summed up the main points that emerged; Suny related the history of the workshop and pointed out that this was the first successful academic endeavor toward a dialogue. Göçek reiterated that the scholars' aim had not been to focus on who employed the term genocide in which context, which would have turned the meeting into a political contest. Instead, the aim had been to work together to approach the events of 1915 from as many different perspectives as possible. Thus, the intent had not been to prove or disprove a particular political stand, but to gain a better understanding of the events.

Michael Kennedy placed the workshop and its dialogue-building potential within the scope of the activities of the International Institute. Çandar called it an "unprecedented scholarly endeavor" and hoped that the findings would be released soon to the public. Dink said that for an Armenian journalist like himself, living in Turkey, it is difficult to speak of the events of 1915. One becomes an enemy of one's own nation. It is like living on a razor blade. But the Michigan workshop, he said, gives hope that this problem can be solved by dialogue between the two peoples.

Some in the audience were unhappy that the workshop organizers had not allowed more participation of people from the community in the deliberations. After listening to the increasingly heated discussion, Baskin Oran quietly pointed out that the polemical and partisan discussion at the public session illustrates why scholars have to meet by themselves to carry on their indispensable work. The University of Michigan and its International Institute had provided just such a possibility for debate and discussion free from polemic.