

The Historical Reconciliation of Armenians and Turks

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Germany, the same nation allied in World War I with the Young Turk regime which sought to exterminate the Armenian population, is emerging today as the stage on which the two formerly adversary communities are extending their hands in dialogue aimed at understanding and reconciliation.

People can change. People do change. This fundamental fact of human nature, too often forgotten or overlooked, is crucial to seeking means to overcome longstanding political strife. The Turkish-Armenian conflict is a case in point. Progress towards transcending the adversary relationship, bred by the 1915 genocide perpetrated by the Young Turk government against the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, is becoming visible in what one German historian has dubbed a “policy of small steps and soft tones” pursued by representatives of both communities.(1)

Rapprochement between Armenians and Turks has been unfolding over the past years on various levels: with their signing the “Protocols” a year ago, the governments of Ankara and Yerevan pledged to establish diplomatic relations and reopen borders closed since the 1993 Nagorno-Karabagh war. The Armenian President’s announcement on April 22 this year that his government would “suspend the procedure of ratifying the Protocols” appeared to jeopardize the entire experiment, but that announcement did not end the dialogue; he added, in fact, that his government would not “exit the process.” President Sargisian had good reason to do what he did. Considerable roadblocks had popped up to hinder the process, specifically, Turkey’s demands that the Nagorno-Karabagh issue be settled before the protocols continue. But roadblocks are there to be removed.

On the level of civil society, Armenians and Turks are reaching out in efforts to come to terms with the 1915 catastrophe, to learn about what occurred, and to use that knowledge to work towards reconciliation. Increasingly, Turkish intellectuals in their own country and abroad are challenging the official government policy of denial, and, on a broader plane, curiosity about and interest in the events of 1915 are motivating members of the general population to pore over reports, novels, and memoirs on the topic that are becoming available in growing numbers on bookshop shelves in Istanbul and Ankara.

Outside Turkey, it is in Germany that this mutual engagement is most striking and holds the potential for the greatest political impact. In the Federal Republic, despite the obstinate resistance posed by die-hard Kemalists, on the one side, and some hard-core revanchists on the Armenian side, members of both communities are thrashing out past history in public forums, with an eye to charting out a new future. The protagonists of this dialogue are actors at the grass roots level, playing against a backdrop of an unprecedented campaign in

the mass media aimed at shedding light on the 1915 events.

Martyrs' Day

April 24 is the day on which Armenians worldwide commemorate what they identify as the start of the systematic elimination of the Armenian population in the Ottoman Empire, through deportations and mass killings. On that day in 1915, 250 Armenian intellectuals, civic leaders, priests, politicians, and other members of the elite in Constantinople were arrested and many thereafter executed. April 24 is a day of remembrance, of mourning, and rightly so. But how should one commemorate that fateful date?

In the historic Paulskirche in Frankfurt, Germany, which hosts a ceremony every year, several speakers this year stressed the need to force Turkey, or “the Turks,” to recognize the genocide, and to call it by that name. Although the Armenian Ambassador in Berlin, Armen Martirosyan, concentrated on explaining his government’s recent decision to suspend the protocol process, and Bishop Stephan Ackermann, representing the German Bishops conference and *Justitia et Pax*, stressed the need for reconciliation, what brought the house down was the speech by Ralf Giordano, an 87-year-old Holocaust survivor and journalist, who has long championed the Armenian cause. Due to failing health, Giordano had handed his speech over to a young German actor, who read it with emphasis and pathos. The repeated insistence in his address for Turkish recognition of the genocide drew waves of applause from the Armenian audience, and his invectives bordered on Turkey-bashing.

That very same day, in the northern port city of Hamburg, 250 Armenians, Turks, Kurds, Aramaens, and Germans — all descendants of national and ethnic groups swept up in the 1915 events — gathered under the roof of the St. Petri church to commemorate the anniversary. A joint requiem mass was celebrated by leaders of the Armenian Apostolic, the Syrian Orthodox, and the Catholic churches, and speakers included Protestant Bishop Maria Jepsen and Murat Cakir of the Turkish-Kurdish Peace Council. In the forefront of the Hamburg event was the common striving for reconciliation, a sentiment echoed in other, smaller events in other locales.

Those April 24 commemorations dedicated to resolving the conflictual relationship constitute a landmark along the road that members of these communities have been travelling over the past year or so. On the local level, in Hamburg and Cologne, small but dedicated grass-roots organizations have been mobilizing to promote dialogue as the first step towards reconciliation. In January, citizens gathered to commemorate the life work of Hrant Dink, the Armenian editor of *Agos* magazine, who was gunned down on January 19, 2007 in front of his Istanbul office by a Turkish extremist. Hrant Dink, who tirelessly fought for rectification of the historical record of the genocide, while just as energetically arguing for reconciliation, has rightly become the reference point for initiatives in Germany, in the US, and also in Turkey, committed to respecting historical truth in the pursuit of justice.

The “Armenian Issue” in Germany — and in Turkey

Why, one might ask, has Germany become the staging ground for one of the most complicated, challenging, and promising approaches toward conflict resolution?

Of all European countries, Germany has the largest and most influential Turkish population. Growing out of the post-World War II waves of Turkish immigration, which was vital to West

Germany's economic recovery and reconstruction, the Turkish community has become an integral part of the German economy and civil society. Fully assimilated Turks (with German citizenship) have gained prominence as political leaders and elected officials, like Cem Oezdemir, Green Party chairman and Bundestag member, and Ayguel Oezkan, newly elected Social Minister in Lower Saxony.

As the historical record shows, during the tragic events of 1915-1918, the Young Turk government enjoyed the full political, military, and logistical support of the German imperial government and its top brass. So everything that occurred during those years was known to the German military and diplomatic corps; they either cast their glance in another direction, or, in some documented cases, attempted to stop the atrocities, or, through *raison d'état*, accepted and even endorsed the massacres. Thus, if full light is to be shed on those events, the documents of the German Foreign Ministry archives in the war years must be evaluated. (www.armenocide.de) This means that the political debate within Germany must take into consideration these facts, and acknowledge imperial Germany's role — not to assign blame or guilt, but to understand what and why.

That is precisely what is happening. Through background articles and documentary films on television, German journalists have been offering the public a rare glimpse into those tragic historical events, with a slant that is as scientifically rigorous as it is "politically incorrect." It started with a couple of articles in the newspaper of record, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, which reported critically and sarcastically on a tour in Germany of the hapless American historian and genocide denier, Justin McCarthy, who, with enthusiastic support of part of the local Turkish community, argued against charges of mass murder; for McCarthy (who coincidentally holds an honorary doctorate from the Bogazici University in Istanbul and received a Turkish order of merit), the Ottomans "did what they had to do," in that the Armenians at the time allegedly constituted an internal threat which had to be eliminated.

Then came a spate of feature articles on the 1915 massacres, in the same *FAZ*, but also in the influential weekly *Der Spiegel*, the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, and others. They presented factual reports on the 1915 genocide, and made reference to a new film produced by the North German Radio (NDR). The NDR production, aired on April 9 on Germany's first national television station ARD, was a bombshell. Although experts may quibble about the accuracy of this or that detail, the documentary was a broadside against all genocide deniers. The filmmakers artfully juxtaposed irate statements by Turkish politicians, who deny any involvement, with the photographically and literarily documented record. Certain graphic photos of Armenian victims appeared, but there was no attempt to manipulate the viewers' reaction through gruesome details. Rather the focus was on the sober reports of eye-witnesses of the events. Here, professional actors and actresses entered the scene, one after the other in solo shots, and testified to what they had personally witnessed, reported, and written down for posterity. Thus, one actor portrayed U.S. Ambassador Henry Morgenthau as he detailed what he had seen and personally heard from the Young Turk leaders regarding the planned genocide; European helpers, nurses and missionaries, as well as U.S. Consul Leslie Davis, related their having watched as masses of Armenians were carried off, deported, and never seen again. German military and diplomatic personnel attested to their knowledge of what crimes against humanity were being committed, but excused their complicity under the rubric of pragmatic necessity. The actor portraying Imperial Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg uttered his words: "Our only goal is to keep Turkey on our side until the end of the war, whether or not it means the Armenians perish."

The film, entitled “Aghet” (which in Armenian means, “catastrophe”), sent shock waves through Germany. A second showing on TV, this time on the private channel Phoenix, was followed by a round table discussion among representatives of the various political forces involved. Karen Krueger, journalist of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, who had penned a feature on the 1915 events, joined with representatives of the Armenian and Turkish community. It was what the Italians would call a “dialogue among the deaf.” Bahattin Kaya, official representative of the Turkish Community in Germany, and Ahmed Kulahci, correspondent from the Turkish paper Hurriyet, could only regurgitate the official Turkish government position, which was essentially: all the documentation was false; all the photos were forged; there was no genocide; the entire film was “one-sided” and politically motivated. Their views were mercilessly and rigorously refuted by the other participants, Prof. Hermann Goltz from the Johannes Lepsius Archive, Armenian community representative Ischiyan Chifidjan, and journalist Krueger. But no understanding was reached, not to mention consensus.

If such a wild and woolly debate can occur on German television, this means a very profound change is in the offing. In short, the “Armenian issue” is not only no longer tabu, but has become what the Germans call “salonfaehig,” quite socially acceptable. That such debates are taking place in the public realm denotes interest on the part of institutional forces, albeit acting behind the scenes, to promote a healthy dialogue between Armenians and Turks — and, yes, Germans — on German soil.

This ongoing discussion process in Germany finds its mirror image in analogous developments in Turkey itself. On April 24 this year, three commemorative demonstrations occurred outdoors in Istanbul while a two-day conference in Ankara on the history and consequences of the genocide was convened. As reported in the Armenian Mirror-Spectator, Kurdish mothers gathered in one event, displaying posters of their missing children as well as of Armenian intellectuals rounded up 95 years ago. An estimated 200 people at a centrally located train station held up pictures of assassinated intellectuals, during the commemoration organized by the Human Rights Association of Turkey. Following a lecture by Armenian Weekly editor Khatchig Mouradian, a candlelight vigil was held in Taksim Square, on the initiative of Turkish intellectuals. The conference, organized by the Ankara Freedom of Thought Initiative, brought together Armenian and Turkish scholars from home and abroad. Heavy security was visible at all events, and scattered counter-demonstrators attempted to interrupt here and there, but the meetings proceeded without incident. Although they were not the first ever, it was unprecedented for commemorations to be held out in the open in very public places. The Turkish authorities did not intervene.

Hrant Dink’s newspaper, Agos, came out on martyrs’ day with a banner headline reading “24 April 1915,” and features on the genocide. Articles documented the events with pictures, and the back page carried photographs of press articles published in 1921 by Armenians looking for family members that had gone missing. In one article, the journalist made a play on words, by prefixing the letter /ch/ (a privative) to the word “abril.” “Abril,” in addition to being the name of the month, derives from the verb “to live.” Thus, “chabril” meant not living, or deprived of life. This issue of Agos is an extraordinarily courageous intervention, fully in the tradition of Hrant Dink, into the ongoing process of working through the historical record in uncensored, public terms. (One should never lose sight of the fact that, according to Art. 301 of the Turkish legal code, any reference to the genocide is considered an affront to the Turkish nation, and is punishable by law.)

All told, this year's April 24 commemorations in Turkey deliver an unequivocal message: that the social and political movement urging acknowledgement of the genocide and reconciliation among the ethnic/religious communities involved has become unstoppable. "The train has left the station," one Armenian intellectual based in the US remarked, "and nothing any Turkish government can do will stop it." He added that inside Turkey today, no one knows how many women are confessing to their children that their grandmothers were not Turks at all, but Armenians. What he was referring to was the impact made by the best-selling book, "My Grandmother: A Memoir," by Fethiye Cetin, a Turkish human rights lawyer, who recounts the compelling drama of her ethnic self-discovery: she learned from her grandmother, shortly before the latter's death, that she had been an Armenian survivor of 1915 who had been brought up as a Turkish Muslim. Such Armenian survivors grew up in Turkish families, had their names changed, and married Turks. Indeed, no one but the Turkish authorities (who have access to the birth certificates) really knows how many such "crypto-Armenians" live in today's Turkish republic. Some put the figure at 2 million.

There is no doubt that over the past five years, the Turkish political elite has embarked on a course of fundamental change; regardless of momentary setbacks, democratization inside Turkey is moving ahead, and it will have decisive impact on the Armenian issue. This interrelationship between the two is the subject of intensive debate in Germany, as indicated by a timely new book, "Die Armenienfrage in der Tuerkei," (The Armenian Question in Turkey). Author Sibylle Thelen, journalist at the Stuttgarter Zeitung, has provided a concise but comprehensive overview of the debate on the Armenian issue inside Turkey today, from the standpoint of the search for resolution (2). Summarizing the historical events, the author reports on how questions raised by the younger generation in Turkey about their families' past are challenging the official establishment line denying the genocide. She highlights the discussion of new literary works, like Cetin's "My Grandmother," which have opened the hearts of Turkish readers, and thus opened their minds to critically scrutinize the historical record.

One outstanding commentary which illustrates the depth of the ongoing debate in Turkey appeared in the Turkish daily, Zaman, on May 2 by Ümit Kardas, a retired military judge, entitled, "Do we have to defend the actions of the Committee of Union and Progress?" In it, he reviews the history of the concept and term "genocide," as coined by Raphael Lemkin and embodied in the 1948 UN Convention, then summarizes the account of persecutions of Armenians (and other Christians) from the late 19th century Ottoman Empire culminating in 1894. He reports on how the Young Turk regime, following its 1913 Balkan losses, determined to "homogenize" the population, and launched the ethnic cleansing campaign through deportations, run by the Special Operations. The author recounts the atrocities committed especially against women and children during the death marches, then offers a startling consideration:

"A regime that hinges upon concealing and denying the truth will make the state and the society sick and decadent. The politicians, academics, journalists, historians and clerical officials in Turkey should try to ensure that the society can face the truth. To face the truth is to become free. We can derive no honor or dignity from defending our ancestors who were responsible for these tragedies. It is not a humane or ethical stance to support and defend the actions of Abdulhamit II and senior CUP members and their affiliated groups, gangs and marauders. Turkey should declare to the world that it accepts said atrocities and massacres and that in connection with this, it advocates the highest human values of truth, justice and humanism while condemning the mentality and actions of those who committed them in the past.

He ends with a bold proposal:

“After this is done, it should invite all Armenians living in the diaspora to become citizens of the Turkish Republic. As the Armenians of the diaspora return to the geography where their ancestors lived for thousands of years before being forced to abandon it, leaving behind their property, memories and past, this may serve to abate their sorrow, which has now translated into anger. The common border with Armenia should be opened without putting forward any condition. This is what conscience, humanity and reason direct us to do. Turkey will become free by getting rid of its fears, complexes and worries by soothing the sorrows of Armenians.”

Reconciliation Now

Many Armenians will reject the proposal, demanding instead that lands in today's eastern Turkey be given back to Armenia. That notwithstanding, such words, similar, though in a different sense, to like those of Fetiye Cetin, are a stirring call to citizens of Turkey and their compatriots in Germany, a call which Armenians throughout the world should heed. A sea change is occurring in the Turkish population, a change which reflects a moral, psychological, and, in numerous cases, personal crisis related to what took place 95 years ago. Precisely such a subjective shift in the popular consciousness is a precondition for reaching true reconciliation. Governments may do and must do what they can to reach agreements to overcome the legacy of past conflict and define a new bilateral relationship. It is at least the hope of this author that the Armenian and Turkish governments will reach agreement on the ways and means of furthering the protocols process. And those in the Armenian diaspora, as well as among the Turkish community abroad, should reflect on the mutual benefits that such agreements could usher in for both sides.

But true reconciliation entails far more than signing protocols between governments. As I argue in my book, which deals with such cases, true reconciliation means healing the wounds of the past, overcoming the bitterness, hatred, fear, and search for revenge bred by the conflict.(3) And this can occur through personal encounters and dialogue among representatives of the former enemies. If Germany and France, who had fought wars against each other over centuries, finally, after World War II, came not only to peace but also to social and national reconciliation, it was largely due to the efforts of persons involved in civil society, who arranged for youth of both countries, for instance, to come together and come to know one another.(4)

In Germany, a new initiative is coming into being, dedicated to this task of understanding and reconciliation. Dubbed “Project 2015”, it aims at bringing together Turks, Armenians, Kurds, and Germans in a nationwide discussion process, starting at the level of single individuals and groups, who pledge to work through the historical record methodically, rigorously, and serenely, to overcome the enmity of the past and define new relationships.

If Germany can play host to such a process, that in itself will be a great honor. Considering past history, it will also be an act of poetic justice.

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Notes

1. Wolfgang Gust, "Eine gute Politik der kleinen Schritte und leisen Toene," www.armenieninfo.com, April 24.
2. Sibylle Thelen, Die Armenierfrage in der Tuerkei, Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, Berlin, 2010.
3. Muriel Mirak-Weissbach, "Through the Wall of Fire, Armenia - Iraq - Palestine: From Wrath to Reconciliation," edition fischer, 2009.
3. Abbe' Charles Merand organized the French-German youth exchange. Se Mirak-Weissbach, op. cit., p. 376.

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