

# To Be, or Not To Be, a Turk

Reflections on the Inner-Turkish Debate on 1915/1916

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Why does Turkey have such difficulty in dealing with its historical past? Why can the Turkish authorities not acknowledge that in 1915 the Armenian population in the Ottoman Empire was the victim of genocide? If the German post-war political elite was capable of facing up to the Holocaust and establishing relations with the Jewish people, in Israel and elsewhere, why cannot the Turkish leadership do as much?

The question was raised during a seminar in Potsdam, Germany on November 5, on “The Inner Turkish Discussion of 1915/1916.”

Other issues discussed were the history of Turkish denial and how Turkish publications have attempted to deal with this, as well as subjects related to the genocide itself, the fate of the survivors, and how Armenians have been struggling with their traumatic past. What made this gathering sponsored by the Lepsiushaus in Potsdam quite special was the list of guest speakers, almost all of them prominent Turkish intellectuals, most of them from Turkey. Their task was to present the current status of the discussion process inside the country regarding 1915/1916.

The title of the event itself is symptomatic of the problem: instead of referring to the Armenian genocide, one had to cite “1915/1916,” perhaps to protect those Turkish participants from being subjected to punitive measures from state authorities on their return home. In fact, one planned guest speaker, Ragib Zaragolu, a prominent publisher who has issued books on the Armenian question, was prevented from attending the conference by an arrest on October 28, when he, along with 48 others, were detained on trumped-up charges of membership in or association with a terrorist-linked organization.

Thus, the Potsdam gathering was a special event, because the themes addressed and the personalities involved constituted a challenge to the current Turkish establishment, albeit neither political nor militant, but nonetheless a challenge on the intellectual/psychological level.

The comparison to the German treatment of the Holocaust was historically relevant and instructive. In answer to the question, why Turkey has such difficulties in dealing with its past, some suggest that they fear demands by the Republic of Armenia and/or the Diaspora for territorial concessions and reparations, the latter on the German model. But there is more. Elke Hartmann, an Ottoman expert from Berlin, explained that Turkey, unlike Germany, was neither defeated nor occupied. To be sure, the Ottoman Empire lost in World War I, but the Turkish Republic emerged victorious from its struggle for national sovereignty and independence. In post-war Germany, it was the occupying powers who organized the Nurnberg trials which tried, convicted, and executed leading Nazis for crimes against

humanity. In subsequent years, especially in the 1960s, historians worked through the Nazi experience, and the broader German public was educated about the reality of the Nazi regime.

In Turkey, immediately after the Ottoman defeat, trials were also held and leading Young Turk officials who had not managed to flee the country, were put on the dock, convicted, and in some cases executed. Others, including the leading figures Talaat Pasha and Cemal Pasha, were hunted down in their exile and assassinated by Armenian assailants. But after the establishment of the Republic in 1923, Mustafa Kemal declared the assassinated Turks to be martyrs, and, where possible, had their remains returned to Turkey for heroes' burials. To grasp the import of this act, one should reflect on what would have happened had Konrad Adenauer rehabilitated Göring.

As Rober Kaptas, the new editor in chief of AGOS, Hrant Dink's newspaper, explained, the 1919 trials had been made possible because an opposition government had come into power after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire and the flight of the leading Young Turks. One could write about it, discuss it openly, and Turks knew a lot about the genocide in 1919. But with the establishment of the Turkish Republic under Mustafa Kemal, that changed radically. He arranged for 150 CUP members on trial in Malta to be freed, and redefined the perpetrators as martyrs. Thus, the policy of "forgetting" began with the establishment of the Republic.

### **The Phases of Denial**

The history of the Turkish Republic's handling of 1915/1916, was summarized by Elke Hartmann, who stepped in for Prof. Dr. Halil Berktaş on short notice. In a speech on "1915 and Scientific Reappraisals since the founding of the Turkish Republic: Between State Guidelines and Freedom of Research," she showed how at the time of the events, the perpetrators knew exactly what they were doing, and demonstrated it in their memoirs, for example, those of Talaat, which were full of justifications for what had occurred. After Turkey's independence war, the policy was one of silence and forgetting. Attempts from the outside to address the genocide, as in the 1934 film on Musa Dagh, were blocked, then and again in 1938, by Turkish political pressure.

Although the dramatic revelations of the dimensions of the Holocaust after World War II overshadowed discussion of the Armenian genocide, in 1965, when Armenians abroad demonstrated to commemorate the 50th anniversary of their tragedy, and began to erect monuments, the issue was again on the political agenda. A turning point occurred in 1973, when the first Turkish diplomat was assassinated by an ASALA assailant, which inaugurated the wave of revenge killings. This, Hartmann said, led to a policy change in Turkey, in that the Turkish authorities decided to present their own version of events. As Koptas put it, after the ASLA assassinations began, Turkey realized that "they had a 1915 problem." According to Hartmann, historians in the West, especially Turkologists in the US, enjoyed Turkish support for research and access to archives to develop a literature of denial. Following the 1980 military coup, a campaign was launched in Turkish schools to educate (or better indoctrinate) youth on 1915. This campaign, which unfolded in parallel with the natural process of dying out of the survivor generation, fixated on so-called "proofs" that the genocide did not occur. Author Marc Nishanian has dubbed Turkish historiography in the 1990s as a "historiographical perversion," in that researchers admitted that perhaps hundreds of thousands of Armenians had perished in 1915, but questioned the "significance" of this "fact." Nishanian's view was that a "fact" without significance is not

truth. Some Armenian scholars responded with an attempt to accumulate ever more “facts.”

### **The Grandchildren Speak Out**

The breach in the wall of denial came with the appearance of Fetiye Cetin’s groundbreaking book, *My Grandmother*, in 2004 followed by the assassination of Hrant Dink in 2007. Cetin’s autobiographical account of her discovery that her grandmother was an Armenian who had survived the genocide unleashed a literary-political-psychological revolution. She may have couched her story in terms of “bitterness” and “pain” instead of using the banned word “genocide,” but her moving account opened the minds and hearts of thousands of Turks, and, as both Hartmann and Koptas stressed, made it possible for Turks to discuss the matter for the first time in their lifetimes. (It was a special treat to have the gracious author Fetiye Cetin on hand in Potsdam, and to hear extracts from her book presented in an evening session in German translation.)

In 2005, as Dr. Ayse Gül Altınay of Sabanci University in Istanbul reported, Cetin’s book had already become a best-seller and university conferences have dealt with the issue. In her speech on “The Survivors from 1915 in the Testimonies of their Descendants Living in Turkey,” Prof. Altınay actualized the issue by posing very direct, pertinent questions: what should one say as a Turk to Fetiye Cetin, perhaps, “I’m sorry about your grandmother?” What should one say if one were to meet that grandmother? She reported on other books that have since appeared, taking up similar themes. What this indicates is that the “grandchildren generation,” those whose grandparents were victims of the genocide, has broken the silence. These are not isolated cases but examples of a sociological phenomenon: here a Turk, there a Turk is discovering he or she had an Armenian grandmother. Altınay and Cetin collaborated on an exciting project interviewing 25 people from this generation. In their book, *Les petits enfants (Actes Sud)*, they present the drama of Turks in this age group who have begun to explore their family histories, to ask who their grandmothers were, and where they came from. In Dr. Altınay’s terms, these are Armenians who are “coming out of the closet,” that is, openly acknowledging their Armenian heritage.

### **“Assimilation” of the Women and Children**

On the one hand the policy of the Young Turks was to eliminate the Armenians, through killings, starvation, and deportations, as Dr. Ugor Ü. Üngör from Utrecht University, reviewed. If the Armenians before 1915 had 2500 churches and 2000 schools among their 2900 Armenian settlements, what remained in 1918 were 6-7 churches in Istanbul, and no cloisters or schools. The Young Turks targeted first the intellectuals and civic leaders, then confiscated Armenian property, then killed through executions and deportations. On the other hand, they also had a policy of forced “assimilation”: that is, that Armenian women and children, especially young girls, should be spared, forced to convert to Islam, and to marry Turks. Fetiye Cetin’s grandmother comes out of this process, as so many others. Figures on how many Armenians were involved are hard to come by and historians’ estimates vary; Vahakn Dadrian spoke of thousands of young orphans, 10,000 girls who were taken as concubines or wives; Balakian refers to thousands of forced converts, and Serafian, to 20,000 orphans. Who knows how many Armenian women and children, especially girls, were taken into Turkish homes, converted to Islam, and given Turkish names? Although some figures for the dead are given in Turkish records, there are no reports of the survivors, a term, in fact, which is not used. How many are they? It is almost impossible to determine. But if the number of “assimilated” after 1915 was tens or hundreds

of thousands, then their offspring and grandchildren could exceed a million today.

It is the grandchildren of these forcibly “assimilated” Armenian females who are now openly raising the question of their parentage and ethnic identity. They are tugging on a thread of yarn which threatens to pull the entire fabric of denial asunder.

The implications of this process are vast and profound.

For those Turkish citizens who have discovered an Armenian (or Kurdish) grandmother, there are two questions that emerge: first, why didn't I know about my Armenian parentage? Then: What happened to the Armenians in 1915? These are the explosive questions that are punctuating a widespread sociological discourse in Turkey today. In parallel, as certain Armenian churches are being reopened and allowed to host services, there are a number of Turkish citizens presenting themselves for baptism, albeit anonymously to avoid harassment. This was the case at the reopening of St. Giragos (Surp Giragos) Church in Diyarbakir on October 22. In short, there is a slow, but steadily expanding process of rediscovery among Turkish citizens of Armenian descent of their heritage.

The publication of Cetin's *My Grandmother* was a watershed of historic dimensions. The assassination of Hrant Dink in January 2007 was another. As Koptas, his successor, related, Dink and Cetin were different heroes, but both presented Turks with the existential question: where do I come from? When Dink was killed, many Turks linked his fate to the historical dilemma. They asked themselves: well, if they killed him, maybe they also killed the Armenians in 1915. What really happened then? Dink, he stressed, introduced a new political language in Turkey and posed the need to face the Armenian question as part of the process of democratization: if Turkey wants to become a democratic state, then it must deal with 1915, he insisted. Koptas also pointed to the case of Hasan Jemel, grandson of Young Turk triumvirate Jemel Pasha, who went to Yerevan and paid homage to the genocide victims at the genocide monument. Hasan too is of the grandchildren's generation.

### **The Threat to Turkish Identity**

To return to the question posed at the onset: why is it so difficult for Turkey to deal with its historical past? What became clear at least for this writer during the Potsdam conference is that the challenge Turkey faces is not primarily political or economic; it is not solely an issue of Armenian reparations or territorial claims or the like. The issue is Turkish identity. If the Turkish establishment were to acknowledge reality, that 1915/1916 was genocide, then it would have to acknowledge that the Young Turk regime of 1915 was responsible. This would raise questions about the credibility of the Ataturk regime from 1923 on which rehabilitated the Young Turk leaders.

As Koptas noted, “Turkishness” was the very foundation of the Republic; the State tried to force the issue of identity, making Alevites into Sunnis and treating Greeks and Armenians as special groups whose numbers were to be reduced. When confronted with eye-witness accounts of the 1915 massacres, the State would respond that the Armenians were “traitors” who had to be punished.

But a nation erected on the basis of a lie cannot have the moral capacity to endure. The Turkish Republic of Mustafa Kemal was built on the lie that the genocide never occurred, and the corollary lies that the Armenians were Russia's fifth column, traitors who had to be

punished.

In purely ethnic terms, the proceedings of the Potsdam conference pose the question: how many Turks are actually ethnic Armenians or at least partially so? What, then, does it mean to be a Turk? If the actual population of Turkey today is multiethnic, then where does the Turkish identity lie? Is it ethnic? Is it religious? How can a young Turkish student – perhaps with Armenian ancestors — go to school in the morning and recite an oath exalting his Turkishness?

Interestingly, there has been much discussion over recent years of a “new Ottomanism,” which is usually presented in regard to Turkey’s foreign policy thrust towards strengthening relations with its neighbors, many of whom were subjects of the Ottoman Empire. Without caving in to temptations of regional hegemonism, such thinking could perhaps help in facing the national identity crisis which is quietly exploding in Turkey. Recognizing multiethnicity in the Turkish population could provide a way of liberating it from the implicitly racist constraints of “Turkishness” and assist in the process of finally dealing with the 1915 genocide.

Koptas said he was confident that, by following Hrant Dink’s approach of educating the Turkish people about their past without wounding them in the process, they would be able to “mourn and accept” and sympathize with the Armenian people. Dink’s insistence on grasping the psychological dimension of the problem was crucial: that one must deal with both the trauma of the Armenians and the paranoia of the Turks. This process of social awakening must develop from the grass roots level upwards – and that is what is occurring. As for the State, Koptas was straightforward: he expressed his desire for a Willy Brandt to emerge in Turkey –referencing the German Social Democratic leader who fell to his knees at the Warsaw Ghetto, in recognition of, and apology for the crimes of the Nazi regime against the Jews.

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