

Turkey: Amnesia and the Armenian Genocide

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The demand for recognition of the Armenian Genocide is inseparable from the defense of democratic freedoms in Turkey.

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April 24 marked one hundred years since the beginning of the Armenian Genocide. A century after the methodically planned, organized, and executed destruction of the Anatolian Armenians, it is instructive to revisit the causes of this genocide and recognize its importance for understanding the present.

Two decades after the genocide, on August 22, 1939, Adolph Hitler told his military chiefs of his plans to massacre the civilian population of Poland, remarking, “Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?” And indeed, after the prosecution of the men most responsible for Turkey’s extermination policies — trials were held from 1919 to 1922 under pressure from the victorious powers — the Armenian Genocide was quickly forgotten.

Ankara’s official line has not changed since the foundation of Kemalist Turkey in 1923: it claims that the Armenians fell victim to the hardships of life in wartime, deadly epidemics, and isolated cases of violence, and the Ottoman state thus bore no blame for the mass fatalities.

The Mechanisms of Genocide

As early as summer 1914 — even before Turkey entered the war, in September of that year — the Anatolian Armenians were being threatened with annihilation at the hands of the “Young Turk” Committee of Unity and Progress (CUP) government, which had come to power in 1908.

Full war mobilization marked the beginning of a generalized surveillance of the Armenians, who were suspected of harboring sympathies for the Russian Empire. Their villages were subjected to increasingly brutal oppression — arbitrary taxation, raids, property confiscation, and the seizure of weapons. In the Russian borderlands, the CUP established special units to terrorize — through Armenians accused of collaborating with the enemy. They carried out massacres and deportations.

When the Tsar’s forces defeated the Ottomans defeat in Sarikamis (northeast Anatolia in late 1914 and early 1915, there was a a rapid and extreme radicalization of these policies. The CUP now considered Armenians a major obstacle to the Turkish-origin Muslim populations’ resistance against Russian expansion. It was in this context that the CUP decided, in March 1915, to deport and destroy the entire Anatolian Armenian population.

Systematic deportations began in May and June in the eastern provinces — followed by the center and west of the country — after the Interior Ministry sent an encrypted message to local governors demanding the deportation of civilians. The party leadership also met face-to-face with local officials, ordering them to summarily execute men who had not enrolled in the army. Enlisted Armenian soldiers were disarmed and murdered, along with the youngest and oldest men in the labor battalions (porters, navvies, etc.).

It is impossible to definitively count the total number of victims — killed after being compelled to dig their own graves or forced onto boats set adrift into the Black Sea, where they drowned by the thousands.

Hundreds of thousands of Armenians who survived the village massacres were forced to make a long march south. Those who were not slaughtered along the way by military police or hostile local populations (who had been encouraged to pillage the Armenians' meager possessions), or who had not died of exhaustion or hunger, were placed in concentration camps before being forced into the desert to die.

The total number of Armenians killed is estimated to be between 0.5 million and 1.5 million, out of a total population of 2.1 million.

From the Ottoman state's point of view, the Armenian Genocide was intended to save "Turkish" political entity by any means necessary, in the face of Russian and Western powers' increasingly overt plans to divide up the Ottoman Empire. After the national independence of Greece (1830); Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro, Romania (1878); and Albania (1912) the Arab territories were on the verge of secession. Anatolia itself became the site for a scramble for territory and influence.

The CUP feared that the empire would quickly be reduced to a Turkish rump state in northern and central Anatolia, and saw expansion toward the east — a pan-Turkic/pan-Muslim strategy encompassing Caucasus, Azerbaijan, northern Iran, and Iraq — as a viable solution. Indeed, it was this hope that guided the Empire's entry into World War I in the first place.

But the Ottoman army's defeats left CUP officials searching for a new solution. By driving the Armenian Christian population off its land in favor of Muslim settlers and big landowners, Istanbul hoped to rebuild its waning empire.

Ottoman Amnesia

By 1918, the Ottoman Empire had lost 85 percent of the population and 75 percent of the territory it had held in 1878. The new Ottoman government, now dominated by elements hostile to the CUP, tried to avoid the partition of its remaining territories by agreeing to prosecute and sentence those who were responsible for the Armenian Genocide.

After France, Britain, and Italy occupied Istanbul in 1919, and the Greeks took control of Izmir, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk rallied the central-Anatolian nationalist forces, and established a second government in Ankara. For a brief period both the Istanbul and Ankara governments accepted that the CUP leaders should be prosecuted (especially since only those directly involved in planning and executing the massacres were put on trial, leaving the large majority of CUP members unaffected).

The two governments also agreed that the leaders should be tried in Turkish courts, and that Anatolia's territorial integrity ought not be placed in question. Ataturk even accepted Istanbul's official figure of eight hundred thousand murdered Armenians (though he attributed the

responsibility for this mass extermination to very limited ruling circles).

But recognition would prove short-lived. Following August 1920's Treaty of Sèvres — which entailed the partition of the Ottoman Empire, the war against the Greeks, and Ankara's resistance — officials hurried to lay down the fundamentals of a Turkish nationalism that had previously been only incipient in form. While making some reference to wider attachments, from Islam to Ottomanism and pan-Turkism, this nationalism was principally characterized by its connection to Anatolia as a territory, which would now become the new Turkey.

The final victory of troops in autumn 1922 paved the way for what would become the new state's enduring attitude, denying that there had been any attempt to exterminate the Anatolian Armenians.

Indeed, the republic now defined itself as religiously, socially, and nationally homogeneous. The state expressed a single Turkish nation (in fact it was only majority Turkish — the Kurds were presented as “mountain Turks”) represented by a single party. Its residents belonged to one common Muslim religion, even if the new authorities strictly codified the social expressions of this faith.

Finally there was no recognition of any class divisions among its citizens, providing the pretext for the new state bourgeoisie (backed by the army) to ban the formation of independent trade unions and workers parties.

The Fight for Democracy Today

As the political scientist Benedict Anderson has shown, nations are always “imagined communities.” The Anatolian Turkish nation was imagined in a time of war, in the context of the collapse of a multinational empire under threat of colonial partition (justified in part as “reparations” for the Armenian Genocide).

Since the 1990s, with the implosion of the Soviet Union, and more recently with the collapse of neighboring Syria and Iraq, Turkey has faced a serious identity crisis. Recognition of the Armenian Genocide, and also of the national rights of the Kurdish people, are central to resolving this identity crisis, and developing a democratic order in Turkey based on people's ability to exercise their rights, and express their interests — particularly of workers' class interests and aspirations.

For the international left, the demand for the recognition of the Armenian Genocide is inseparable from the defense of democratic freedoms in Turkey — and the Kurdish people's national rights. Such demands must also go hand-in-hand with denunciations of the imperialist plans of the victors of the First World War, who bear indirect responsibility for sparking the Armenian Genocide.

It is impossible to imagine any socialist resolution of the “Eastern question” (as the Western foreign offices of the nineteenth century referred to their colonial rivalry) without the victory of the democratic and social aspirations of the peoples of the former Ottoman Empire, from Syria to Palestine, from Bahrain to Yemen, from Egypt to Tunisia.

For that to happen, we must avoid reading these conflicts as confrontations between states and instead be aware of the fundamental social contradictions that feed these clashes — as well as the popular forces whose fight against oppression makes emancipation possible.

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P.S.

* Jacobin. 5.1.15:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/05/armenian-genocide-turkey-ataturk-erdogan/>

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