

The Politics of History, Memory and Social Amnesia in Turkey

By
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On Sep. 23-24, a conference held in Istanbul, titled, "Ottoman Armenians during the Decline of the Empire: Issues of Scientific Responsibility and Democracy," involving Turkish and Armenian scholars and intellectuals—all Turkish citizens—questioned the country's official line on this period of their history. What is the meaning of this conference for Turks, Armenians, and the European Union?

It is clear that this conference has become the catalyst for breaking a major taboo—a real public debate on the events of 1915—and achieving a huge leap forward for the democratization of Turkey. Nearly all elements of Turkish society—ultra-right, ultra-left, Islamists, secularists, nationalists, judiciary, academia, the media, and government officials at the highest level—are now involved in this debate. The military, which is generally perceived as a proponent of the status quo, has yet to make its views known.

While some outsiders have tended to view Turkey as a monolithic country, the heated debate indicates that there is a definite disagreement between the position of the Turkish state and that of a significant portion of the population with respect to this issue, which cuts across each social group, each institution, and every segment of Turkish society.

Adding to the intensity of the debate is a statement issued by the European Parliament on Sep. 28, which calls on Turkey to recognize the Armenian Genocide and states that it "considers this recognition to be a prerequisite for accession to the European Union."

In analyzing this intense debate, Turkish scholar Taner Akçam, a visiting professor at the University of Minnesota, states, "Turkish education for the past ninety years has created ignorance about the country's history. This ignorance has fostered social amnesia, as nationalist historiography generally does not discuss or even mention the events before the founding of the Turkish Republic, especially those of 1915. The Turkish populace has also not had the chance to read, discover, and recover their past because of the alphabet reform of 1928, when the Arabic script was abandoned in favor of the Latin one. This reform enabled the Turkish state to control society's access to its own past by selectively transcribing only those texts and documents that gave support to the state's point of view. As a consequence, Turkish society was left in a state of ignorance about its own past. Opinions are polarized because of a lack of information and a different base of knowledge."

Elif Shafak, in an October 6 article in the Wall Street Journal, described the shock she felt realizing the difference in perception of the past between the version of history she had learned in the state controlled Turkish education system and that of those nations who had been ruled by the Ottomans. She added, "Differences in the interpretation of the past notwithstanding, it is a bigger shock to realize how vivid those memories remain, passed on from one generation to the next in former Ottoman lands, be it the Middle East, the Balkans or among the Armenian diaspora."

These two Turkish intellectuals independently explain the power of history, memory, and social amnesia. Essentially, that is behind the public debate in Turkey today. One concludes that a considerable segment of Turkish society wants to have access to its past, of which it has been deprived by the state for so long. It wants an open discussion of its history, including the events of 1915, which have been taboo up to now and a major obstacle to freedom of speech and thought.

"The best way to access the past is by creating a common body of knowledge shared openly by both Turkish and Armenian societies," insists Dr. Akçam. "This would consist of primary historical documents of the period, both written and oral, from Turkish, German, Armenian, English and other sources," he added.

"It is important that peoples in conflict who wish to come to terms with one another should understand each other's way of thinking," Akçam explained. "It is essential that the Turkish public should know how Armenians think about, narrate, and live their past. By the same token, Armenians should know and understand how Turks think, narrate, and experience this same period. What is needed is a process which focuses on interaction not between states, not between officials, but between people," he concluded.

For the next ten years, Turkey will be negotiating its entry into the European Union, while going through some radical changes to comply with European standards. Since the EU has highlighted recognition of the Armenian Genocide as one of the key issues for the negotiations, the debate will continue to intensify, and the need for reliable information will become even more critical. Such information, provided through a common body of knowledge on this period in history, can help to reconcile memory and social amnesia and thus to mollify polarized opinions.

To help move this process forward, Roger W. Smith, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Zoryan Institute, outlined four specific actions points (in a public letter to Prime Minister Erdogan this past May) that the Turkish government could initiate: 1) facilitate critical scholars educating society about the events of 1915 from different points of view and not only from the government's perspective; 2) allow the televised broadcast of lectures, which do not necessarily reflect the government's official position, without any censorship, and with accessibility to the public for questions; 3) do not persecute Turkish academics and intellectuals, whose point of view challenges the official version of what happened in 1915, (the most recent examples of which are novelist Orhan Pamuk and newspaper editor Hrant Dink); 4) make it publicly clear that Article 305 of

the Penal Code, which criminalizes “acts against the fundamental national interest,” does not pertain to the “Armenian Genocide” issue.

Only through such a process can there be normalization of relations between Turkey and Armenia, leading to the possibility of peace, stability, and economic development in the region, as an integral part of the greater European Union.

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