

Turkey's National Security Chief Rehashes and Publishes Dubious Material on the Armenians: Another Case of Historical Distortion

According to an article in the Sept. 10, 2001 issue of the Turkish newspaper *Zaman*, the head of Turkey's National Security (Emniyet Genel Müdürlüğü Department II), Eyub Shahin, has just reedited and republished Russian General Mayewski's report on the conflict between Armenians and Turks that was evolving during the last decades of the 19th century. It is published under the auspices of Lt. Gen. Osman Solakoglu, President of the Center for General Staff Military History and Strategic Studies.

Sedat Güneç, the author of the article, states that Shahin used the Ottoman language and script version of that report as a source to translate the tract into modern-day Turkish, thus bypassing the original Russian version. This new translation appears under the title, "The Armenian Question as Seen by a Foreigner" (*Yabancı Gözü ile Ermeni Meselesi*). As *Zaman's* correspondent points out in his article, the purpose of this new undertaking is to show that the Armenians in their propaganda entirely distorted the existing situation in the provinces of Bitlis and Van, portraying themselves as the helpless and hapless victims of Turkish oppression. In reality, however, they were better off in their living conditions than many of the Kurdish and Turkish inhabitants of these provinces. Whatever misfortunes befell the Armenians, it was due to their provocative behavior, by virtue of which they, spurred on by foreign powers, tried to topple the Ottoman regime and create a new Armenia in Ottoman territories. These are the main points being made by this new translation.

Consistent with Turkish journalistic practices, however, *Zaman's* Güneç nowhere in his article indicates that Mayewski is covering the Abdul Hamit era of 1894-1897. Instead, he boldly brings up and focuses on the subject of World War I "so-called Armenian genocide."

For decades now, this piece by Mayewski has been used by Turkish academics, politicians, and even journalists, as major capital for anti-Armenian propaganda and as source material for Turkish self-justification. It was even used as material for agitation against the Armenians during World War I. Department II of the Ottoman General Staff distributed many copies of this tract to high-ranking Turkish officers stationed for duty in the areas of Bitlis and Van just before the start of World War I for political "orientation." As the above cited article indicates, it is still being used as a weapon against Armenian efforts aimed at the recognition of the Armenian Genocide. For his part, Justin McCarthy also continues to rely on this Turkish presentation of Mayewski for his quantitative and qualitative analysis of the Armenian population and its wartime fate.

Contrary to these claims, however, in an article titled, "The Perversion by Turkish Sources of Russian General Mayewski's Report on the Turko-Armenian Conflict," (*Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies* vol. 5 (1990-1991): 139-152), Prof. Vahakn Dadrian, the Zoryan Institute's Director of Genocide Research, dissected the Turkish publications dealing with Mayewski's tract to conclude that they are faulty and are in part based on doctored, rather than authentic, Mayewski material. By checking Turkish,

Armenian and French sources, as well as official German documents, Dr. Dadrian established the fact that the Turks, through Major Mehmet Sadik, an intelligence officer in the General Staff's Department II, first translated the Russian tract into Ottoman Turkish. Using the latter as a basis, the Turks then translated it into French for world-wide distribution. But a careful examination of this French and, therefore, Turkish version with the Russian original by German Ottomanist Prof. Martin Hartmann, revealed that there are significant discrepancies between the original, on the one hand, and the Turkish and French translations, on the other, including omissions. Moreover, as Professor Hartmann ascertained, "The French version contains items not found in the Russian." In other words, as Professor Dadrian concludes, "The Russian General has been credited with statements he did not make in his report." Professor Hartmann felt constrained to inform the German Foreign Office, which had commissioned him for this task of checking the translations, that "The portions extracted from the Russian text and taken out of context prove nothing; they may possibly include falsifications. The French text is worthless (*wertlos*)." In his summary conclusion, Prof. Hartmann declares: "The aim of the material obviously is to place the blame on the Christians... This is an instrument of agitation... On the whole one gains the impression that one is dealing with a clumsy effort to excuse the conduct of the Turkish government in the great atrocities of 1895-6 through the mouth of a Russian."

It should be noted that another Russian military officer's report is likewise being used by various Turkish authors to reverse the roles of perpetrator and victim in the Armenian Genocide. It concerns Lt.-Col. Twerdo-Khlebof, Commander of the Russian 2nd Artillery Regiment of Fortress Erzurum, whose tract deals with Armenian atrocities, which the Russian officer claims to have occurred following the collapse of the Tsarist regime and the withdrawal of the Russian Caucasus army from eastern Turkey, December 1917-March 12, 1918. Twerdo-Khlebof reportedly wrote his account while in Turkish captivity at the Turkish army's headquarters. His report has been used by several Turkish military commanders, in particular by General Kâzım Karabekir, by A. Hulki Saral Pasha, and by Talât Pasha in his memoirs, and the Turkish Paris Peace delegation, as a basis to blame the Armenians and to deny any Turkish wrongdoing.

However, research on this so-called Russian officer revealed a number of significant facts seriously calling into question the value of his "report." As Professor Dadrian lays out in his above-cited article, first and foremost, the translator of this report is none other than the same intelligence officer, Major Mehmet Sadik, who falsified the Mayewski translation! As far as it is known, there has been no other access to the Russian original in terms of any translation and any other language. Moreover, as Dadrian pointedly indicates in his long endnote 23, Twerdo-Khlebof was of Azerbaijani Tatar origin with strong affinities for the Turks. Armenian military commander Sebouh, in his memoirs (vol. 2, pp. 31, 68-69), states that this Twerdo-Khlebof had close contacts with his compatriot, the Azeri Tatar Seyidof, who "had come to Erzurum to spy on and foment anti-Armenian disturbances..." and that "despite the existence of 70 fortress cannons only a few times artillery fire was used. No wonder that the few shells thus spent fell on our soldiers for Colonel Khlebof was an Azerbaijani Tatar; being a friend of Seyidof, he directed the fire against the Armenian soldiers." Another Armenian observer, the Aide de Camp of famous folk hero Antranig, declared that "The sympathy of this Colonel

[Twerdo-Khlebof] was entirely directed towards the Turks. He and his officers were billeted in Turkish houses where they used to ravish Turkish girls...none of the cannons opened fire, despite repeated orders. With but few exceptions, the foreign officers and military were won over through bribery and Turkish ladies.”

These are but two samples of the type of material the much-cited Ottoman archives are known to comprise relative to the Armenian Question. They illustrate the pervasive lack of authenticity and reliability of the many sources that are an integral part of these archives. It should be incumbent on all interested parties, and especially historians, to take note of this fact before assigning equal value to them in comparison with European and American state archives.

Given the persistence of Turkish denials, the fundamental issue is, and remains, the probing, testing, and the validation of the claim, advanced by Armenian as well as non-Armenian scholars, of genocide, which is an integral part of Ottoman history.

Since the announcement of the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission (TARC) in July, the Turkish commissioners, the Turkish media, and Turkish historical institutions have consistently maintained their active denial of Ottoman history as it relates to the treatment of the Armenians during World War I. The republication of Mayewski's dubious material and its promotion in the media through *Zaman* deliberately masks the story of a 19th century event to misrepresent it as part of the World War I Armenian Genocide in order to deny that genocide. The recent reprinting and distribution of Kamuran Gürün's notorious book, *The Armenian File*, a classic rendering of the traditional Turkish state position of denial, is yet another example. Perhaps the most disappointing example of this attitude is the widely reported statement given by TARC member Ozdem Sanberk to the Azeri newspaper, *525-chi Gazet* on July 19, 2001 in Baku. He is reported as saying that, "The basic goal of our commission is to impede the initiatives put forth every year in the U.S. Congress and parliaments of Western countries... The key goal is to prevent the genocide issue from being regularly brought into the agenda of the Western countries... Because, as long as we continue the dialogue [with Armenians], the issue won't be brought to the Congress agenda... The U.S. Congress will see that there is a channel of dialogue between Turks and Armenians and decide that 'there is no necessity for the Congress to take such a decision while such a channel exists.'" Notwithstanding Sanberk's convenient excuse at the recent TARC meeting in Istanbul, Sep. 23-25, that he was misunderstood, there has been no public retraction, and his words speak for themselves.

These are all indications which clearly demonstrate that Turkey is not yet willing to deal with its history honestly, freely and openly and is determined to resort to any means to obfuscate the issue as a device for denying it. It seems there is virtually no one in Turkey today, with very few exceptions, whether an academic, commissioner or media representative, who dares contradict or deviate from the official state policy of denial. In this regard, it is worth remembering that one is dealing here with a disputant party that happens to be also identified with the perpetrator camp. The latest TARC meeting in Istanbul has given no indication that the Turkish attitude has changed. The Zoryan

Institute continues to support the Armenian TARC representatives' commitment to dialogue and reconciliation in the hope that TARC comes to deal with the key issue of history. Turkey can deal realistically with its present only if it deals openly and honestly with its history. Without that, it will not be possible to achieve any meaningful dialogue, let alone reconciliation, either with its own civil society or with the Armenians. With it, however, Turkey stands to benefit not only internally and with its relations with its neighbors, but also internationally, particularly with the European Union, which Turkey, itself, considers so important for its future.