

**Dialogue Across an International Divide:  
Essays Towards a Turkish-Armenian Dialogue  
by Taner Akçam**

**Foreword**

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Armenian-Turkish Dialogue and Taner Akçam

The current problems, if not enmity, prejudice and hatred, between the Turkish and Armenian communities can almost entirely be traced back to the Genocide of 1915. This has been, and still is, the major stumbling block in Armenian-Turkish relations. Frequently, the Armenians look at the year 1915 as the epitome and culmination of the misfortunes, misgovernment and tragedies they suffered under Ottoman Turkish rule. The Turkish state continues flatly to deny the events of 1915, often mitigating or denigrating the Armenian tragedy in various forms and to varying degrees. They also claim that the vile acts of destruction committed against the Armenians are below the inherent dignity and honor of the Turkish people and the ideals of Turkish nationalism that gave rise to the modern Turkish state. Any and all references to 1915 have not only polarized both the Armenians and the Turks but have also politicized their respective stands vis-à-vis one another. They continue to suffer emotionally, as their viewpoints remain mutually unrecognized or unacceptable. They spend millions of dollars to silence one another's voice and become all the more embittered, as they fail to come to terms with the unspeakable pain, loss and memories associated with 1915 and its attendant consequences.

The social actors engaged in this confrontation are the nation-states of Turkey and Armenia, the communities in both countries, including the Armenian minorities in Turkey, the Armenian diaspora, especially in France and the United States, and the nascent Turkish communities in Germany and the United States. All of these actors have their separate interests, interpretations, and expectations from the discussion of the Armenian tragedy, and they all attempt to impose their respective views upon others. As a whole, the Armenians are in agreement that what happened in 1915 was indeed genocide. They have different interpretations, however, as to why 1915 happened, where 1915 should be located in collective memory, and how this location should affect the present. The views of the Turkish state, the Turkish diaspora, and the people of Turkey also differ widely on the assessment of 1915. The Turkish state has developed a master story that aims to deny and erase the genocide from Turkish collective memory. This master story has so far been viable because of the inherent disregard of the Turkish state for its own historical past. Since the Turkish nationalist project had to construct the Turkish nation-state in contradistinction to the Ottoman

Empire, it construed and identified the birth of the Turkish state as the beginning of the history of the nation, rendering what had transpired earlier irrelevant. While the Turkish diaspora seems to adhere to this official state line, the people of Turkey often do indeed have their own alternative narratives. These narratives circulate informally among groups and individuals, but are never brought into the public arena, for fear of retribution from the state.

Such contestation and discrepancies between and within the Armenian and Turkish communities, and the persistent lack of meaningful dialogue produce sadly significant consequences. Their failure to cultivate direct ties not only allows third parties to enter the public space and exploit Armenian-Turkish differences and disagreements to their advantage, it also forecloses opportunities to discuss, acknowledge and address problems and silences in their own histories. The Armenian and Turkish communities can overcome such negative consequences by recognizing their shared past, the violence, shock and trauma they both have experienced, and the man-made tragedy inflicted on the Armenians. One could certainly assert that the Armenians have experienced a double trauma: one resulting from the massacres of 1915, and the other from Turkey's refusal to recognize the genocide. One of the first steps towards reconciliation through dialogue is the recognition of the trauma of the past affecting both the Armenians and the Turks.

Prior to 1915, the Armenians and Turks shared more than six centuries of common history. This common history can only be studied if 1915 is recognized as one, albeit major, historical instance to be analyzed within the context of the common history Turks and Armenians shared before and after 1915. Inability to do so would essentialize 1915. The second step in reconciliation through dialogue is the recognition of the common history of the Armenian and Turkish communities.

In its account of what happened or did not happen to the Armenians, the master story of the Turkish nation-state chooses to emphasize the pain and suffering inflicted on the Turks themselves, as if this would in some way alleviate Armenian pain and lessen the Armenian tragedy. The Turkish master story also claims that the denial of the Armenian tragedy and the exclusion of this group from its imagined community would decrease the pain and suffering of the Turks. The third step in reconciliation through dialogue is the recognition of the inherent biases present in the master story of the Turkish state.

Once these steps are taken jointly by the Armenian and Turkish sides, on equal terms and with mutual recognition and respect, the current insufferable atmosphere can be turned into a joint search for reconciliation through dialogue. Such a perspective is essential if Armenian and Turkish scholars are to explore history in a meaningful way and in all its shades, gray and otherwise. There is an acute need and, indeed, much room for understanding, collaboration and joint exploration of all aspects, facets and details of Armenian-Turkish relations throughout history. For there is much prejudice to be shed, stereotypes to be destroyed, and many obscure areas to be explored in a constructive fashion. It is this spirit that has led us, two University of Michigan faculty, working in the field of Ottoman and Armenian history and culture, to work together with

a view to promoting a scholarly dialogue and adopting a wider embrace of Armenian-Turkish studies. In our approach and determination to work together, we have derived much inspiration from the person and work of Dr. Taner Akçam.

It is with a deep sense of privilege and honor that we introduce Dr. Taner Akçam's collection of essays. For many years now, Dr. Akçam has been working tirelessly, and against tremendous odds, to overcome prejudices and biases and to promote understanding and better relations between Turks and Armenians. The focus of his scholarship has been the Armenian Genocide, its history and impact on Armenian-Turkish relations since 1915. He has diligently delved into primary archival sources to understand and illuminate, and to analyze and interpret, some of the darker aspects of the Armenian tragedy and human behavior. In all his work, Dr. Akçam's scholarship has been meticulous, his perspectives illuminating, and his moral fortitude inspiring. What has also been remarkable about this gentleman is not only his perseverance, but also his genuine sense of optimism. His essays offer us a glimpse into the soul and work of a compassionate human being and a dispassionate scholar, endowed with a deep sense of social awareness and responsibility.

Dr. Akçam's work has been so far published in Turkish and German and has therefore been inaccessible to the English-speaking public. The present volume brings together some of his essays in English translation. We are certain that this volume will be of significant importance to those interested in the modern phase of Armenian-Turkish relations. We are also certain that its appearance will be gratifying to Dr. Akçam himself. A wider audience will read his work. This will translate into a greater impact and, hopefully, will stimulate more dispassionate research. And there is no greater fulfillment for a Turk who began his arduous journey all alone, than to be joined by an increasing number of companions in quest of the truth and fruitful understanding between Turks and Armenians.

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