

SOME RECENT BOOKS ON THE ARMENIANS AND THE NEXT STAGE IN THE
HISTORIOGRAPHY OF TURKISH ARMENIAN RELATIONS

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Interest in the history of Turkish-Armenian relations, which had subsided after the end of World War I, revived after 1965, a year which Armenian nationalists marked as the 50th anniversary of the destruction of their community in Anatolia. The following year saw the publication of an unassuming popular history by Senator Sadi Koçuş¹, whose primary aim was to stress the friendship that had existed between Turks and Armenians over the centuries, and that he had himself experienced in spite of the estrangement between the two peoples before and during World War I. But it was the spate of attacks by Armenian terrorists on Turkish diplomats which prompted the appearance of a number of studies on what had become once again a topical issue. The firsts of these attacks resulted in the murder of the Turkish consul-general and vice-consul in Los Angeles in 1973. Then in 1975 there began a systematic campaign of terror against Turkish mission abroad, a campaign which, fortunately, now seems to have ceased or to have been suspended. The course of the campaign has been studied in two useful books: an investigation of the ASALA terrorist organisation by two Israeli scholars Anat Kurz and Ariel Merari², which has to be used with care as it contains a number of errors, and a more solid study of contemporary Armenian terrorism by the American scholar Michael M.Gunter³. The latter is unlikely to be superseded soon, although it will eventually have to be up-dated.

As Michael Gunter says, "terrorism is a phenomenon that usually stems from the failure of its perpetrators to develop political or military strength to present their case in a more conventional manner"⁴. However there have been attempts to present the

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¹ Sadi Koçuş, *Tarih Boyunca Türk-Ermeni İlişkileri*, Altınok Matbaası, Ankara 1967.

² Anat Kurz and Ariel Merari, *ASALA: International Terror or Political Tool*, Tel Aviv University Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Westview Press, 1985.

³ Michael M. Gunter, *"Pursuing the Just Cause of Their People": A Study of Contemporary Armenian Terrorism*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 1986.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.30

Armenian nationalist case in a conventional manner too. The best known comes from the pen of a British scholar, Christopher J. Walker⁵. This has been followed by the publication of papers presented at a conference in Tel Aviv, and edited by the American Armenian scholar, Richard G.Hovanissian⁶.

On the Turkish side there have been several major works. Our knowledge of original sources has been served by the publication of documents from Ottoman archives, preceeded by more limited compendia from the Turkish military history archives⁷ and of British documents on Ottoman Armenians⁸. Then in the field of historiography two works stand out, Ambassador Kamuran Gürün's *Armenian File*⁹, and Dr. Salahi Sonyel's *The Ottoman Armenians*¹⁰. In a fascinating work of historical detection, Şinasi Orel and Süreyya Yuca, have, I believe, proved conclusively that the so-called Andonian documents purporting to show that there had been a deliberate policy to exterminate the Armenians, were a fake¹¹. Their conclusions stand in spite of the objections of the American Armenian scholar Vahakn N.Dadrian¹² whose use of the minutes of the court-martial held in Istanbul under Allied occupation has little relevance to the authenticity of documents, all of which seem to have conveniently disappeared.

Another key study is that of the American Professor Justin McCarthy, whose conclusions on the effects of World War I on the demography of Asia Minor, might conceivably be refined, but are unlikely to be substantially altered¹³. And, of course, work has continued on aspects of the life of the Armenian community in the Ottoman Empire,

⁵ Christopher J. Walker, *Armenia: The Survival of a Nation*, Croom Helm, London 1980.

⁶ Richard G. Hovanissian (ed), *The Armenian Genocide in Perspective*, Transaction Books, New Brunswick 1986.

⁷ *Documents*, DGPI, Ankara n. d.

⁸ Bilâl Şimşir (ed), *British Documents on Ottoman Armenians*, ii, Türk Tarih Kurumu, Ankara 1983.

⁹ Kamuran Gürün, *The Armenian File: The Myth of Innocence Exposed*, K. Rüstem & Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 1985.

¹⁰ Salahi Ramsdam Sonyel, *The Ottoman Armenians*, K. Rüstem, London 1987.

¹¹ Şinasi Orel and Süreyya Yuca, *The Talât Pasha Telegrams: Historical Fact or Armenian Fiction?*, K. Rüstem, Nicosia 1986.

¹² Vahakn N. Dadrian, "The Naim: Andonian Documents on the World War I Destruction of Ottoman Armenians: the Anatomy of a Genocide", in *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 18 (1986), 311-360.

¹³ Justin McCarthy, *Muslims and Minorities: The Population of Ottoman Anatolia and the End of the Empire*, New York UP 1983.

as witness two of the papers presented in the symposium on Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire, edited by Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis¹⁴.

What have we learnt from all this historiographical activity, and what is the next stage? The beginnings of Armenian nationalism and the part played by Armenian nationalist agitation in the genesis of the intercommunal troubles of 1894-1897 are now established with reasonable clarity. After the work of Gürün, Sonyel and McCarthy, exaggerations of these incidents, and particularly of the number of Armenian casualties¹⁵, are now untenable. We now know that the great majority of Ottoman Armenians survived, that a great many of them continued to be rich and even increased in wealth, and many were still employed by the Ottoman State until the beginning of World War I. But while the troubles of the 1890's did not destroy the Armenian community, they destroyed mutual trust between it and the Muslim majority among whom the Armenians lived.

The bloody troubles of the 1890's were, we know, preceded by the appearance of Armenian nationalist revolutionaries. What about the much graver events of 1915 which ended in the disappearance of the Armenian community from Anatolia? Here we come to an oft-repeated accusation to which Turkish historians have not yet turned their full attention. That there were not just fears, but repeated instances of Armenian sedition in the Ottoman Empire in 1914 and 1915 we know: the 1948 Hunchaks "pledged determined opposition to the Ottoman empire", one Dashnak deputy in the Ottoman parliament fled "to join up in one of the Armenian volunteer partisan units that were being formed in Russian Armenia"¹⁶, and there was certainly Armenian uprisings in Van and elsewhere in 1915. But Armenian and pro-Armenian historians argue that these instances of sedition do not explain the tragic fate of the Armenian community in Anatolia, given that the Armenians stood in the way of the Pan-Turanian aspirations of the Young Turkish leadership of the Ottoman Empire, and were, in any case, doomed. True, Christopher Walker says that "the evidence (for the theory that Armenians were

¹⁴ Kevork B. Bardakjian, *"The Rise of the Armenian Patriarchate in Constantinople"*, and Hagop Barsoumian, *"The Dual Role of the Armenian Amira Class within the Ottoman Government and the Armenian Millet (1750-1850)"* in Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (eds), *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire*, i, Holmes & Meier, New York 1982.

¹⁵ Thus Hovannisian in *The Armenian Genocide in Perspective* still speaks of "the slaughter of between 100,000 and 200,000 Armenians" in the 1890's (p.25), although, as Kamuran Gürün points out, even the pro-Armenian pastor Johannes Lepsius gave the number of killed as 88, 243. Gürün himself estimates that the true figure "hardly reach(es) 20,000" (op. cit., p. 161).

¹⁶ Walker, op. cit., 198-9.

the victims of a well-prepared plot) is not yet conclusive"¹⁷. Nevertheless he claims that Ziya Gökalp's Turanian ideals involved "the forcible Turkicisation of Armenians" before the expansion of the Turkish state to Azerbaijan¹⁸. Richard Hovanissian argues that "the Young Turk leaders were drawn to the newly articulated ideology of Turkism, which was to supplant the principle of egalitarian Ottomanism and give justification to violent means for transforming a heterogeneous empire into a homogeneous state based on the concept of one nation, one people"¹⁹. Similarly Robert Melson says: "The genocide of the Armenians, we believe should be understood not as a response to 'Armenian provocations' but as a reaction to Turkish disasters and a stage in the Turkish national revolution"²⁰.

The attempt by Armenian nationalist scholars to attribute the destruction of their community in Anatolia not to Armenian, but to Turkish nationalism and particularly to Turanian ideology is easy to understand. The reverse would lead to a conclusion, intolerable to them, that it is the Armenian nationalist revolutionaries who lit the fuse of the bomb and blew up their own community. The point was made twenty years ago in a thoughtful essay by Professor Elie Kedourie who wrote: "when the catastrophe was final, complete, irredeemable, the (Armenian) nationalists were still indignant that their methods had had such untoward consequences. They could not understand why salvation was so recalcitrant in coming, why the easy path which so many European revolutions had promised should have proved full of vipers and nettles"²¹.

The break-up of the multinational Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires in World War I has been followed by that of the British, French and the smaller Dutch and Portuguese colonial empires after World War II. Now we are witnessing at the very least a profound transformation of the Soviet empire. Looked retrospectively this process, which is now fashionably called "de-colonisation", looks inevitable. But there is a wide variation in the fate of distinct national and confessional communities which once lived together under the common roof of one or the other of these empires. The difference can be explained partly with reference to history, geography, demography and other variables which the leaders of these communities cannot affect. But these leaders also matter: they can be wise or foolish, knowledgeable or ignorant, realistic or fanciful.

¹⁷ Ibid., 202.

¹⁸ Ibid., 190.

¹⁹ Op. Cit., 28.

²⁰ Ibid., 79.

²¹ Elie Kedourie, *The Chatham House Version and Other Middle Eastern Studies*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 1970, 298.

Writing about a different nationalist clash - in this case on the island of Cyprus - a retired US ambassador, Parker Hart, noted "the current tendency of both Cyprus and Greece ... to blame the United States for the island's misfortunes" and comments "The United States should recognize this as a flight from reality. Group self-criticism, especially by small political entities, is a rare commodity. It is infinitely easier to target a larger outside force"²². I would add that it is also easy to blame historical inevitability, material circumstances, anything or anyone other than oneself.

At a time when Armenian nationalists have come to power in what used to be "the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic", with its common frontier with Turkey; it is vitally important to study the track record of Armenian nationalism and the effect which it has had in the past on the fate of various Armenian communities. Perhaps a knowledge of the mistakes of the past will prevent their repetition in the future. This is why I hope that Turkish historians will turn their attention to the thesis that the disappearance of the Armenian community from Anatolia was the "inevitable" result of the espousal of Pan-Turanianism by the Young Turkish leadership of the Ottoman empire - that, to put it epigrammatically, Ziya Gökalp has been the agent of the tragedy and not the Armenian nationalist revolutionaries who preceded him by a generation. After the French Revolution, supporters of the *ancien régime*, used to complain "C'est la faute à Jean-Jacques", meaning that Rousseau was responsible for all their troubles. I hope that Turkish and other historians will find the time to deal with a similarly facile attribution of the Armenian tragedy to Ziya Gökalp. By doing so they would serve the cause not only of historical truth, but of the rational conduct of international relations.

²² Parker T. Hart, *Two NATO Allies at the Threshold of War: Cyprus, a Firsthand Account of Crisis Management, 1965-1968*, Duke UP, Durham 1990.