

Turkey, the EU and the Armenian Question

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The Armenian question has frequently occurred to be an issue of contention in Turkey-EU relations. This essay briefly sketches out the historical context in which the way to genocide was paved during the final decades of the Ottoman Empire. While emphasizing the necessity of a revision of Turkish national history writing in this respect, the essay suggests that this revision should be embedded in a larger re-examination of the history of Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, still a dark and poorly comprehended chapter of European history in which millions of people, Christians and Muslims, lost their lives.

In 1929, the German author Franz Werfel was travelling through Egypt and the Levant. His wife Alma Mahler-Werfel tells us in her autobiography, *Mein Leben*, about their encounter with a group of desperate children working in a carpet manufactory in Damascus. The owner of the manufactory explained to them that these were the orphans of Armenian parents killed during the massacres of 1915/16. The couple left the manufactory in deep dismay and Werfel decided to make the tragedy of the Ottoman Armenians the topic of a novel. In 1932/33 he eventually completed *Die vierzig Tage des Musa Dagh*, a literary account of the killing and deportation of Anatolia's Armenian population. Werfel based his novel on interviews with eye-witnesses, as well as on archival material, sources which clearly suggest the instigation and organization of the tragic events by the Young Turk regime. However, although he implicitly describes the massacres as genocide – the contested concept was not yet invented in the 1930s – Werfel did not blame the Turks as a nation. On the contrary, he provides us with a complex narrative in which good and evil are not delineated by religious or ethnic lines. In his novel, Werfel presents us a multi-faceted picture of one of the darkest chapters of modern European history for which it would be historically wrong to blame Turks alone. The Armenian question is a European question and this essay will raise some points in order to explain why.

In historical terms, the road to genocide was paved by developments in the nineteenth century with the intensification of the so-called "Eastern Question", the decline of the Ottoman Empire in the context of European imperialism. Sultan Abdülhamid II's accession to the throne (1876) had been preceded by nationalistic revolts in the Herzegovina and in Bulgaria, and soon the Ottoman Empire was again embroiled in a disastrous war with Russia (1877-1878), which led to the humiliating treaty of San Stefano in March 1878. Only the intervention of the great powers prevented the almost complete loss of Ottoman territory in Europe. At the Berlin Congress in July 1878, the Ottoman Empire was able to retain its formal supremacy over an autonomous Bulgaria. However, Serbia, Romania, and Montenegro became independent, and Habsburg was allowed to occupy Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Russians were finally granted the north-eastern Anatolian provinces of Batum, Kars and Ardahan.

After parcelling out the European provinces at the Berlin Congress, European imperialist interference drifted from the Balkans into the Anatolian heartland of the Ottoman State. At Berlin, the British government took direct interest in the welfare of the Armenian population in eastern Anatolia, and two European-inspired reform programmes were forced on the Empire in 1879 and 1896. Sultan Abdülhamid was confronted with British plans for Armenian autonomy in the eastern provinces, implying European supervision over tax collection, judicial

procedures and the gendarmerie. While the Ottoman government was trying hard to centralise state power, European interference was pressing for a decentralisation of the provincial administration. Moreover, the British reform plans encouraged Armenian aspirations for autonomy in a region with a mixed population, resembling an ethnic and religious mosaic. This renewed European interference coincided with Abdülhamid's attempt to re-establish state control over eastern Anatolia. In successfully subduing most of local strong-men and Kurdish tribal leaders in the 1830s and 1840s, the Ottoman State had previously been able to establish its relative control over the eastern parts of Anatolia. However, the security situation significantly deteriorated during the Ottoman-Russian War (1877-1878). In order to regain government control, Istanbul exploited the existing rivalry between the Kurdish leaders in the countryside and urban notables. The Ottoman rulers tried to manipulate the various groups so that none of them was powerful enough to challenge Ottoman sovereignty. As a mechanism of supervision and control, as well as in order to be prepared for another war with Russia, auxiliary cavalry corps had been formed in 1891. They consisted of Kurdish tribesmen who were attracted by an exemption from conscription and taxation. At the same time Armenian revolutionary forces, encouraged by the European reform proposals, began their militant activities. In the academic literature it is contested whether it was the deliberate intention of the Ottoman Sultan to violently suppress the Armenians or whether the escalation of events was caused by a complex interplay between Istanbul, the British government, Christian missionaries, Armenian nationalists and Kurdish tribes. Eventually, the Ottoman government lost control over the tense situation, and the autonomously acting Kurdish auxiliary troops played a major role in the violent process leading to the Armenian massacres of 1895-1896.

The next decisive step to the catastrophe of 1915/16 was the Balkan Wars (1912-1913). After the Young Turk Revolution of July 1908 and the final deposition of Abdülhamid II in 1909, hopes to stop the dismemberment of the Empire did not last very long. In October 1908, the island of Crete declared its incorporation to Greece, Bulgaria cut its formal ties to the Ottoman Empire, and Vienna announced the annexation of Bosnia and the Herzegovina. A series of regional insurrections in the Balkans followed in which not only the Christian population but also Muslim Albanians became involved. Mainly caused by traditionally motivated resistance against the centralising policies of the Young Turk regime, the revolts in Albania (1910), Kosovo (1910, 1912) and Montenegro (1911) increasingly adopted a nationalist posture.

As a predecessor to the First World War, the Balkan Wars contributed a lot to enhance the anxieties, mistrust and hatred among the diverse ethnic and religious groups in the Ottoman Empire. Justin McCarthy emphasized in his work

this historical legacy of mutual killings and expulsions between Christians and Muslims of South-East Europe. According to McCarthy's highly contested figures, the Muslim population of the European parts of the Ottoman Empire comprised around 2,315 million before the Balkan Wars (1912-13). More than 600,000 Muslims were killed in the wars and about 400,000 re-settled in Anatolia. The population exchanges following World War I brought another 400,000 European Muslims to Anatolia. In this region, the decades before the Armenian genocide were characterized by a process of continuous warfare and nationalist agitation in the context of international conflict. In the course of this process millions of Christians and Muslims died or lost their homes, while the Ottoman Empire as a viable political structure disappeared. The killing of about 1.5 million Armenians during the First World War was the culmination point of this spiral of violent events.

In political terms, the attempt of the Young Turk regime under the Ottoman Minister of War, Enver Pasha, to break out of international isolation and to enter the war on the side of the central powers, Germany and Austria, was crucial. Being militarily, economically and in terms of internal communications in no condition to fight a major war, Istanbul soon found itself surrounded by multiple fronts. Ottoman troops were fighting in Galicia, Macedonia and Romania. They had to defend the Empire against Russia in the Caucasus, against Britain in Iraq and at the Suez Channel, and in the Straits against the allied forces of France and Great Britain. Despite singular military successes, the First World War ended for the Ottoman Empire in an absolute fiasco. On 31 October 1918, Sultan Mehmet VI had to accept the truce of Mudros, an unconditional capitulation. Only one day later the leadership of the Young Turk regime fled Istanbul aboard a German submarine.

In light of this historical sketch, the issue of the Armenian genocide certainly plays a crucial role in Turkey-EU relations. There is no doubt that Turkish national history writing needs a revision in this respect. This revision, however, should be embedded in a larger re-examination of European-Turkish history. The killing and deportation of the Armenians was the terrible result of the mutual policies of intimidation, expulsion and ethnic cleansing which characterized the relationship between European states and the Ottoman Empire from the late nineteenth century until the years after the First World War. This period of time is still a dark and poorly comprehended chapter of European history in which millions of people, Christians and Muslims, lost their lives. Such a revision of this part of European history is important for both the EU member-states and Turkey and contrary to Turkish anxieties it could serve as the "big idea" around which Turkish-EU relations could develop into a mutually shared democratic future.