

The Creation of a Common Body of Shared Knowledge for Armenian-Turkish History

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The deportation and killing of Armenians in 1915 is one of the major stumbling block in current Armenian-Turkish relations, and has consequences for the progress and stability of the entire region running from Southeastern Europe into Turkey, the Middle East, and Central Asia.

The genocide in 1915-16 tragically divided two peoples that had coexisted in the same region for centuries. Each side began to develop its own narrative. On one side of this narrative is the Turkish state and its nationalist writing of history that dominates Turkish discourse; on the other side is the Armenian narrative developed mostly in the diaspora and in contradiction to the Turkish state narrative. These two sides appear as two irreconcilable factions engaged in political and psychological warfare to either prove or disprove the Genocide. The contention is not simply a controversy about history but a political struggle in the region and involving international politics. As both the Armenian diaspora and the Republic of Armenia try to pressure Turkey to acknowledge the Genocide through the intervention of the Western Powers and Western public opinion, the Turkish side uses its political and military clout in the region to pressure third parties not to acknowledge the Genocide. The result is a blockage, an inability to move toward reconciliation.

One element missing from this picture is the narrative of Turkish society. As a result of this factionalism, both the Armenians and third parties conflate the position of the Turkish state with that of Turkish society. Even though this perception appears to be accurate on the surface, closer analysis reveals a different picture: a large gap between the position of the Turkish state and that of a significant segment of Turkish society with respect to the Armenian Genocide.

Even though “denial” is the term commonly used in international circles to depict the positions of both the Turkish state and society, more appropriate terms that fully capture the position of Turkish society toward the Genocide would be “ignorance-apathy” and “silence.” In contemporary Turkey, the state-sponsored education of ninety-five years of nationalistic historiography has created ignorance about past events among all adults in general and younger generations in particular. This ignorance has then become coupled with social amnesia as the nationalist historiography generally does not discuss or even mention the events before the founding of the Turkish Republic, especially those of 1915-16. The Turkish populace has also not had the chance to read, discover, and recover its 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 and, because of this ignorance, one of apathy toward its own past.

The result is that Turkish society has been unable to come to terms with its own past. It has also had no access to “private memories” except those passed down orally in the private sphere; the public sphere has been totally dominated by the imposed official state narrative. Even though the state has not been able to successfully create a common identity, it has nevertheless imposed an

“imagined” one that society has been unable to question because of its ignorance and amnesia and, especially, fear. This can be regarded as part of its survival strategy.

Yet the various sub-groups all had, and still have, their own collective narratives, a product of their own historical experiences that have survived orally. It is the survival of these narratives, discussed only in private and never in public, that has enabled some people to be critical of the official narrative, even though they have never been able to publicly oppose and contradict the official state narrative. Hence there are two sets of narratives that exist side-by-side, one the hegemonic and public version of the state, and the other the suppressed and private version of various sub-groups.

The *Creation of a Common Body of Knowledge* aims to create a new social space in Turkish society that promotes an open public discussion of the Armenian Genocide. Such a development would have three important consequences. First, it would foster the democratization process in Turkey, whereby all sub-groups can participate in the public sphere in their own voices. Secondly, it would also make it possible to overcome the political polarization that has developed around this issue and reveal to international public opinion that there are Turkish societal narratives that do not fully support the official state narrative. Finally, such a space would aid and accelerate the development and transfer of common knowledge, both written and oral, which would act as a catalyst for the normalization of relations between Turkish and Armenian societies. An open discussion of history is important not only for the Turks, but also for the Armenians, particularly the diaspora Armenians, where two millennia of history, and especially the last 600 years, are linked to the same history as that of the Turks.

How does one go about creating such a vitally significant social space? First and foremost, there needs to be a common body of knowledge, shared by both Turkish and Armenian civil societies, to allow an informed discussion. The aim of this proposed project is ultimately to achieve the creation of a common body of shared knowledge by making the range of sources described above available to Turkish civil society and Western scholarship by publishing them simultaneously in modern Turkish and English. Consequently, the project aims to collect, compile, translate, and publish existing Western documents, as well as collect, compile, transliterate, translate, and edit the existing Ottoman documents on the Armenian Genocide in both Turkish and English. The project will be executed as follows:

1) *The Translation of English, American, German and Austrian Documents into English and Turkish:* Even though the British and American documents on the 1915 events have been inventoried, catalogued and published, they need to be translated in their entirety into Turkish. The translation of the relevant German documents into Turkish has already been organized as a common project between the Zoryan Institute of Canada and Wolfgang Gust in Germany, and they have also prepared the English version. Translation and editing of the American documents is still an open issue and must be organized.

2) *The Transcription and Editing of Ottoman Documents into English and Turkish:* The Ottoman documents on the events of 1915 are the most problematic because they have been selectively destroyed or sanitized, and have been published only selectively by the Turkish state. These publications are mostly in Turkish with brief English summaries.

Most of the publications explicitly support the official Turkish position. However, there exists a wide range of documents that strongly challenge the official position. These Ottoman documents comprise the following three categories:

a) *The Transliteration, Translation and Publication of Takvim-i Vekâyi (the official gazette of the Ottoman government) Concerning the Trials for the Events of 1915*: The Ottoman government had published some of the proceedings, indictments, and verdicts of the Ottoman military court tribunal, which tried perpetrators of the 1915 deaths and massacres between 1919-1922 in Istanbul after the World War I armistice. The official gazette that published this information was printed in Arabic script and is currently dispersed in different libraries throughout the world. It is very difficult to get a complete collection. The project aims to accomplish the complete transliteration, translation, and editing of these gazettes into modern Turkish and English. Vahakn Dadrian, director of Genocide Research in Zoryan Institute and Taner Akçam completed the Turkish edition and it will be published soon. The English edition is in preparation.

b) *The Translation and Publication of the Ottoman Newspapers from the Armistice period of 1919-1922 Concerning the Events of 1915*: In addition to the information provided by the official gazette, there were also many Ottoman newspapers of the period that provide vital information concerning the events of 1915. Even though according to the *Takvim-i Vekayi* more than thirty-eight trials were held in Istanbul, the official Ottoman gazette only published complete accounts of three of them, along with some additional indictments and verdicts. Yet the Ottoman newspapers of the period not only reported daily on all of these 38 trials, but also on a further 27 trials and included a large amount of the testimonies of the accused. The newspapers of this period were not censored by the Ottoman government because of the special conditions existing during the armistice period, when Turkey was administered under Allied Occupation. Hence the newspapers contained unexpurgated information not only from the trials, but also from individuals who gave their own personal recollections of the events. For the same reasons that have been noted above, there is no single complete collection of these twenty contemporaneous newspapers in any single library, either in Turkey or abroad.

This is a common project involving the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at the University of Minnesota; Columbia University; the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation, directed by Elazar Barkan; and Vahakn Dadrian, the director of Genocide Research at the Zoryan Institute.

c) *The Transliteration, Translation, and Publication of the Ottoman Documents in the Turkish State Archives Concerning the Events of 1915*: Full access to the archival material in the Turkish state archives is particularly difficult when a scholar chooses to research the Armenian Genocide. Yet we have been in collaboration for years with colleagues who currently work and conduct research in the Turkish archives; we have managed to collect both a complete list of the archival catalogues and a large sample of documents that are relevant to the Armenian Genocide. Contrary to the accepted belief, fostered by the Turkish state, that the Ottoman documents prove that there was

no genocide 1915, our research reveals that they provide compelling evidence on the widespread practice of deliberate massacres of Armenians. As a part of this project, we propose to transliterate, translate, and publish these archival sources in English and Turkish.

All of these volumes have to be published in both English and Turkish, in order to create the common body of shared knowledge. As outlined above, this project proposes to make available to both the English and Turkish-speaking public information on the Armenian Genocide that would create a social space which, in turn, would enable a full scholarly discussion that would overcome the entrenched polarized political positions that currently exist.

This project involves cooperation with a number of different universities and research institutes, including Columbia University; the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (Elazar Barkan); Södertörns University College, Stockholm, Sweden (David Gaunt); and the Zoryan Institute (Vahakn Dadrian, director of Genocide Research).