

TANER AKÇAM'S  
«TÜRK ULUSAL KİMLİĞİ  
VE ERMENİ SORUNU»  
AND THE SLOW EMERGENCE OF A  
REVISIONIST TREND IN TURKISH  
HISTORIOGRAPHY AS REGARDS THE  
GENOCIDE OF OTTOMAN ARMENIANS  
IN 1915

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When Professor Bernard Lewis, the famous British-American orientalist of Jewish descent, was sued by certain French-Armenian organisations in early 1994 for claiming that the mass deportations and massacres of the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire in 1915 did not amount to a premeditated act of genocide<sup>(1)</sup>, the Western media did pay the issue due attention. Wrote Christopher Hitchens in *The Nation* that «poor old Lewis could hardly have chosen a worse time to advance his lenient and euphemistic account of the century's first genocide,» for he remained «one of the few scholars of any reputation who maintains that there was no 'genocide' of Armenians in Turkey during the First World War» at a time when the taboo on discussion of the matter has been broken even in Turkey herself. In this context, Hitchens first mentioned Çağlar Keyder's monograph, *State and Class in Turkey : A Study in Capitalist Development* (London and New York, 1987), which argues that by confiscating the property of massacred Armenians, Jews and Greeks during and immediately after the end of World War I, the post-Ottoman bureaucracy was able to initiate a crude form of capital accumulation. Hitchens then made a special mention of Taner Akçam's *Türk Ulusal Kimliği ve Ermeni Sorunu* [Turkish National Identity and the Armenian Question] (Istanbul : İletişim Yayınları, 1992), which, he said «faces the whole issue of 'denial'». Hitchens' claim that

Akçam's book has been «reviewed and debated openly» in Turkey may be an exaggeration and his assertion that «until recently, any such publication would have been met with censorship and imprisonment of the author»<sup>(2)</sup> may be slightly out of place, having in mind that Akçam is a political refugee living in Germany, but his interest in the said book is more than appropriate for here we deal with a monograph, which is certainly one of the most interesting and thought-provoking works that have recently come out in any language about the genocide of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during World War I. Moreover, Hitchens is correct in looking at this publication within the context of a revisionist trend in modern Turkish historiography, which is not only gradually becoming readier to face the realities when discussing the fate of the Ottoman Armenians, but is analysing the latter events — a point not emphasised by Hitchens — within the wider context of the factors behind the emergence of the post-Ottoman republican Turkish nation-state.

The publication of Akçam's *Türk Ulusal Kimliği ve Ermeni Sorunu* in the autumn of 1992 did not go unnoticed at the time by Armenian scholars and journalists around the world, but it was only in 1995 that the dissident Turkish author became a household name in the Armenian media through his participation in symposia commemorating the 80th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide held in Mülheim (Germany)<sup>(3)</sup>, Moscow<sup>(4)</sup> and Yerevan<sup>(5)</sup>, during which he presented papers on the topics of the persistent official Turkish denial that a genocide has taken place and the 1919-1921 trials in Turkey of Young Turk officials. Akçam will undoubtedly be always remembered by Armenians in the future as the first-ever Turkish author in the republican era, who managed to have a book published in Turkey, where he diverged from the habitual attempts to deny that the deportations of 1915 and the ensuing massacres that befell the Ottoman Armenians did amount to genocide, but went as far as attempting to explain why the genocide happened and why do modern Turks to this day persist in denying it. Yet it seems that Armenians interested in the whole complex of the issues generated by the genocide and their attendant effect on the present and future of Turkish-Armenian relations — and few Armenians will claim that they are not interested in these topics — have still a lot to discover about the circumstances leading to the «Akçam phenomenon». This essay is a humble attempt in that direction.

### **Who is Taner Akçam?**

Taner Akçam was born in the village of Ölçek near Ardahan in the province of Kars on 23 October 1953. He considers himself a product of the student movements of 1968, when a group of students in Istanbul, imi-



tating the actions of their French counterparts, occupied the campus of their university and demanded a «National Democratic Revolution» in Turkey. This spontaneous movement, with its anti-imperialist, anti-American and pro-Vietnamese stance, culminated in the formation in 1969 of the Federation of Revolutionary Youth of Turkey (*Devrimci Gençlik*), of which Akçam, then a student in the Faculty of Economics in Istanbul's Middle East Technical University (*Orta Doğu Teknik Üniversitesi*), became a prominent member. He later edited the organisation's synonymous periodical and was arrested in March 1976, put on trial for allegedly making Communist and Kurdish propaganda in the journal, and sentenced to nine years' imprisonment in 1977. He escaped from his prison in Ankara on 12 March 1977 after digging an underground hole and in October that year arrived in West Germany. He spent three months in a Munich prison for having entered the country illegally, but was later granted political asylum. Since August 1988, he is a research fellow at the Hamburg Institute for Social Studies (*Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung*). Among his publications is a collection of articles — written during his stay in Hamburg — titled *İşkenceyi Durdurun : İnsan Hakları ve Marksizm* [End Torture : Human Rights and Marxism] (Ayrıntı Yayınları, 1991). His first book published by the *İletişim Yayınları*, an Istanbul publishing house known for its publications on Turkish politics and history seen from a leftist/socialist perspective, was *Siyasî Kültürümüzde Zulüm ve İşkence* [Oppression and Torture in Our Political Culture] (May 1992), where he analysed the development of political violence and torture through the long Ottoman period until the establishment of the republic in 1923.

Thus, Akçam's interest in Armenian affairs is not very old. He admits that at the peak of his radical political activities, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was only the terrorist acts against Turkish diplomats perpetrated by the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) and similar terrorist organisations, which used to make him think of the Armenians. He remembers now that he did not regard ASALA highly at the time, considering it to be a tool of imperialist forces plotting against Turkey. In his *Siyasî Kültürümüzde Zulüm ve İşkence*, he mentions the Armenians briefly, on pp. 299-305. It was only when preparing that book, however, says Akçam, that he realised that «the Turkish national identity was formed and developed based on violent methods. It became clear to me, that in that respect, the Armenian massacres perpetrated by [the Sultan] Abdülhamit [II] and, later, the Armenian Genocide have had a significant role. Thus, I decided to work on this subject»<sup>(6)</sup>. The Hamburg-based institute, where he is a researcher, was planning at the time to complete by 1995, the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, a series of studies analysing the interconnection of «civilisation» and «barbarism», including instances of mass murder. Akçam, therefore, selected a topic titled *Türk Ulusal Kim-*

*liğinin Yıkıcılığı ve Ermeni Kırımı* [The Destructiveness of the Turkish National Identity and the Armenian Massacres], of which the book under review is a product of.

### **What does Akçam say in *Türk Ulusal Kimliği ve Ermeni Sorunu*?**

Akçam mentions very early in his own introduction to *Türk Ulusal Kimliği ve Ermeni Sorunu* that his method of approach to the Armenian massacres will differ from that of other Turkish authors. He promises not to discuss whether the events of 1915 did constitute a genocide or not, nor attempt to rationalise what happened. For even if the lowest estimate of around 300,000 deaths that year as a consequence of the events in question is taken into account, that is, according to Akçam, something to regret and feel deeply sorry about. He considers it frightening that some authors interpret the events in such a way that one gets the impression that if similar circumstances arise in the future, those authors would support responding again in the same manner (pp. 22-23)<sup>(7)</sup>. Nor, argues Akçam, should the Turks seek justification for what they have done by pointing at similar deeds committed by others. Otherwise, people may fall into a vicious trap of committing and re-committing excessive murder (p. 24). The author's declared aim in the book is to show how problematic was the creation of the Turkish national state and to point that the way it was created is the source of many of Turkey's current problems (p. 25). Typical of many a post-nationalist Western liberal, he also aims to underline the destructive tendencies of nationalist ideologies in general (p. 27).

To describe the events of 1915-1917, Akçam uses the terms *kırım* and *kırım* (both meaning «massacre» in Turkish), as well as sometimes *soykırım* (genocide). He gives preference to *kırım*, because, he says, it was the most widely used term among the populace at the time. He notes, however, that he is using all these words as synonyms of «genocide», admitting that the *kırım* of the Armenians was the first planned ethnic mass murder of the twentieth century aiming at the annihilation of a whole people. It was instigated by the ruling party in the Ottoman Empire and executed through the latter's bureaucratic structure (p. 23). He agrees that the Armenian genocide has since served as a model for many similar acts that have followed it (p. 22).

One of the main reasons leading to the Armenian massacres was, according to Akçam, related to the nature of the Turkish national identity. The latter also played a crucial role in the establishment of the Turkish republic and in making the Armenian Question a taboo in Turkey (p. 29). Most contemporary Turkish historians try to deny the fact of genocide, ignore the Armenian Question, or, at most, dismiss it in a few sentences. Those who have written about it are mostly either advocates of the official



point of view or extreme nationalists and/or Islamists. Their language is openly racist in tone (p. 32). They condemn the Armenians for their fabrications (*iftiralar*) and ingratitude (*nankörlük*) and, instead of making direct accusations, hide themselves behind a lot of quotations made from foreign authors unfriendly to the Armenians. On the other hand, leftist and socialist authors in Turkey have curiously ignored this subject. Their silence cannot be interpreted only by government pressure and legal difficulties. They avoid the issue simply because they do not wish to confront some unpalatable facts which such an investigation is bound to bring to light (p. 33).

Akçam then proceeds to specify in detail some of the characteristics of the Turkish national identity. Turkish nationalism (*ulusçuluk*) made a late entry into the world stage. It is only in the beginning of the twentieth century that the Turks started to ponder seriously about their national identity. Until the Young Turk revolution of 1908, students in Turkish-speaking Muslim Ottoman schools were required to study an Ottoman/Islamist interpretation of history and culture, beginning with the life and deeds of Prophet Muhammad, which did not project a highly esteemed picture of the Turkic race. The term «Turk» carried for a long time for members of the Ottoman elite a derogatory meaning. There were many reasons behind the persistence of this entrenched attitude. The main, according to Akçam, was the predominance of Islamic identity. Moreover, the imperial mentality hindered the development among the Ottoman elite of ideas like «nation» and «homeland». They feared that the adoption of such notions might result in the disintegration of the empire. Most of the high-level officials in the Ottoman state bureaucracy were not Turks themselves, being the product of the *devşirme* system, when young boys used to be taken away from the empire's non-Muslim subjects, given a thoroughly Islamic military and administrative education and then assigned to high posts in government. According to Akçam, the alliance that the Turkic beys of Anatolia made in 1402 with Tamerlane against the Ottoman state and the repeated rebellions of the Alevi and Turkoman tribes of Anatolia against the central Ottoman government might have also left some residual ill-feeling. Hence, the Bulgarian and other national insurrections against the Ottoman state in the nineteenth century were regularly interpreted by the Ottoman elite in non-nationalist terms, like Russian intrigue. Turkish national consciousness grew only as a reaction to continuous humiliation suffered by the Ottomans, especially to repeated defeats on the battlefield in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It developed among the elite together with a fear of being destroyed. The natural consequence of this relatively late development was, according to the author, a hastened attempt, particularly after the Balkan Wars of 1911-1913, to bridge the existing gap as quickly as possible, by pursuing a rapid policy of Turkification. The development of national consciousness among Ottoman Turks coincided with the prevalence in Europe of racist and social-Darwinist theories of nationalism, which im-

bued Turkish nationalism with a feeling of open hostility toward other ethnic groups. It also resulted later in the proliferation of such fantastic theories that all languages and civilisations in the world were the sole product of the Turkish genius; in the belief that only Turks were suited to rule over other peoples. However, even before the full development of Turkish national identity, stresses Akçam, among the advocates of all — seemingly contradictory — ideologies aiming at the holding together of the cosmopolitan Ottoman Empire, the sovereignty of the dominant Turkish ethnic element was accepted and defended (p. 52). Even the reformist Young Ottomans and, later, Young Turks, judged the rule of the Turkish element over the rest of the empire as being normal and indisputable. For the Young Turks, Islamism/Ottomanism and Turkism were the one and same thing. They were ready to tolerate other ethnic groups only as far as the latter willingly accepted Turkish hegemony.

Until the establishment of the Turkish republic, says Akçam, the recovery of lost Ottoman territories was considered a priority for the Ottoman/Turkish elite and had a lasting influence on Turkish national identity. The Young Turks, however, were unsuccessful even in their bid to halt the further disintegration of the empire. This failure made them very suspicious. They began to interpret the demands of ethnic minorities, especially Christians, for further democratisation and freedom in the empire and the pretexts those demands provided the foreign powers to intervene in the empire's internal affairs as a threat to the empire's survival *per se* (p. 57). The equality before the law of all members of different ethnic and religious groups in the empire promised by the *Tanzimat* reforms had angered many Muslims. Only a minority of the Ottoman Christian subjects were actually benefiting from the capitulations and foreign protection, but for the Muslims the fact that they were few in number made no difference. The initial demands of the Christians were social and democratic in nature, but inevitably, and as a reaction to the uncompromising stand of the central government, they gradually turned into demands for secession and the creation of separate states, especially among those ethnic groups, who lived near the empire's borders. The humiliated Ottoman elite searched for a weaker scapegoat to take revenge against for the territorial losses it had suffered and found it in the empire's remaining Christian communities (p. 70).

The Young Ottomans and Young Turks, who had dreamed of recreating the past Ottoman glory, now saw in the ideology of Turkism a panacea against the humiliation suffered from the previously derided Greeks, Serbs and Bulgarians. This feeling grew in tandem with feelings of revenge generated by successive military defeats, massacres of the empire's Muslim population during wars against foreign powers and loss of territory. The migration of Muslims and Turks into Anatolia from the now detached areas of



the empire had a profound effect on Turkish self-consciousness. Akçam puts the number of Muslim immigrants to Anatolia from 1878 to 1904 at around 850.000. The latter were later to become the willing slaughterers of Armenians and other Christian minorities (p. 76). Turkish feelings of suspicion intensified as a result of the way with which Europe, and especially its media, treated the news of Christian massacres and ignored the losses suffered by the Muslims (p. 81).

Akçam disagrees with those Turkish historians, who justify the Armenian massacres by arguing that the Muslims were simply provoked by the Armenians, and that the latter were simply tools in the hands of Western powers wishing to intervene in the internal affairs of the Ottoman state (p. 85). Such historians, says Akçam, repeatedly underline the supposed «crimes» (*suç*) committed by the latter. Following traditions set during the age of the rise of Turkish nationalism, they accord priority to the supposed collective interests of the «nation» rather than to the individual rights of all subjects of the empire. Akçam suggests instead that due attention should also be paid to the pressures exercised upon the minorities.

Armenians, the last numerous Christian minority of the empire, says the author, paid the price of all those — the Greeks, Bulgarians, etc. — who had previously managed to secede. Armenians wanted to play the same game of trying to focus the attention of the West on their continuing plight, but they were perhaps a little late. The Ottoman government had by now understood the potential consequences of this strategy. It began to see the Armenians as another extension of foreign influence and the Armenian Question as a matter of life and death for the empire. It therefore tried to silence the Armenian demands and thus ultimately prevent another secession by all means possible. The first massacres against the Armenians, up to the early 1890s, were largely local in character, with the Islamic factor playing a significant role. Thereafter, however, newer factors also came to the fore. The state began to indirectly encourage the Armenian massacres in order to create some kind of pan-Islamic grass-roots support for the survival of the empire (p. 98).

The massacres of 1915-1917 were, according to Akçam, of an entirely different nature, however. They were intended to totally wipe out Armenian presence from Anatolia. World War I created the suitable atmosphere. The decision to embark on immediate mass annihilation of the Armenians was probably taken, again according to Akçam, in February or March 1915, but it was not a plan long in process of articulation. Therefore, its pretexts must be of an immediate nature. Akçam mentions that the early fading of hopes of reviving the empire was a crucial factor behind the decision to annihilate the Armenians and reminds that the allied attack on Gallipoli in April that year further panicked the Young Turk leadership. He does not see the supposed «provocative» role played by the Armenian volunteers fighting

alongside the Russian army as important. Nor were, he argues, the claims that Armenians were deserting the army *en masse* and forming outlaw groups. Although the official Turkish thesis denies the existence of any plan to annihilate the Armenians, says Akçam, there was indeed a centrally ordained and co-ordinated plan. The consistency of reports filed by different eyewitnesses from mutually far places in the empire makes that certain (pp. 105-106). He does not commit himself to a specific number of those killed, putting it between 600,000 and 1,500,000. It appears, however, that he thinks the number 800,000 is closest to the reality (p. 111)<sup>(8)</sup>.

The second part of Akçam's book, titled «Some Dimensions of the Armenian Massacres and the Turkish Silence», is actually composed of a series of independent and thought-provoking essays. It undoubtedly constitutes the most interesting section of the monograph. Here the author refrains from making a long narrative of the events, but concentrates, as the title of the section suggests, on some of the genocide's unique dimensions.

Unlike the Nazi party in Germany, the Turkish/Ottoman ruling elite prior to and during World War I, says Akçam, did not have a single guiding ideology. It only wished to ensure the survival of the empire. According to the author, therefore, it is useless to go on searching in the Turkish archives for long-established plans to totally eliminate the Armenian race. Indeed, not all Armenians were deported during the war. Some were only forced to accept Islam. The survival of a considerable number of them after the end of the deportations was later ignored by the government. The Ottoman government was later also prepared to bargain with the Armenians on future frontiers between the two states. The real aim of the deportations, claims Akçam, was to reduce the Armenian presence in Anatolia so that they would thereafter be unable to challenge the Turkish character of the region (p. 115). The Islamic ideology was only used as a political tool during the deportations to mobilise the Muslim masses. Moreover, Akçam underlines that there exists a strange relationship between successive Turkish governments and the use of written documents. Armenian and Western scholars, who keep looking for written documents ordering the massacres or think that such documents were probably later destroyed by the perpetrators, says Akçam, have fallen in a trap. In a transparent allusion to the famous telegrams first published by Aram Andonian immediately after the end of World War I, Akçam says that some scholars, who fit the above-made description, have even gone as far as publishing what he considers to be forged documents (p. 118)<sup>(9)</sup>. According to the author, such written orders will never be found, for in the Ottoman/Islamic world, written documents were produced not only to document occurring events, but also to misrepresent the reality. Instead, documents may have been preserved in the archives which «show» that officials, who had mistreated the Armenians, were investigated and even punished, for some documents were produced simply to mis-



lead and to show the events as the government wanted them to be seen. To make his point clearer, Akçam then goes on to compare the above-described documents with repeated claims made nowadays by Turkish officials that there is no torture in Turkish prisons and that those minor officials, who resort to torture, are regularly punished. Orders to kill the Armenians on the deportation routes, says the author, were given orally as attested by those Young Turk officials, who were tried in 1919 (pp. 119-120). Written documents were produced only after the said oral orders had been delivered and their sole purpose was to provide those oral orders with an «official» character. He does not find it strange that even after taking a decision to annihilate the Armenians, Ottoman government officials continued to strongly deny in their circulars sent to their subordinates in the regions that such a decision had been taken, for that remained the government line all along. Talât Pasha, for example, told the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) congress on 1 November 1918 that the state opposed the Armenian massacres, but was unable to prevent the abuses of some local officials (p. 121). Akçam's line of argument on how the orders to massacre the Armenians were transmitted to the provinces differs slightly, but in no way can be said to contradict, the thesis put forward by Vahakn Dadrian, who has argued in numerous articles that there existed a two-tier system of official orders in the Ottoman bureaucracy.

Akçam does not believe that the genocide was aimed at looting Armenian property or creating a new stratum of rich people of Turkish stock, for, in effect, the massacres pushed the economic development of Anatolia back for almost 150-200 years [*sic!*] (p. 122). Its main achievement, from the Turkish point of view, was, according to the author, the establishment of an ethnic Turkish majority in Anatolia that eventually paved the way for the creation of a Turkish nation-state in the area (p. 123). Akçam suggests that this policy of demographic Turkification had already been in deliberation since the time of the Balkan Wars, citing future Turkish President Celal Bayar's very frank admissions in his memoirs, *Ben de Yazdım* [I Wrote, Too] (Istanbul, 1967), vol. 5, p. 1573, that this policy was first tried in Izmir and the Aegean coast just after the end of the Balkan Wars through *Teşkilât-ı Mahsusa* [Special Organisation], the secret organisation created by the CUP. This Turkification attempt through the deportation of Greeks from the region had to be suspended then, however, under European, especially French, pressure. The Ottoman government even felt obliged to send a delegation, headed by Talât Pasha and including representatives of foreign legations in Istanbul, to outwardly investigate the matter. Akçam sees the Armenian massacres of World War I within this context and explains the harsher methods used during the Turkification of Anatolia by the world war, which freed the Ottoman government from the above-mentioned constraints. The Armenian massacres, says Akçam, were an act of desperation after every-

thing seemed to have been lost for the Turks with the defeats against the Russian army on the eastern front and the allied attack on Gallipoli (p. 127). Akçam thinks it interesting that, even before the war, elaborate plans had already been made to the effect that the Ottoman government, if defeated, should retreat to the Anatolian hinterland and continue to resist foreign aggression from there (p. 127)<sup>(10)</sup>. He admits that he has not come across any document linking this plan with the Armenian massacres, but considers it likely that when a struggle of life and death was being waged at Gallipoli, it was deemed necessary to prepare Anatolia as a last refuge for the retreating Ottoman government (pp. 129-130). A homogeneous Anatolia was important to wage a successful resistance. A radical solution to the Armenian question, i.e. their annihilation, would also finally shelve the issue of Armenian reforms, which were bound to come up in case of a final defeat (pp. 130-131). Akçam gives credence to documents, quoted in Kâmuran Gürün's *Ermeni Dosyası* [The Armenian File] (Ankara, 1982), ordering provincial officials to reduce the total number of Armenians residing in Anatolia to 10 percent of the total population and geographically disperse the remaining Armenians, i.e. their vast majority, in such a way that no single Armenian village would in the future have more than 50 households (p. 131). To achieve this aim, even those Armenians, who had initially accepted Islam, were later not spared from deportation (p. 132).

Compared with the ideologically-motivated Nazis during World War II, Akçam argues that the Turkish government acted very rationally during the Armenian deportations. For example, it brought Armenians down from trains used to transport the Armenian deportees and then used the same trains to transport soldiers and military hardware to the front. The Nazis, on the other hand, were driven by racist anti-Semitism. In the Second World War's most crucial battle, which was to turn the tide against Germany, for example, German troop trains were diverted from Stalingrad in order to be used for the purposes of the «Final Solution». Thus, in Germany, genocide took precedence even over winning the war against the USSR (p. 132). There is nothing original in this conclusion. Many scholars who have compared these two instances of mass murder, have rightly pointed out that the millenarian element was missing among the Young Turk officials. The example used by Akçam, is, this reviewer thinks, not suited to the argument, for the Nazis had in their death camps a more efficient tool to annihilate the targeted Jews. Using the trains would only hasten the demise of the victims. In the Ottoman case, however, the intention seems to have been to kill the deportees through fatigue, malnutrition and dehydration by making them follow long and tiresome routes in the Syrian desert. The train, in this case, would not assist in the quick accomplishment of their aim. Akçam could have brought another example, which, this reviewer thinks, is more relevant to his argument : in Ottoman Turkey, there was,



unlike in racially-obsessed Nazi Germany, no official government and/or religious sanction against abducting Armenian young women (for sexual intercourse or even marriage) or children (for adoption).

Another significant characteristic of the Armenian genocide was, according to Akçam, the participation of a considerable section of the public in the acts of looting and killing. Since the Young Turk government did not enjoy widespread grass-roots support in Anatolia, contends he, it wanted, perhaps even unintentionally, to make the population an accomplice in its crime and encouraged the latter to loot the belongings of the deported Armenians and then legitimised this plunder by passing a special bill through parliament (pp. 133-137).

Finally, turning to the issue of denial, Akçam points out the dichotomy between the attitude of the Turkish elite, which vehemently denies that the deportations amounted to genocide and does not even permit the subject to be openly discussed, with that of the populace, where almost everyone privately accepts that mass murder has taken place, but almost no one actively challenges the official stand (p. 137)<sup>(11)</sup>. Akçam attempts to explain this strange dichotomy by the existence of a wide chasm between the «official» and «civil» societies in the Ottoman Empire and now in Turkey. This chasm, says Akçam, is exemplified by the wide difference between the state laws and regulations and popular beliefs (p. 138). A second reason behind this silence at the popular level emanates probably, according to Akçam, from the fact that contemporary Turks do not feel that they are individually and/or collectively responsible for what happened in 1915. They usually believe that only those who organised the genocide and/or materially benefited from it should be held personally responsible. Even when under duress, they try to exonerate themselves by pointing out that there were, in the meantime, thousands of individual Turks, who saved Armenian lives during the deportations (p. 141). Others attempt to justify the harshness of the punishment by the heavy nature of the Armenian «crimes», i.e. their supposed alignment with the invading Russian army (p. 141). The latter method of reasoning, says Akçam, must be altogether discarded. He points out that even those writers who accept and condemn the genocide have fallen in this trap of crime-and-punishment by attempting hard in their works to assert Armenian innocence. This attitude, says Akçam, may have its roots in the Christian/missionary approach, according to which, only the weak and the innocent should be sympathised with, thus indirectly accepting the validity of a link between guilt and punishment (= massacre) (p. 143). Akçam warns that if this approach is adopted, people will inevitably forfeit their moral right to condemn mass massacres, as any mass murderer will begin to justify his crime by alleging that the victim himself had previously perpetrated an unforgivable crime, too (p. 144).

The current Turkish government, says Akçam, can, after all, acknowledge the reality of the genocide of 1915 and simultaneously claim that it is in no way responsible for what happened during World War I, because it is an entirely new state, which itself emerged by fighting against the old Ottoman order. It can even argue that it put some of the main culprits of the genocide to death in 1926. Akçam dismisses the argument that the reluctance to pay compensation to the survivors and their descendants is a significant factor in making the Turkish government maintain its posture of insistent denial. This official attitude is made easier on the home front, according to Akçam, by the «success» of the Turkish republican elite in cutting the links of the modern generation in Turkey with its past, a path taken, again according to Akçam, to strengthen the new elite's position and justify its newly-acquired influence. The Turkish society is relatively young if its average age is taken into account, and only a few professors can today read Turkish texts written before 1928. Moreover, the old nomadic habits of the Turkish society should perhaps be also taken into account. Then, it may be that the Armenian genocide itself, from the trauma of which the Turks have not yet recovered, is one of the main reasons behind their wish to forget their past (p. 147). Akçam's main thesis explaining the persistence of official denial, however, is, briefly stated, that the Turkish officers and officials who did away with the Armenians were in many cases the same ones who went on to distinguish themselves in Turkey's 1919-1921 wars against Greece and Armenia, which paved the way for the creation of the republic. The latter is, therefore, despite official disclaimers, intimately connected with the country's Ottoman past. Akçam suggests that a thorough investigation of the Armenian massacres will shatter many of the current myths in Turkey as regards the emergence of the Nationalist Movement and the establishment of the republic. The so-called Turkish War of Independence, reminds Akçam, was not waged against the imperialist forces of Britain and France, but against the Greek and Armenian minorities of the Ottoman Empire. He points out that this aspect was emphasised by Mustafa Kemal himself in his letter of resignation from the Ottoman army on 8 July 1919. The Nationalist attitude vis-à-vis «imperialist» Britain and the USA during that war cannot be termed as uncompromising. The possibility of a Western mandate, for example, was not dismissed for a long time. The Defence of Rights (*Müdafaa-i Hukuk*) societies, which provided grass-roots support to the Nationalist Movement, were initially established only in previously heavily Armenian- and Greek-populated regions. The Nationalist Forces (*Kuvâyı Milliye*) were set up on the core provided by the *Teşkilât-ı Mahsusa* and were mostly composed of people who had participated in the Armenian massacres, enriched themselves and now feared possible revenge from the returning deportees. Such people joined Kemal in his struggle only because they feared that otherwise they might be punished by the



post-CUP Ottoman government in Istanbul. The Nationalists saw in the trials of some of the Young Turk officials involved in the Armenian massacres a Western-inspired attempt to further weaken Turkey and thus hailed the accused as heroes and martyrs. Furthermore, the new Turkish bourgeoisie, that later became one of the pillars of the Kemalist ideology, was composed of many who had directly benefited from the deportation of Armenians. Thus, concludes Akçam, any official acknowledgement of the latter's earlier role in deporting, massacring and looting the Armenians will be intolerable for the modern Turkish elite and will be seen as an inadmissible blot on Turkish national mythology. The alignment of Nationalists and Kurds during the Turkish War of Independence was, continues Akçam, based on the same premise. He calls on to investigate the past careers of early Republican leaders, hinting that such an investigation will most probably uncover their links with the Armenian genocide. He also sees an after-effect of the deep dichotomy generated within Turkish society by the Armenian genocide in the acute political struggle of the 1950s between the ruling Democrat and the opposition Republican People's parties, which was only «terminated» by the 1960 military coup. The Democrat supporters, says Akçam, were mainly those who had fought on the fronts during World War I had not had an opportunity to enrich themselves at the expense of the deported Christian population. They, therefore, felt a strong resentment against the RPP members of Unionist/Kemalist past<sup>(12)</sup>.

### **How original is Akçam in his arguments?**

For many Armenians who are only familiar with previous Turkish books towing the official line as regards the Armenian massacres and who are not regular observers of existing trends in modern Turkish historiography, Akçam's views may come as a pleasant surprise. It is necessary, however, to view the work in general perspective.

Akçam is not a trained historian. His interests lie more in the field of sociology and he does not hide his motives in tackling the thorny issue of the Armenian genocide. After having embarked on an active political career as a radical leftist, he has now — probably because of the immense changes that happened recently in Eastern Europe — become a proponent of a democratic and liberal Turkey, where there will be no place for authoritarianism, imposed official ideology or state-sponsored censorship. His book is a protest against state supervision over history-writing, in particular as regards topics dealing with Atatürk, the national-liberation movement that he led and the fate of the Christians, who once lived in considerable numbers in Asia Minor<sup>(13)</sup>. Akçam considers that if creating historical myths was understandable at a time when the Turkish nation-state was young and hence relatively weak, it is inexcusable now that the entity has matured. Ömer Laçiner, the author of the book's introduction, expresses anxiety

too that the Turkish elite is still afraid of opening all the files relating to the past and discussing all the alternatives that were available. It is because of this official attitude, argues he, that many ordinary Turks today feel uncomfortable to look directly at their past.

During his stay in Germany, Akçam has basically adopted the world-view of a typical post-nationalist Western intellectual, who is abhorred with the destructive features of resurgent nationalism in Eastern Europe, the former USSR and the Middle East after the collapse of the Communist Bloc and wants to see the nation-state based on the primacy of one ethnic group replaced by some kind of civic nationalism, where all citizens in the state will, irrespective of their ethnic origins, enjoy equal individual rights. His focus, throughout the work, is on the individual, not the nation as an entity. This is the criterion upon which he wants to see the Ottoman past judged and evaluated and a future Turkey constructed. For both Akçam and Laçiner, there exists a strong connection between what befell the Armenians of Anatolia during World War I and the plight of the Kurds of south-east Anatolia today. Both relate the two crises to the destructive tendencies implicit in the Turkish national identity. The publishers' note also makes the same connection between today's Kurds and yesterday's Armenians and expresses hope that this book will be a warning «which has not been left late» (p. 8).

As regards the authenticity and plausibility of his historical arguments, it must be kept in mind that Akçam wrote his book in exile. He has not used any new archival material. Moreover, he seems to have reading knowledge of only Turkish and German, and, thus, has been unable to use important collections of published documents and secondary literature in Armenian, English, French, Spanish and Russian. Of the countless books and articles written by Armenians, only two are mentioned in his bibliography: the volume of wartime documents relating to the Armenians from the Austrian state archives edited by Artem Ohanjanian and an article by the relatively unknown Aram Sipanyan published in *Kurdistan Press*, No. 16/8, Stockholm, April 1987.

Turning to some of Akçam's specific arguments, he is not the first, of course, to argue that the Turkish national consciousness developed comparatively later than nationalist tendencies among some of the other, particularly Christian, ethnic groups in the Ottoman Empire. Few historians either in Turkey or in the West have to-date suggested, let alone attempted to prove, however, that the issue of ethnic Turkish hegemony over the affairs of the empire had been considered natural by members of both the Ottoman hierarchy and the intellectual opposition even before the full development of Turkish nationalism as an ideology. At face value, Akçam's argument looks plausible and, if proved beyond doubt, may be helpful in explaining why many of the consequent political developments in the empire happened the way they did. However, this reviewer thinks, that Akçam's hypothesis still



needs to be backed through a thorough research and analysis of both archival material and literary output relating to the time-span under scrutiny.

Akçam is not original as well in making a qualitative distinction between the nature of the pogroms and massacres perpetrated against the Armenians in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on the one hand and the gargantuan proportions attained by the genocide of 1915 on the other, with its attendant premeditated character and bureaucratic mechanisation, without which it could not have succeeded. The section, however, where the author attempts to find out the immediate factors that led the Young Turk government to embark on a policy to «ethnically cleanse» Anatolia of its Armenian inhabitants, is extremely interesting and thought-provoking. This reviewer believes that a true and complete picture of why, when, how and to what extent did the Young Turks attempt to get rid of the Armenians cannot be drawn until the study of the Armenian genocide is finally freed from its political shackles of today, where it can be surmised that both the plaintiffs (the Armenians) and, more specifically, the defendants (the Turkish historians close to the Ankara government who have full access to the relevant archives) are guilty of not disclosing «the whole truth and nothing but the truth». Only in a world where there is no reason to hide any evidence can all the pieces of the jigsaw be put together. That time, unfortunately, is still not seen on the horizon. Meanwhile, we must be thankful to Akçam for bringing to our attention certain pieces of already published information, which, as far as this reviewer is aware of, had been outside the field of view of many historians dealing with the topic of the Armenian genocide.

Finally, Akçam's arguments about the futility of looking for written documents specifically outlining the mechanism of mass deportations and attendant massacres seem plausible, too. Certain genocidal attempts, that have happened since, like the Holocaust of Jews in Central Europe during World War II and the so-called *Anfal* operation against the Iraqi Kurds by Saddam Husayn's regime in the late 1980s can be studied today more thoroughly simply because the bureaucratic paperwork dealing with the said attempts were later, because of specific political developments, made available to scholars and politicians not sympathetic to the regimes which perpetrated those horrific acts. A foreknowledge by the perpetrators of the abhorring nature of the crime to be committed and a feeling to hide its proportions is apparent in the kind of euphemistic language used in those documents, which were after all, it should not be forgotten, designed only for internal use. The comparison that Akçam makes with the contemporary Turkish official attitude as regards the existence of torture in Turkish detention centres and prisons is, in this sense, very appropriate.

As regards the continuities between the Young Turks and the Kemalists, which forms the basis of Akçam's argument as to why post-Ottoman Turkish nationalist governments have steadfastly denied that a genocide has

taken place and that the Young Turks were in no way wrong to deport the Armenians, here again Akçam is not entirely original. These similarities had previously been pointed out in detail in Erik Jan Zürcher's monograph, *The Unionist Factor : The Rôle of the Committee of Union and Progress in the Turkish National Movement 1905-1926* (Leiden : E. J. Brill, 1984). Zürcher, however, had then referred only briefly to the Armenian massacres and deportations and never to the fact that this continuity between the old and new elites might account for the persistent Turkish official denials as regards the Armenian genocide. Akçam mentions the Turkish translation of this book, *Milli Mücadelede İttihatçılık* [Ittihatism during the National Struggle] (Istanbul, 1987), in his bibliographic list. What is innovative in Akçam's case, however, is that he makes that connection between continuity and denial. Zürcher, on the other hand, in his last monograph, *Turkey : A Modern History* (London and New York : I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd Publishers, 1993), which came out only a few months after Akçam's *Türk Ulusal Kimliği ve Ermeni Sorunu*, elaborates on his thesis of continuity and goes as far as to suggest that the time-span from the revolution of 1908, which restored the Ottoman constitution, to 1950, when the RPP — originally established by Atatürk — lost power to the opposition Democrat Party in Turkey's first-ever truly democratic multi-party general election, is the Young Turk era of modern Turkish history, i.e. Atatürk, his followers and his ideology are, according to Zürcher, simply a continuation of the CUP. Zürcher, on this occasion, has also more to say about the «controversial» Armenian Question and *Teşkilât-ı Mahsusa*'s pivotal role in organising the «extermination» of the Armenians of Anatolia, concluding that in the ensuing Armeno-Turkish controversy over what really happened, he is «at least of the opinion that there was a centrally controlled policy of extermination, instigated by CUP»<sup>(14)</sup>. Zürcher still does not explain, however, why modern-day Turks deny that there was such a policy.

The interesting parallels between Akçam and Zürcher do not end here. It is no coincidence that Akçam's book was published by *İletişim Yayınları*, a publishing house whose books hold a prominent place in Zürcher's bibliographical survey of modern Turkish history, which the author suggests should also serve «as a practical guide for further reading»<sup>(15)</sup>. Moreover, Zürcher, like Akçam, explicitly calls for real bi-nationalism in Turkey as the only way to solve the thorny Kurdish question<sup>(16)</sup>.

#### How is Akçam seen by Armenian reviewers?

Turks and Armenians have never agreed on an interpretation of the events of 1915. Each side has so far attempted to propagate its own version without any real, face-to-face attempt to come to some mutual agreement. Especially since the late 1960s, such arguments on the intellectual level, pursued even by professional historians, have become extremely politicised.



The official Turkish image of the Armenian remains of a traitor, who despite living better than the individual Muslim in the Ottoman Empire, did not realise the relative welfare that he was enjoying and, tricked by European powers, which wished to intervene in the affairs of the empire, was exploited by the latter to that effect. The Ottoman government, therefore, had legitimate fears that the Armenians would again foolishly support the advancing Russians and had every right to deport or relocate them to distant areas. Great pains were taken during those deportations to save the lives of the deportees, and all those who perished, a mere 300,000, fell victim not to Turkish troops, but to Kurdish and Arab — and never Turkish — illegal bands. In such an explanation, where the deportations are rationalised and any genocidal intent denied, there is no room, of course, even for regret for the loss of so many lives, let alone any official recognition of government responsibility in planning and executing a widespread policy which will, in today's jargon, be termed as «ethnic cleansing».

The traditional Armenian attitude, on the other hand, has always emanated from the conviction that what happened was a government planned and supervised attempt to empty Historical Armenia of her original inhabitants. Some Armenians even claim that it was only the first step in a long-term Turkish plan — which, they think, remains valid today — to wipe out all Armenians from the face of the earth. All Armenian parties, which have functioned in the Armenian Diaspora since the establishment of Soviet power in the homeland in 1920, insist that in order for peace and harmony to be re-established between Turks and Armenians, the Turkish government must first accept that the Young Turks were officially responsible for organising the genocide; then, agree to pay full compensation for the losses suffered by those killed and deported; and, furthermore, return the previously Armenian-populated areas of Eastern Anatolia into their rightful owner, the Armenian nation. Armenian political parties and lobby groups in the Diaspora have over the last three decades spent a lot of effort to propagate the Armenian point of view among the governments, the intellectuals and the populace in general of the countries they live in, protested against the Turkish official attitude and attempted to prevent, within the limits of their powers, any potential diplomatic success by Turkey. The aim is to force Turkey into a weak position, hoping that she would then feel obliged to mend her unyielding stance.

The above-summarised Armenian attitude offers no ready prescription on how to deal with those Turkish individuals, like Akçam, who while strongly objecting to the official position of Ankara, do not, at the same time, see eye-to-eye with the opposing Armenian point of view as well. It is clear that Akçam has embarked on this project not to appease the Armenians *per se*, but hoping to turn his own country, Turkey, into a more liberal, tolerant and democratic society<sup>(17)</sup>. He was indeed a sole Turkish voice during the symposia in Mülheim, Moscow and Yerevan. Everywhere he

is reported to have received prolonged applause from an audience sympathetic to the Armenian point of view, indicating that what he said corresponded with what the Armenians wanted to hear from «honest» Turks. But the story does not end there. Those reviewers, who still cling to the traditional Armenian point of view, were bound to feel disappointed with his *Türk Ulusal Kimliği ve Ermeni Sorunu*, and some have been frank in airing their disappointment. An Armenian lawyer from Aleppo, long interested in Armenian-Turkish relations, titled his review of Akçam's book, «The Hesitant Thoughts of a Turkish Intellectual» (*Türk Mdavoragani me Dadam-soun Mdoroumnere*) and concluded that Armenians have to wait for a long while until Turks will unconditionally accept responsibility for the crime they have committed<sup>(18)</sup>. Another Aleppine-Armenian writer seems, in his long review, to have also been disappointed at not reading a short and simple recognition of the fact that a genocide was committed by the Turks, but instead a long explanation, which to him seemed an evasion from coming to terms with the stark reality. He is sorry that no apology is offered, and that only «half-truths» are acknowledged. He also thinks that Akçam has, in supposedly failing to acknowledge the whole truth, fallen victim to internal contradictions<sup>(19)</sup>. Both, however, still consider that Akçam has taken an important step in the right direction. In both cases the criteria with which Akçam is judged is the traditional Armenian position. He is praised solely wherever his views seem to coincide or come near to what most Armenians traditionally think is the true version of events. These Armenian worries are best summarised in a review by Melineh Pelivanian of a recent collection of articles edited by Tessa Hofmann and published under the title, *Armenier und Armenien — Heimat und Exil* (Hamburg : Rowohlt, 1994), of which Akçam is a contributor. Akçam, writes Pehlivanian, «does not accord preference to the study and analysis of the genocide of the Armenians. The democratisation of the Turkish Republic is closer to his heart. This is why Armenian expectations of Akçam should be limited. No Turkish intellectual will discuss the issue of compensation. Moreover, he does not insert the War of Liberation of Kemal Atatürk in inverted commas, a war which meant not freedom, but death and exile for the Armenians and Greeks of Asia Minor»<sup>(20)</sup>.

But what role, if any, are people like Akçam expected to play in bringing official Turkish recognition of the genocide closer? What should the Armenian attitude be towards people, who, like Akçam, may in the near future, accept the historicity of the genocide but still keep silent, let alone dismiss, any claim for compensation and/or Turkish territorial concessions? How should Armenians define the term «recognition»? A reef by a future Turkish head of government at the Tsitsernakaberd memorial of those who lost their lives during the genocide, as was recently suggested by Ragıp Zarakolu in his preface to the now banned Turkish translation of Yves Ternon's *La Génocide Arménienne* or something else<sup>(21)</sup>?



## Is Akçam alone?

Armenians have so far dismissed all Turkish authors writing about the genocide, arguing that they follow a specific government-ordained path and that their motives are insincere. Any attempt for a dialogue has been considered futile. At most, Armenians have attempted to refute their claims in the ongoing Armenian-Turkish battle to capture the hearts and minds of so-called neutrals.

Akçam's is still the sole original book published in Turkish, which accepts that what befell the Ottoman Armenians in 1915 constituted a genocide. He himself later admitted that

*Il n'a pas été facile de publier un livre qui réfute les positions communément défendues. Il a fallu d'abord que l'éditeur ose le faire, que nous maîtrisions nos propres peurs qui étaient sans fondement, en partie au moins. Aucun paragraphe du code pénal n'interdit ouvertement les publications sur le sujet, contrairement à ce qui existe pour les Kurdes. Plusieurs paragraphes du code pénal interdisent explicitement d'écrire quelque chose de positif sur les Kurdes mais pas sur les Arméniens. Bien sûr, il est toujours possible de recourir à tel ou tel paragraphe pour condamner une publication mais on sait qu'il n'existe pas de paragraphe spécifique.*

*En fait, il s'agissait plutôt de nos propres peurs parce que c'était la première tentative de pénétrer dans cette zone tabou. C'est la peur qui a empêché l'éditeur de publier les photos du génocide. En dehors de nos peurs, il n'y a eu aucune difficulté que ce soit avant ou après la publication. On peut acheter le livre dans toutes les librairies<sup>(22)</sup>.*

Akçam is not, of course, the first Turk ever to accept Ottoman government responsibility in the Armenian deportations and massacres during World War I. The Turkish Communist Party in exile has in the past labelled those massacres as a «black page» in Turkish history and has condemned them, dismissing, however, any claims for territorial retribution<sup>(23)</sup>. Some illegal radical leftist Turkish organisations in Europe have over the years even participated in April 24 commemorations and protest marches against the official Turkish silence. None, however had tried to write a whole book about the subject or the question of silence.

This reviewer thinks that the above-stated questions demand clear Armenian answers in the near future, for, it looks likely, that Akçam will not remain alone<sup>(24)</sup>. Akçam himself admits that «today in Istanbul, there is a new generation of historians, who share my views, albeit not fully. It is not our intention now to put pressure on the government. Maybe in the future, but not now. We simply want to speak openly about the truth and historical facts. For us, scholars, it is very important that we should be able to speak freely on this issue in Turkey»<sup>(25)</sup>. Recently, for example, Ismail

Beydemir, reviewing in the periodical *Arabkir Postası* a yearbook published in Arabkir in 1986, criticised the latter's compilers of falsifying history by «intentionally ignoring the presence of the Armenian factor» in the history of Arabkir. Beydemir admitted that massacres were organised against the Armenians during World War I and mocked all attempts to draw a parity between the Armenian and Turkish deaths during that war, claiming that there were indeed provocations to force the Armenians to rebel and considering the memoirs of Talât Pasha as an attempt of self-justification. Interestingly, Beydemir, too, drew a parallel between the plight of Turkey's Kurdish population in the Southeast now and the fate of the Ottoman Armenians during World War I. «Based [solely] on the fact that certain Kurds are rebelling against the government there, do we have the right to deport the entire population of those areas?» asked he rhetorically. «How should we appraise ourselves (let alone the appraisal of the world) if the state ceases to guarantee the inviolability of life of those people and we annihilate all refugees, the Euphrates and the Tigris carry for months human corpses and the smell of decomposed bodies fills the valleys and hills?»<sup>(26)</sup>. The rate with which such «revisionists» will come forward will partly — though never primarily — depend, however, on what kind of Armenian response they get. Neither has Akçam said his last word on the issue of the Armenian genocide. He is now reportedly studying the 1919-1921 trial of Young Turk leaders and planning to write a book on ethno-demographic processes in Anatolia. He intends to move back to Turkey in 1996<sup>(27)</sup>. Moreover, *İletişim Yayınları*, the publishers of *Türk Ulusal Kimliği ve Ermeni Sorunu*, said in the book's preface that they wished to break the Armenian taboo and promised that Akçam's book would only be the first in a series of publications related to the subject<sup>(28)</sup>.

Neither seems that the debate over the fate of the Ottoman Armenians will eventually remain confined to the domain of printed books and articles. One of Turkey's most respected left-wing «revisionist» historians and the chairman of the country's *Helsinki Watch* commission, Murat Belge, who has, in recent years, done much to propagate the multi-cultural past of the Ottoman Empire and of Istanbul in particular, is reported to have told during a debate on 21 February 1993 on one of Turkey's new, privately-owned TV stations, *Canal 6*, that all dictatorships without any exception — including that of Atatürk — can result in anti-democratic acts, just like the way the Young Turk dictatorship led to the «ethnic cleansing» of the Armenians of Anatolia<sup>(29)</sup>. Another unnamed young Turkish participant in the conference «October, Stalinism and the National Question», organised in Barcelona by *Symposium-90* on 3 to 7 November 1992, is reported to have publicly expressed regret that his government, historians and the press continue to hide from his generation the truth about the Armenian genocide<sup>(30)</sup>. All this comes in the background of apparent relative Turkish



willingness to recognise Armenian contributions to Ottoman and Turkish culture. The re-emergence of a sovereign Armenian state at Turkey's doorstep may have played a role, too.

Another interesting novelty in recent Turkish, albeit yet dissident, attitudes toward the Armenian genocide, is the emergence of another Istanbul publishing house, *Belge* publications, owned by Mrs. Ayşe Nur Zarakolu, which has embarked on the dangerous path of translating and publishing, despite incurring apparent government displeasure, a series of works by non-Turkish authors on the Armenian genocide. The government's strict posture may be interpreted as a recognition by the state prosecutors that not stemming the tide, which began with Akçam and *İletişim Yayınları*, can indeed have, in the long run, some unsavoury consequences for the Turkish elite<sup>(31)</sup>. In late 1993, *Belge* published *Ermeni Tabusu*, the Turkish translation of the famous work by the French author, Yves Ternon, *La Génocide Arménienne* (1977). Two months later, however, on 5 January 1994, the book was banned in Turkey and its publishers, Rajip and Ayşe Nur Zarakolu, as well as its translator, Emirhan Oguz, were summoned to the State Security Court<sup>(32)</sup>. In early 1995, Ayşe Nur Zarakolu was condemned to two-years' imprisonment and a fine of TL 300 million (approximately \$ 7500) for publishing *Ermeni Tabusu*, which the court thought was inciting racial hatred and encouraging secessionism. At the time of writing, she is appealing against the sentence<sup>(33)</sup>. Meanwhile, Zarakolu has recently been also indicted (13 April 1995) for having published yet another book related to the Armenian Genocide. This time it is *Ulusal ve Uluslar arası Hukuk Sorunu Olarak Jenosid*, the Turkish translation of Prof. Vahakn N. Dadrian's article. «Genocide as a Problem of National and International Law : The World War I Armenian Case and its Contemporary Legal Ramifications», published originally in English in the *Yale Journal of International Law*, Vol. 14, N° 2, pp. 221-334. (The publishers were careful to note in their introduction that Turkey's current Prime Minister, Tansu Çiller «was herself a Yale graduate»). It was translated by Yavuz Alogan and published in Turkey in February 1995, only to be banned a month later. During the court session held on 13 April 1995, the prosecution is reported to have claimed that the publication of the book in Turkey was tantamount to inciting racial hatred and objected to the use in the book of the term «Turkish», instead of «Ottoman», adding that «the responsibility of the acts against the Armenians belongs to all kinds of nationalities and it is not correct to defame the Turks in relation to the genocide». Zarakolu has reportedly replied that the book translated is of high academic merit; it is not up to her to judge on the events in question; and that she is only providing a free forum to discuss this topic instead of turning in into a taboo<sup>(34)</sup>.

The dissident voices mentioned above constitute a minority in Turkey. The official government position as regards the Armenian Question

remains unchanged and the fate of Ayşe Zarakolu indicates that the publication of only those works which follow the government-sanctioned line will be tolerated in the near future at least. Any change in the Turkish government's attitude is wholly dependent on the latter's definition of terms like «democracy», «citizenship», «freedom of speech», etc., which form the core of the ongoing debate about the political future and image of Turkey. Any change is also dependent on evolving Turkish attitudes as regards the Kurds and the Kurdish problem.

So, how will the Turkish attitude evolve as regards the Kurds and how may that affect the Armenians? All that can be said in response to the first part of the question is that Turkey is today an extremely polarised society, engaged in a sharp debate on what path to take in the near future. Will the ruling elite, represented by the centre-right and centre-left parties, as well as in the high echelons of the army, be able, by hook or by crook, keep alive the present «Atatürkist» consensus of a democracy checked by strong nationalist and anti-religious attitudes, or will they ultimately succumb either to the emerging liberal current or the Islamist trend?

Armenians do not have much to gain from an Islamist victory in Turkey. Turkish nationalist and Islamist elements were so intimately intertwined in preparing the mood in which the Armenian massacres and deportations were executed, that any victorious Islamist government will feel no need or pressure to change the official Turkish position as regards the events of 1915. Indeed, the anti-Armenian rhetoric may even be intensified in the official circles of any potential Islamist government against alleged Western and Christian intrigue, in which Armenians will probably be re-assigned the «role» of a tool.

Any potential change in Ankara's attitude seems only possible if the merchant and industrialist classes of Istanbul, which are looking more and more to the European Union as an economic and political model, gain the upper hand. This class has since 1980 scored a few successes in the political arena. President Turgut Özal and Prime Minister Tansu Çiller have pushed hard to introduce reforms which will benefit them directly. At the moment the political hopes of this class seem to converge on Cem Boyner and his newly-established New Democracy Movement (*Yeni Demokrasi Hareketi*). This political party is promising a long list of democratic reforms, including the closure of the State Security Courts and is admitting that there is a problem between the Turkish state and its citizens of Kurdish stock<sup>(35)</sup>. One of the ideologues of this party is Etyen Mahçupyan, the first Armenian to play any prominent role in Turkish politics in modern times. Born in 1950, Mahçupyan, a one-time instructor at the Faculty of Political Science of Ankara University (*Mülkiye*) and currently a businessman, is a Bosphorus University graduate in chemical engineering and business administration and holds an M.A. degree in economics from the Faculty of Political



Science of Ankara University. He told *Milliyet* on 3 January 1995, that the real dichotomy in contemporary Turkey was between the liberal-democratic line and the despotic-totalitarian line. He sees no difference between rightist and leftist totalitarianism and suggests that a new interpretation should be accorded to the term «citizenship»<sup>(36)</sup>.

On the immediate issue of the Armenian Genocide, the new party is generally keeping silent or just repeating the official line, albeit not forcefully. On 15 February 1995, for example, during a meeting he held together with the European Forum for the Prevention of Conflicts, Cem Boyner was frankly told by two prominent French Socialist politicians, Michel Rocard and Bernard Kushner, that Turkey must sooner or later face the fact that a genocide was committed against the Armenians. Boyner who had earlier, in his opening speech, denied the fact that the Ottoman Armenians had been subjected to a genocide, is reported to have kept silent in response to the suggestion made by the two above-mentioned French politicians<sup>(37)</sup>. A few months later, in July, Mahçupyan himself was asked what he thought about the events of 1915. The occasion was the recent «private» visit to Yerevan by Gürbüz Çapan, the mayor of the Istanbul suburb of Esenyurt, during which he laid a reef to the Tsitsernakaberd memorial, probably the first-ever elected Turkish official to do so. «If what happened was not a genocide,» answered Mahçupyan, «then it undoubtedly was a massacre, a carnage, requisition, exile, mass murder of intellectuals...»<sup>(38)</sup>. But even if Boyner and his followers are not ready yet to face fully the fact of the genocide of 1915, their promises to lift censorship might eventually open new horizons for the pursuit of recognition of the genocide.

[26 August 1995]

## NOTES

1. Lewis claimed in an interview published in the November 16, 1993 issue of the French daily *Le Monde* that for Turkey to recognise the Armenian genocide would mean to accept «la version arménienne de cette histoire». «Nul doute», continued he «que des choses terribles ont eu lieu, que des nombreux Arméniens — et aussi des Turcs — ont périés. Mais on ne connaît sans doute jamais les circonstances précises et les bilans des victimes. [...] Pendant leur déportation vers la Syrie, des centaines de milliers d'Arméniens sont morts de faim, de froid... Mais si l'on parle de génocide, cela implique qu'il y ait eu politique délibérée, une décision d'anéantir systématiquement la nation arménienne. Cela est fort douteux. Des documents turcs prouvent une volonté de déportation, pas d'extermination». Thirty intellectuals of French, Swiss, Armenian, Jewish and other backgrounds responded through a collective letter published in *Le Monde* on 27 November 1993, but Lewis, in a new letter to the same newspaper, published on January 1, 1994, reiterated his original point of view that «il n'existe aucune preuve sérieuse d'une décision et d'un plan du gouvernement ottoman visant à exterminer la nation arménienne». Eventually, two cases

were brought against Lewis by different French-Armenian organisations. The criminal case was eventually dismissed by the court, which argued that the *Loi Gayssot*, the statute which has been employed in the past to prosecute those who had denied the Holocaust of the Jews during the Second World War, could not be interpreted so as to cover the denials of the Armenian Genocide of 1915 as well. During the civil case, however, the Court of First Instance in Paris ruled on 21 June 1995 that Lewis had committed a «fault» when making his above-quoted statement to *Le Monde*. The Court pointed out that «it is only by hiding elements which go against his thesis that the defendant was able to state that there was no 'serious proof' of the Armenian Genocide», and «his statements, prone to unjustly reviving the pain of the Armenian community, are erroneous and justify damages». Lewis was sentenced, therefore, in line with article 1382 of the French civil code, to pay 1 franc of damages and interest to the plaintiffs, the Forum of Armenian Associations and the International League Against Racism and Anti-Semitism; see *Le Monde*, 23 June 1995, p. 11.

2. Christopher Hitchens, «Minority Report», *The Nation*, May 16, 1994, p. 655.
3. *Aztag* (Beirut), 19 May 1995.
4. *Zartonk* (Beirut), 22 April 1995.
5. *Ganch* (Beirut), 27 May 1995.
6. See Akçam's interview with Gayaneh Moukoyan of the Armenian *Noyan Tapan* (Noah's Ark) news agency, published in *Ararat* (Beirut), 20 May 1995. See also another interview given by Akçam to *Les Nouvelles d'Arménie* (Paris), N° 4, October 1993, p. 37.
7. All page numbers in brackets refer to Akçam's book under review.
8. The number of 800,000 Armenians killed during the deportations was first admitted in public in March 1919 by the post-war Ottoman Minister of the Interior, Cemal, who said that the figure had been reached on the basis of computations undertaken by Ministry experts; see Vahakn N. Dadrian, «Documentation of the Armenian Genocide in Turkish Sources», in Israel W. Charny (ed.), *Genocide : A Critical Bibliographic Review*, vol. 2 (London and New York, 1991), pp. 92, 110, 130. Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk), too, had in 1919, according to one of his closest aides, Rauf (Orbay), deplored to General Harbord, the head of the US Mission conducting an investigation in Turkey and Armenia on the feasibility of a US mandate for the area, the fact that «only the Turks are being held responsible for the massacre of 800,000 of their own people»; see Rauf Orbay'ın *Hatıraları : Yakın Tarihimiz* [The Memoirs of Rauf Orbay : Our Recent History], vol. 3 (1962), p. 173, quoted in Dadrian, «Documentation», pp. 97, 131. A few years later, however, Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) produced, in an interview printed on the front page of the *Los Angeles Examiner* of August 1, 1926, a higher number of those killed. He was quoted as sharply condemning the circles responsible for a recent assassination attempt on him, referring to them as «those left-overs from the former Young Turk Party, who should have been made to account for the lives of millions of our Christian subjects who were ruthlessly driven en masse from their houses and massacred»; quoted in Dadrian, «Documentation», pp. 97, 131 and Dankwart A. Rustow, *Turkey : America's Forgotten Ally* (New York : Council of Foreign Relations, 1987), p. 133.
9. The question of the authenticity and the reliability of the telegrams published by Andonian has recently become a matter of controversy between Turkish and Armenian scholars; see Sinasi Orel and Süreyya Yüca, *Ermenilerce Talât Paşa'ya Atfedilen Telgrafların Gerçek Yüzü* [The Real Nature of the Telegrams Attributed by Armenians to Talât Pasha] (Ankara : Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1983); Turkkaya Ataöv, *Talât Paşa'ya Atfedilen Andoniyen «Belgeler»i Sahtedir!* [The Andonian «Documents» Attributed to Talât Pasha are Forgeries] (Ankara, 1984); Vahakn N. Dadrian, «The Naim-Andonian Documents on the World War I Destruction of Ottoman Armenians : The Anatomy of Genocide», *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 18, N° 3 (August 1986), pp. 311-360. Ataöv's booklet is also available in English, French, German, Arabic, Armenian and Persian.
10. Akçam's source for this very interesting piece of information is an article by Seref Ça-



- vusoglu, «İttihat ve Terakki'nin Gizli Planı» [The Secret plan of the Committee of Union and Progress], *Yakın Tarihimiz*, II, p. 263.
11. In a more recent article, Akçam says that since he began to write a book on the Armenians, he has made a habit of asking every Turk he meets, whether young or old, what does he/she know about the Armenians from stories he/she has heard in their respective regions. He finds it interesting that all those questioned have responded willingly. In the Turkish collective consciousness, he says, there is no equivalent to the famous German sentence : «I was not aware of what was happening at all» (*Ich habe von alledem nichts gewusst*); see Taner Akçam, «Wir Türken und die Armenier. Plädoyer für die Auseinandersetzung mit dem Massenmord», in Tessa Hofmann (Hg.), *Armenier und Armenien — Heimat und Exil* (Hamburg : Rowohlt, 1994), pp. 36. The Armenian translation of this article from the German original by Gerayer Koutcharian was published in *Zartouk*, 26 & 27 May 1995 under the title «Yerp Turk Kidnagan Taner Akçame Ge Khosi» [When the Turkish Scholar Taner Akçam is Speaking], as well as in *Ganch*, 10 June, 1995.
  12. Ömer Laçiner, who wrote the introduction to the book under review, agrees with Akçam's thesis on the origins of the Kemalist elite and urges historians to research further how those people acquired their wealth (p. 17).
  13. «I think,» repeated Akçam recently, «that when the Turkish society is not pondering aloud on this subject [i.e. the Armenian massacres], it is missing a very important opportunity towards democratisation»; see Akçam. «Wir Türken und die Armenier», p. 37. See its Armenian translation in *Zartouk*, 26 May 1995.
  14. Erik J. Zürcher, *Turkey : A Modern History* (London and New York : I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd Publishers, 1994), p. 121.
  15. *Ibid.*, p. 326.
  16. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
  17. While Akçam did not refer in his book under review to the ongoing Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over the future status of the region of Mountainous Karabagh, in a later interview to *Les Nouvelles d'Arménie*, he said : «Mais il serait encore plus important pour ce gouvernement-ci de sortir de cette dénégation à cause de la guerre entre Arméniens et Azerbaïdjanais qui s'est déclenchée après l'effondrement de l'URSS»; see *Les Nouvelles d'Arménie*, N° 4. October 1993, p. 39. Akçam probably meant that a Turkish recognition of the genocidal nature of the events of 1915, in view of Turkey's strong backing of the Azerbaijani position, may now have a favourable effect on the attitude of the Armenians and thus help in some way to establish a suitable atmosphere for fruitful negotiations between the warring sides. This reviewer thinks, however, that Akçam's general approach in questioning the universal validity of long-established nationalist convictions and the high reverence he accords to the sanctity of individual human life, make most of his other arguments relevant to this war as well.
  18. Roupén Boghossian, «Turk Mdavoragani me Dadamsoun Mdooroumnere» [The Hesitant Thoughts of a Turkish Intellectual], *Zartouk*, 20, 21 & 24 May 1994. This review was originally published in *Baykar* (Boston), January-February 1994, pp. 28-35.
  19. Toros Toranian's review was first published in *Ararat*, 7-16 October 1993 and later republished in a separate booklet, T. Toranian, *Haygagan Hartse : Yergou Modetsoum* [The Armenian Question : Two Approaches] (Aleppo : Cilicia Publishers, 1994), pp. 7-48.
  20. Ms. Pehlivanian's review in Armenian of Hofmann, *Armenier und Armenien — Heimat und Exil* is published in *Zartouk*, 25 May 1995 and in *Ganch*, 28 May 1995.
  21. See *Azg*, 2 March 1994; *Zartouk*, 10 June 1995.
  22. *Les Nouvelles d'Arménie*, N° 4, October 1993, p. 39.
  23. See the article by N. Gürel, «How Can Armenian Terrorism Be Prevented?», published in East Germany in the official organ of the Turkish Communist Party's Central Committee in August 1983. I have consulted its Armenian translation published in *Aztag* on 17-19 November 1983.
  24. In a paper recently presented in Yerevan, the researcher Anush Hovhannisian has repor-

- tedly mentioned a few other Turkish authors, like Putuoglu, Tahsin Celali and Arzu Toker, who are said to be among those «revisionists» who confirm that the Ottoman Armenians were subjected to a policy of genocide; see *Aztag*, 8 & 15 April 1995. This reviewer has, unfortunately, been unable to consult directly the works of the authors mentioned.
25. *Ararat*, 20 May 1995.
  26. See Murat Bojolian's article in *Zartonk*, 11 April 1995. The article was most probably originally published in *Azg* (Yerevan), but this reviewer has been unable to consult the supposed original source.
  27. *Ararat*, 20 May 1995.
  28. Akçam, *Türk Ulusal Kimliği*, p. 7.
  29. *Nor Marmara* (Istanbul), 22 February 1993.
  30. «Yeritasart Turke Amachoum e Ir Karavaroutian Ararkits» [The Young Turk is Ashamed of his Government's Posture] (an interview with the author Gevorg Emin, an Armenian participant of the same conference), *Azg*, 20 March 1993.
  31. The only exception to this recent hardening of the government line is the full publication of the paper delivered by Levon Marashlian during the 11th congress of the Turkish Historical Society (*Türk Tarih Kurumu*) in September 1990 in the volume of the proceedings of that conference; see *Zartonk*, 30 March 1995.
  32. *Azg*, 2 March 1994.
  33. Zarakolu was also simultaneously sentenced for an additional six months in prison for publishing a selection of articles by the imprisoned Kurdish deputy Yasar Kaya; see *Azkayin Meshagouyt* (Beirut), 4 March 1995; *Zartonk*, 27 April 1995. She had previously, on 6 May 1994, been also sentenced to five months' imprisonment for publishing a book on the Kurdish question, which, the court ruled, was undermining «the indivisible unity of the land and people of Turkey»; see *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 48, N° 4 (Autumn 1994), p. 713.
  34. *Aztag*, 24 May 1995. See also A. Beylerian's article on this subject published originally in *Haratch* (Paris), 27 & 28 April 1995 and re-published in *Azkayin Meshagouyt*, 3 June 1995.
  35. *Turkey Briefing* (London), vol. 8, N° 4 (Winter 1994), p. 2.
  36. See the Arabic translation of the said interview in the *Shu'un Turkiyyah* (Beirut) quarterly bulletin, published by the Center for Strategic Studies, Research and Documentation. N° 15, Spring 1995, pp. 31-33.
  37. *Aztag*, 21 February 1995.
  38. *Nairi* (Beirut), 29 July 1995.