

ARMENO-TURCICA

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**ARMENIANS AND TURKS: CONTACTS IN HISTORY
FROM SELDJUKIDES TIMES UP TO THE END OF THE
19TH CENTURY¹**

*We are always inside the history.
Karl Jaspers.*

One thousand years is a tangible period of history. There are not so many peoples on the Earth, which have a 1,000-year-old history of neighborhood. Armenians and Turks are just among those few groups of peoples.

However, the history of the neighborhood of Turks and Armenians has another peculiarity, which makes it unique in many respects. It is a history of neighborhood of the peoples, whose relations were effected by a terrible catastrophe, such as genocide.

It is not accidentally that I use word catastrophe. Genocide is a large-scale catastrophe, which distorts the process of normal development of not only the victim-people, but also of that, who sullied itself by participating in this terrible crime as a result of the ill will of its rulers.

"It is a dark spot on the forehead of my people," said Ahmed, one of the heroes of the novel "*Romantika*" by the well-known Turkish writer Nazim Hikmet.

Genocide factor lays a great responsibility on us, historians. As we are not only "inside the history," as Karl Jaspers wrote in the last century, but also to some extent create it by our professional activity, that is, interpretation of historical reality. That is why, a quiet study of the history of the neighborhood of our peoples without surplus emotions will contribute to creating such conditions when it will become possible to start the uneasy way of overcoming the negative consequences of genocide, and I believe in it.

¹ Text of paper is based on the talk given at the International Conference "In the History and Beyond History: Armenians and Turks: One Thousand Years of Relations», organized by the Institute "Venice and Europe". Cini Foundation, Venice, Italy, October, 2004.

I have chosen the factor of existence of Armenian statehood as a criterion for panoramic review of the main periods of history of our peoples' interaction. Just the statehood of Armenians, as the 1,000 years history of various Turkic peoples in Asia Minor is, factually, the history of uninterrupted statehood.

Thus, the neighborhood of Armenians and Turks processed in two forms: relations between two sovereign states or residence of Armenians as part of and subordinate to Turkey. If one takes into account that all the Turkish countries in Asia Minor were Islamic states, it is necessary to admit that Armenians were subjected to double discrimination there: national and confessional. Of course, in different periods of time, the discrimination was of different heaviness, but its essence remained unchanged. That is, Armenians evidently did not enjoy equal rights, which had its impact on the nature of the contacts between Armenians and Turks.

Basing on this criterion, I propose that the history of Armenian-Turkish contacts should be divided into three main periods. Of course, it is a conditional division.

The first period of time embraces the 11-14th centuries. Both aforementioned forms are characteristic to it.

The second period of time is some 500 years of Armenians being as part of the Turkish state – Ottoman Empire, that is, here we deal with only one form of neighborhood. It includes in it the period beginning from the 15th and ending in the 20th centuries. Factually, this period of time resulted in the Armenian Genocide.

And, finally, the third period of time began in the 20th century, when the Armenians statehood was restored. I'd like to believe that its main leitmotiv would be liquidation of negative consequences of the catastrophe of genocide.

I

The Armenian-Turkish contacts started in 1016. The tribes of Turkmen mercenaries serving in the armies of the various Emirates located on the territory of Iran raided the Armenian Kingdom of Vaspurakan ruled by the dynasty of Artsrunies. They deeply impressed the local Armenians not only by their unusual appearance and the way to fight, but also by their traditions. Thus, the historian of the 11th century Tovma Artsruny mentioned their "horrifying" appearance and that they lived "in mountains, valleys and deserts."

This clash between Armenians and Turks can be characterized as a cultural shock suffered by the settled population of Armenia engaged in agriculture from the first meeting with nomadic tribes. Though at the cost of great losses, the Armenians of Vaspurakan managed to maintain their independence and made the Turkmens to leave the borders of their state, however, the fear of the new raid was so great that the King Senekerim preferred to yield Vaspurakan to Byzantium in order to save at least the physical presence of his people. Thus, already the first contact with Turks had grave consequences for Armenians: though indirectly, but it resulted in collapse of Vaspurakan Kingdom.

After those events, starts the 75-years period of gradual conquest of almost the whole territory of Armenia by various Turkic tribes. Those years are described in the Middle Age Armenians chronicles as a period of chaos, physical annihilation of population and hold up of rich towns.

The modern Armenian historiography divides that period into two stages. If the first stage was the period of separate raids, which weakened and shook various Armenian state formations, which was taken into advantage by Byzantines, the second period was connected with systematic conquests by the armies of Seljuks under command of the sultan or his commanders.

The first stage resulted in establishment of almost full control of Byzantium over Armenia, and the conquest of Armenia by Seljuks completed the second stage. Thus, at the initial stage of Armenian-Turkish contacts the factor of a third regional force originated as one of the most important factors, which has remained up to nowadays. At first, it was Byzantium, then Iran, and later it was Russia. All these states were geopolitical rivals of Turkey. The most important direction of this competition was aspiration to establishment of control over the Armenian Plateau.

It is clear that this competition had its impact on the Armenian-Turkish relations and in the most unexpected way. There were many cases when Armenians perceived Muslim - Seljuks as the lesser of two evils and established allied relations with them against Christian Byzantium, which did not hide its aggressive goals in respect to Armenia.

As regards Byzantium, at first, it used Turkic raids for successful completion of its policy of invading Armenia, and then failed to properly protect it from Seljuk-Turks.

The establishment of domination of Turk-Seljuks over Armenia not only led to a sharp reduction of socio-economic and cultural level of the country, but also resulted in mass flow out of the population. This process especially activated after occupation of the big Armenian town of Ani in 1064. Simultaneously, the process of settlement of various Turkic tribes in the Armenian Plateau started.

In the same period of time, such form of the Armenian-Turkish neighborhood as residence of Armenians as part of various Turkish states began. It was often leading to destruction of economy, sharp decline in the level of social and cultural life of the Armenian population, to strong national and religious pressure by the ruling Turkish element.

However, there were periods of time of comparatively favorable attitude of the Turkish authorities to the Armenian population. Thus, in the 12th century a peculiar "modus vivendi" was established between the Seljuks and various groups of the Armenian population. The Seljuk rulers needed Armenian merchants, craftspeople, architects.. Favorable conditions were created for them, there were even cases when Armenian refugees returned from Christian Byzantium to their native country, however, under rule of Muslim-Seljuks.

At the same time, it was already then that cases of forceful mass conversion into Islam and enslavement of the Armenian population were observed, in particular, *Ghulams* institute originated, when the Armenian boys converted into Islam were educated at special schools and used as a military force or on public service.

Besides, various groups of the Armenian population were converted into Islam on the voluntary basis, mainly, representatives of the higher strata of the population for social reasons. Thus, a transitional group of population originated between Christian-Armenians and Muslim-Turks, which were called *Armens* by the Arabic middle-aged sources. It were Armenians who voluntarily admitted Islam, but did not lose their ethnic roots.

In several cases one could speak of a peculiar *symbiosis* between Armenians and Turks. Thus, in our opinion, the Armenian-Turkish relations in the emirates of *Danishmendids* and *Khlat* in the 12th century are characteristic. The coins of Danishmendids as a rule had a cross indicated on them, while the rulers of Khlat called themselves *Shah-i Armens*.

The relations between the Armenian Cilician Kingdom and various Turkish states were an especially interesting page in the history of the Armenian-Turkish relations. In our opinion, they were especially noteworthy as it was interstate relations. That is why, we think that it was the very period in

the 1,000-year-long history of the Armenian-Turkish relations, which has a direct exit to the our days when both Armenia and Turkey are sovereign states.

I shall not dwell on all the details of the Armenian-Turkish interstate relations of that period of time. I shall emphasize just one point, which attracted my attention and which I think is of great importance.

In the period before appearance of Mongols in the region of Cilicia, a peculiar rather tenuous balance between the leading regional forces of that period was maintained i.e. Byzantines, crusaders, Vatican, Seljuks, Mamluks, European states or, if these forces are brought to the confessional basis, which was rather important in that period, between the Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Islam

Cilicia was obliged to its art of equilibration between these forces (of course, there were other reasons as well) for its existence and comparative welfare in such complicated and important region in the world in that period of time.

The situation began changing after origination of a new stern force of Mongols in the region in the 40s of the 13th century. Owing to the fact that there were pagans, not Muslims, Christians, mainly, crusaders, Vatican and the Armenians of Cilicia tried to establish allied relations with them and to use them against Muslims: Seljuks and Mamluks. Armenians succeeded in it as they acted rather rapidly. At first, King Khetum sent his brother Smbat there as his Ambassador, and then he personally visited the Great Khan of Mongols and proposed an alliance against Muslims. As the proposal was mutually advantageous, the alliance was established. Armenian troops alongside with Mongols participated in a number of battles against Mamluks and defeated them at Aleppo and Damask.

As a result, Cilicians' relations with Mamluks and Seljuks worsened, but they managed to achieve real guarantees of security and territorial integrity for their state. In particular, Seljuks had to stop their policy of permanent pressure and demand of large contributions by Cilicia Kingdom, supported by their armed raids to the depth of Cilicia, which greatly damaged the country, as it was in 1233 and 1245.

However, as a result of changes in the regional geo-strategic situation, what seemed to be a great success of Cilician diplomacy turned into a catastrophe. Becoming aware that Mongols, who established control over a considerable part of Islamic Syria due to Armenians, became so strong that caused threat to them, Crusaders unexpectedly established an alliance with Mamluks. As a result, Mongols were defeated and they had to leave the region of Eastern Mediterranean. Thus, Cilician Armenia was deprived of its "strategic

ally," speaking with modern terms. As the fragile balance established in the past, before Mongols' period, was broken, Cilician Armenia was subjected to new, even more severe attacks by its Islamic neighbors, Mamluks and Seljuk Turks, who aspired to "punish" Cilician Armenians for the alliance with their enemies, Mongols. Especially severe was the attack by Mamluks, who reduced the prospering country into ruins within several weeks. Cilician Armenia could not recover from that terrible attack, though existing for some one century. Later its territory and the Armenians residing there were included into the Ottoman Empire.

Thus, the first period in the history of the Armenian-Turkish relations resulted in collapse of the Armenian statehood. The Turkish factor played a considerable role in it. As a result, the Armenian people proved to be part of the Turkish state. Hereby, more than five hundred-years history of Turkey's domination over Armenians was initiated.

2

In the course of such short time set for our talks it is very difficult to characterize such a large period of time rich with important historical events as the "Ottoman period" for the Armenian-Turkish relations. However, I shall try, emphasizing only its several, the most significant peculiarities, in our opinion.

The Armenian-Turkish relations were carried out at several levels in that period of time and were different from the spatial point of view. I shall explain my idea.

Those relations were determined by a great number of circumstances. I shall mention only several of them.

At first, they were reflection and at the same time realization of the Islamic theoretical approaches regarding to Christians in practice. I shall not dwell on them, all the present are professionals and know them very well.

Second, in our opinion, rather important and determining the whole spectrum of the Armenian-Turkish relations in the Ottoman period was the fact that they developed up to the middle of the 19th century under the control of the Turkish ruling elite, which interests, in our opinion, were determined with the following goals:

- To maintain control over the strategically important Armenian Plateau (which is known to had been an object for strong rivalry between the Ottoman Empire and Iran for several hundreds of years);
- To maintain the power over the Armenian population;
- To rule Armenians in a maximum centralized way.

The form which would secure an achievement of these goals in respect

to Armenians and other subordinated peoples, Christians and Jews, in the most optimal way was found already in the 15th century by the Turkish rulers in the person of Sultan Mehmed II. This form is called a *system of millets* in the scientific literature.

Rich research literature is dedicated to this brainchild of the sultan, the conqueror of Constantinople, however, discussions on it do not end, often arising diametrically opposite opinions on the essence of the system of millets. Several researchers consider it almost a prototype of the modern confederate approach to the state structure of polyethnic and polyconfessional societies like Swiss Confederation. Meanwhile, others consider it an instrument of oppression on dependant peoples. Having no intention to participate in those discussions at the moment and without going into detailed consideration of all the peculiarities of functioning of such a complicated system as the system of millets, undoubtedly, was, we shall only mention several important, in our opinion, points:

- As the millets were formed by the authorities, they served, first of all, to their interests. We have already touched upon those interests;
- At the same time, owing to their peculiarities, they secured some internal autonomy for the members of the millets;
- Normal functioning of the system of millets was possible only in conditions when the force of arms and the centralized state government supported it.

When in the 18th century the force of the Turkish arms weakened and disintegration of the system of centralized government started, the system of millets stopped fulfilling the goals set to it by the state power.

There were spheres in the State attitude to the Armenian population, which were not included either in the sphere of Sheriat or in the sphere of the system of millets. Among them is, first of all, the practice of *devshirme*, a system by which Christian male children at the age of 8-20 were seized, with the object of their conversion into Islam and denationalization, as well as for their future use in the government or military service. The Middle Age Armenian manuscripts are full with descriptions of the horrors devshirme.

There were other levels of Turkish-Armenian contacts in the Ottoman period (till the end of the 19th century) as well. In particular, the relations between representatives of the lower *strata* of the two nations. Unfortunately, that level of the Armenian-Turkish contacts has been left without attention of specialists so far both in Armenia and Turkey. One can suppose that it is one of

the spheres wherein the cooperation of the Armenian and Turkish historians (and not only historians) will be especially fruitful.

For example, the study of the problem of Armenians' participation in the movement of *Celali* seems to be interesting. Like the joint studies of the spheres of the Armenian-Turkish cultural, scientific, language contacts would be interesting. Of course, a considerable work has been carried out here both by the Armenian and Turkish specialists, a great number of facts have been accumulated. However, joint generalizing studies are necessary.

However, at the empirical level a considerable contribution of the Armenian people to the culture and science of the Ottoman Empire can be stressed in a preliminary sense. One can speak also of a *peculiar syncretism* at the level of everyday culture between Turks and Armenians, which is still felt nowadays both in Turkey and Armenia, as well as in Armenian and Turkish Diasporas in some cases. In short, multi-profile specialists have much to study here.

Above, I have already mentioned the differences in the Armenian-Turkish contacts depending on the spatial factor. I meant that starting from the 18th century great was the number of Armenians who had settled in Constantinople and Smyrna. While in the 19th century, they were playing a great role in the lives of these towns. The difference between the Armenian-Turkish contacts in those towns and those in the territory of Western Armenia was striking. In those towns, the situations on the whole, and in particular, the state of Armenians, were safer.

Meanwhile, in Western Armenia there were no elementary guarantees of security of either property or life. The Armenian sources of that period are full with information on massacres, robbery, requisitions, and open discrimination Armenians by the Turkish authorities.

Weakening of the central power in the 18th century even more worsened the state of the Armenian population, as the factor of oppression and terror by the Kurd tribes, became an addition to the oppression by the authorities. The Kurdish tribes took advantage of impunity and direct support by the authorities, methodically expanding their natural habitat in the territory of Western Armenia.

The process of political modernization of the Ottoman Empire initiated by the pro-western part of the Turkish elite in the epoch of Tanzimat was a

some kind reaction to the challenges created by the *dysfunction* of the millet system and led to the changes in the nature of the Armenian-Turkish contacts.

It would be interest to dwell on the problem of the role and place of Armenians in the process of political modernization of the Ottoman Empire in 30-70s of the 19th century. I especially studied this problem and disagree with the point of view of both the specialists in Armenian and Ottoman study that they are only "objects" of reformative activity. I have chosen and analyzed only three problems of the great variety of issues connected with these subjects, which I think are presentable enough.

1. Cases of durable personal contacts of Armenians and the leading Ottoman rulers of those years, the initiators and heads of the process of political modernization. I give a conditional determination to these relations, such as "friendship."

2. Armenians as part of the so-called "modernizer" Ottoman bureaucracy, in particular, in the Foreign Ministry of the Ottoman Empire.

3. Participation of Armenians in the struggle for declaration of the First Ottoman Constitution.

My study of the problem "Armenians and the process of political modernization of the Ottoman Empire" allowed the following: first of all, to make a conclusion on the *involvement* of Armenian figures of liberal trend into this process; second, to reveal *the tendency towards gradual activation of their role* in it, which was more clearly displayed in the period of struggle for the First Ottoman Constitution.

At the same time, in that period, an aspiration was observed for *influencing* the process of modernization with the object of achieving its correction to the necessary direction. Armenian liberals came out against tendencies towards assimilation in interpretation of doctrine of *Ottomanism* by several Turkish governmental and political circles and tried to achieve a legislative registration of the provisions allowing reforms on its basis in the spirit of <friendship and equality> of the peoples in the Ottoman Empire.

Characteristic is in this aspect the speech by a well-known figure S. Papazyan at the session of the National Assembly (the highest deliberative body of the Armenian millet) in December of 1876, several days before declaration of the constitution. He said: <Let's openly state to our Ottoman brothers and try to make them understand that we are Armenians and shall

preserve our nationality even under the Ottoman flag. Aspiration for amalgamation will not be useful for any of us, however we (the peoples in the Ottoman Empire are meant - P.S.) have common interests that is why we are a single whole as citizens of the Ottoman Empire..>. Many representatives of the Armenian elite shared this point of view in that period of time.

A new page in the history of the Armenian-Turkish contacts was opened by the first Ottoman Parliament in 1877-1878. As the study of protocols shows, there were cases of joint acts by the Armenian and Turkish parliamentarians on the basis of common interests.

However, soon forces counting on the return to the former pre-modernized methods of governance of the multi-national empire prevailed in the Turkish elite. In practice, it reduced to establishment of the regime of "zulum" of Sultan Abdul Hamid II.

The policy of mass destruction of the Armenian people for preservation and absorption of the territory of Western Armenia became a response of that regime to origination of the Armenian Problem.

The general result of the Armenian-Turkish contacts for the Armenian people was grave: loss of a considerable part of the historical Motherland and the achievements of its living activity in that territory, large-scale human losses. Such is the historical truth, bitter truth. Its recognition by our colleagues, Turkish historians, will contribute to the beginning of a long way towards overcoming of aftermaths of the catastrophe of the Genocide or paraphrasing Jaspers words the getting out of history.