

NATIONALISM AND ETHNIC CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST: FOCUS ON TURKISH-ARMENIAN RELATIONS IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

This paper examines the nature of Turkish-Armenian relations in the early twentieth century, focusing on the role of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey, the class structure of the Armenian community, their position and role vis-a-vis European capital and the Ottoman state, and their relations with Turks, especially Turkish capital, as well as their political position in the balance of class forces in late Ottoman society. To place the Armenian community within the proper social context of the Ottoman Empire, comparisons are also made with other (mainly Greek and Jewish) minorities concentrated within the immediate domain of the Ottoman central state.

The purpose of such analysis is twofold: (1) to delineate the class position and role of the Armenian community in late Ottoman society; and (2) to explain the rise of Turkish nationalism ushered in by the Young Turk revolution of 1908 and the subsequent hostilities towards Ottoman minorities, especially Armenians, that led to the massacre of 1.5 million Armenians in 1915 - the first genocide of the 20th century committed against a people with the premeditated purpose of exterminating an entire ethnic population¹.

The implications of this analysis go beyond attempts at understanding the Armenian genocide as such; they help place in the proper context the subsequent rise of Kemalism in post-Ottoman Turkey and the continued oppression of other ethnic minorities in Turkey to this day, especially the Kurds.

Moreover, an understanding of the roots of nationalism and ethnic rivalry in late Ottoman society and modern Turkey may help

¹ Adjarian Hrachya, "Hayots dere Osmanian Kaysrutyeay medj." Banber Erevani Hamalsarani, Yerevan, 1967; Charles Issawi, *In Economic History of Turkey*, Chicago 1980.

us understand the phenomenon of nationalism in general and its rise in other formations undergoing a similar experience throughout the Third World.

The Class Structure of Late Ottoman Society and the Role of Ethnic Minorities

From its formation in the late 13th century to its disintegration and collapse in the early 20th century, Ottoman society was dominated by a strong central state that, despite continued dynastic struggles at the throne, lasted for over 600 years. Dominated by the Asiatic mode of production for centuries, land in the Ottoman formation was the property of the state which controlled and regulated it through a system of administrative structures². However, the state's land allocation system (timar), which involved the granting of land to warriors who took part in the Empire's military adventures, together with the administration of state lands by the tax collectors in rural areas, who maintained de facto control of the land, eventually led to the development of private ownership of land and other means of production and the emergence of a landowning class. Some of these landowners were Armenian, others were Greek and Kurdish, and still others Turkish. The broad masses of the people in rural areas, however, were either peasants, tilling small parcels of land, or were serfs or laborers working on lands controlled by large landowners³. In the cities and urban areas, merchants engaged in local and international trade, small scale manufacturers and self-employed artisans and businessmen, together with the state bureaucracy and workers in different branches of production and services constituted the bulk of the population.

² Berberoğlu Berch, Turkey in Crisis: From State Capitalism to Neocolonialism. London 1982, p. 5.

³ Berberoğlu Berch, Turkey in Crisis...., p 8.

The Class Structure of Ottoman Society in the Early Twentieth Century

To gain greater insight into the class structure of the Ottoman social formation at the turn of the century, it is necessary to take account of the structure of class forces dominating the Empire's economy and polity during the final phase of its development.

Political power in the Empire rested in the throne of the central authority, the Padisah or Sultan, and his administrative deputy called the Sadrizam or Grand Vezir. Below this, and under the direct control of the Sultan, there existed the large but carefully organized Ottoman Palace bureaucracy⁴. The dominant economic interests in Ottoman Turkey during this period were made up of a grouping of big landowners (the ayans, derebeys, and agas) in the countryside, and comprador capitalists of mainly minority ethnic origin in major urban centers. In 1913, the traditional landed gentry (the ayans and derebeys), together with the agas, constituted 5% of the farmer families and owned 65% of the arable land. Given their vast economic power in the countryside, the big landowners were able to monopolize local political power and, through links with the rural Islamic clergy, impose their social and cultural domination over the peasantry. The subjugation of the peasant masses by the landlord-clergy coalition (the *esraf*) thus served the double function of exploitation and legitimization.

Largely involved in import-export trade and domestic marketing tied to European imports, the minority commercial interests, comprised of Greek and Armenian merchants and primarily concentrated in large urban centers, made up the basis of the Empire's comprador bourgeoisie⁵. The role of minority compradors

⁴ Berkes Niyazi, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey*, Montreal 1964, p.11-16; see also Divitçioğlu Sencer Asya, *Üretim Tarzı ve Osmanlı Toplumunu*, İstanbul 1971, p. 47-108; Sencer, M. *Osmanlı Toplum Yapısı*, İstanbul 1963.

⁵ Avcioglu, Doğan, *Türkiye'nin Düzeni*, İstanbul, Tekin Yayınevi, 1975, p. 284-286; see also Lewis Bernard. *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, 2nd

has been pivotal in two contradictory respects. First, through their key position in the urban economy they were in effect the agency for external economic penetration and control. Second, their position in the economy, vis-a-vis national industrial development, hindered the transition to the capitalist mode of production. Consequently, on balance, while their strategic role in accelerating contact with the West played a progressive role in the admittedly limited transformation of the Asiatic mode in an earlier period, the continued existence of the minority bourgeoisie as a comprador class -- as opposed to their transformation into industrial capitalists -- perpetuated the backward structure of Ottoman industry and contributed instead to the further dependence of the Ottoman economy on European capital through debt bondage and as supplier of raw materials, which assisted the development of capitalism in Western Europe. It is this latter role of minority comprador agents of European imperialism that in good part gave rise to the nationalist movement of the Society of Union and Progress and to the Kemalist forces who made a last ditch effort to save the Turkish state in the final years of the Ottoman Empire.

Closely linked with the minority comprador group and the Palace bureaucracy was foreign finance capital or the imperialist bourgeoisie. The penetration into Ottoman Turkey of imperialist finance capital during this period was based on the Empire's role as a raw materials-supplying semi-colony of the expanding European economy. Concentrated largely in the raw materials sector, foreign capital was also engaged in the construction of a network of railways in Western and Central Anatolia, with the sole purpose of accelerating the process of raw materials extraction in Turkey. The absence of the development to any significant degree of European manufacturing industries in Ottoman Turkey was "compensated" for by the flow into the Empire of European goods that were handled through the intermediary of the minority comprador bourgeoisie.

ed., New York 1968, p. 454-456; Gibb H. A. R. and H. Bowen, *Islamic Society and the West*, Vol. I, London 1957.

Hence, it was in this classic sense -- as an exporter of raw materials and importer of finished goods -- that the Ottoman Empire became, in essence, a de facto semi-colony⁶.

The dependent structure of the Ottoman economy during the 19th century, coupled with its tributary position in the Mediterranean economy encompassing the period since the early 16th century, did not permit the development of large-scale local industry. Consequently, there never developed a full-blown class of industrialists that would resemble the classical European national industrial bourgeoisie. While a limited expansion did take place in small-scale manufacturing and processing industries, it was largely the minority comprador bourgeoisie that, in addition to its traditional place in commerce, extended into the ownership and control of these industries and prospered under the terms of the Empire's externally-oriented economy. The small number of ethnic Turkish firms that operated in Ottoman Turkey at the time, however, had interests that were diametrically opposed to those of the imperialist and minority bourgeoisies. Although weak in numbers and economic strength, the political aspirations of Turkish industrialists coincided with and took expression in the leadership of the Nationalist forces as their economic position began to deteriorate with the further expansion into industry and trade of the metropolitan and minority bourgeoisies. It was this deterioration in the position of the Turkish national bourgeoisie that later drove its members on to the side of the Nationalist leadership in the struggle against the forces of imperialism and reaction, represented mainly by the Palace and the minority comprador bourgeoisie. Given the limited size and restricted nature of both national and foreign-owned local industry, the size of the working class was also small: in 1915, the number of workers employed in the industrial sector totalled only 13,485. Moreover, the ethnic composition of the working class was highly

⁶ Çavdar T. Osmanlıların Yarı Sömürge Oluşu. İstanbul 1970; see also Ergil Doğu. "From Empire to Dependence: The Evalotion of Turkish Underdevelopment." Ph.D. Dissertation. State University of New York at Binghamton, 1975, p. 130-131.

fragmented: 60 percent of all those employed in Ottoman industry were Greeks, 15 percent Armenians, 10 percent Jews, and only 15 percent Turks. Such ethnic diversity became an obstacle to the development of working-class unity.

The small, specifically Turkish segment of the working class was not only scattered among many small establishments, and not only isolated politically and culturally from the overwhelming majority of Turks who remained on the land as peasants, it was also culturally and politically isolated from the non-Turkish segments of the working class⁷.

This split within the working class reached its peak during the liberation struggle when non-Turkish workers identified with and joined the ranks of forces of their own ethnic groups and fought against the forces of Turkish national liberation. Isolated as they were in Istanbul and Izmir -- the main centers of industry which came under the control of foreign occupation forces during the liberation struggle -- Turkish workers were cut off from Anatolia and could not contribute directly to or affect the outcome of the national liberation struggle. Thus, several factors -- mainly the numerical inferiority, ethnic heterogeneity, and geographical isolation of the Ottoman working class -- held back the workers from direct participation in the National Front, which otherwise might well have influenced the direction and outcome of the liberation struggle.

In the Turkish countryside, the majority of the rural population consisted of small-holding peasants. Dispersed throughout the Anatolian interior and engaged in subsistence agriculture, the Turkish peasantry was under the direct control of big landowners who exercised economic, political and cultural domination over them through links with the rural Islamic clergy⁸. While 1% of farmer

⁷ Ergil Dogu. "From Empire to Dependence: The Evalotion of Turkish Underdevelopment." Ph.D. Dissertation. State University of New York at Binghamton, 1975, p. 240.

⁸ Özgür Ö., Türkiye'de Kapitalizmin Gelişmesi, İstanbul 1972, p. 79-81; see also Cem I., Türkiye'de Geri Kalmışlığın Tarihi, İstanbul 1970, p. 310-311; Avcıoğlu Doğan, Türkiye'nin Düzeni. İstanbul 1975, p. 286-300.

families in 1913 accounted for 3,000,000 hectares (or 39%) of arable land, 87% of farmer families had access to only 2,700,000 hectares (or 35%) of arable land. This disparity in wealth and economic position did not, however, lead to the radicalization of the small-holding peasantry; neither did it ensure its voluntary participation in the national liberation struggle. Although objectively occupying a revolutionary position in terms of its class interests, the Turkish peasantry, given the enormous economic and political power and socio-religious control exercised over them by the dominant esraf, was unable to develop revolutionary class consciousness and transform the agrarian structure through united class action. Despite the grip of the landlords and the clergy over the peasant masses throughout Turkey, there were a number of mass peasant uprisings in Ottoman-Turkish history (e.g., Celali İsyanları) which challenged the rule of the esraf and the traditional landed gentry.

Finally, in addition to the small-holding peasantry, rural Turkey also contained a class of small merchants and local artisans, who, together with doctors, lawyers, teachers and locally based government officials, made up the core of the Anatolian petty bourgeoisie. It was in this intermediate group that the Kemalist forces first found their crucial support in laying the basis of their national campaign among the masses of the Anatolian peasantry. Dominated and controlled by imperialism and the minority bourgeoisie in the urban centers and oppressed under the rule of the ayan, the derebey, and the esraf in the countryside, the Ottoman petty bourgeoisie was highly fragmented, weak and lacked an organizational base to consolidate its power to serve its own class interests in national politics.

Moreover, the lack of an organizational link between the urban and the rural areas among the different sections of the petty bourgeoisie was a major obstacle to the development of petty-bourgeois class solidarity throughout Ottoman Turkey. Among the different strata of this class, it was the sections associated with the various bureaucratic organizations

of the state -- above all, junior army officers and nationalist intellectuals and journalists, who in an earlier period had embraced Unionist politics and had participated in the Young Turk nationalist movement -- that emerged as the top leadership of the nationalist movement which came to confront the various ethnic groups holding an important position in Ottoman society.

The Role of Ethnic Minorities in the Ottoman Social Formation

Ethnic minorities -- made up of Armenians, Greeks, Jews, and numerous other national groups situated throughout the empire -- played an important role in the Ottoman social structure. Concentrated mainly in Istanbul and Izmir, the Greeks, the Armenians, and, to a lesser extent, the Jews had already obtained a commanding lead in the trade and finance of the Ottoman Empire by the late 18th century⁹. As the ethnic population grew in size over the decades, their position further improved and began to play a dominant role in key branches of the Ottoman economy by the end of the 19th century. In the Ottoman capital, Istanbul, Armenians, Greeks, and Jews together constituted upwards of half the population of the city during this period. Of the 1 million inhabitants of Istanbul, 500,000 were Turks, 400,000 Armenians and Greeks, and 100,000 Jews and Europeans¹⁰. Elsewhere, in Izmir and other major cities of the Empire, although relatively smaller in population size the minority communities had obtained a disproportionate control of the local economy and reaped substantial wealth from the Empire's commerce, finance, and other economic activities. A German account of the role of Greeks, Armenians, and Jews in the Ottoman economy, published in 1912 in Berlin, states:

⁹ Issawi Charles, *The Economic History of Turkey 1800-1914*, Chicago 1980, p. 54

¹⁰ Adjarian Hrachya. "Hayots dere Osmanian Kaysrutyeay medj." *Banber Erevani Hamalsarani Yerevan* 1967, p. 62.

They have divided everything between them or together dominate the terrain. Practically all that concerns the immediate necessities of life is in Greek hands. All branches related less directly to living but rather to the acquisition of civilization are almost exclusively in the sphere of the Armenians; they have the large textile businesses, the large iron, tin, and zinc businesses, and also all that pertains to the building trade. Only the small fancy-goods, haberdashery, and colonial goods trades are left to the Jews. Even the money business--from large bankers down to paltry money-changers--is, in Constantinople, mainly in Greco-Armenian hands; there are only small Jewish bankers there, and very few money-changers.... The antiquity dealers and rug merchants of Constantinople are almost without exception Sephardim¹¹.

In Izmir and Salonika, however, the Jews played a more active role in trade and commerce, though Greek and Armenian presence in the former was quite substantial.

In his book «The Economic History of the Middle East and North Africa» Charles Issawi points out the central role played by Armenian, Greek, and Jewish compradors in the Empire's import-export trade by focusing on "the growth of export-import firms that could handle and finance the outward flow of agricultural produce and the inward flow of manufactures and other consumer goods". "These firms," he adds, "were almost wholly foreign:"

British in Egypt and Iraq, French in Syria and North Africa, British and Russian in Iran, British, French, Austrian, Italian, and others in Turkey.... Their access to the farmers was through small merchants and moneylenders recruited chiefly from minority groups--Armenians, Greeks, Jews, Syro-Lebanese Christians--who advanced money, bought crops for resale to the exporters, and marketed the goods consumed in the countryside. Sometimes minority members

¹¹ Sussnitski Alphons. "Die wirtschaftliche Lage der Juden in Konstantinopel." Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums (Berlin) (8, 12, and 19 January 1912), Charles Issawi, The Economic History of Turkey, Chicago 1980, p. 70.

established their own contacts with Britain, France, and other industrial countries, setting up branches of export firms¹².

Thus, "In Turkey," writes Issawi, "the Greeks, Armenians, and Jews, in that order, dominated the urban sector and controlled a considerable part of the rural."

The Galata bankers, consisting of Levantines and minority members, had controlled finance, and their replacement by modern banks only enlarged the field; in 1912, of the 112 bankers and bank managers in the Ottoman Empire only one was a Muslim Turk. In industry, it has been estimated that only 15 percent of capital belonged to Turks. In commerce, Armenians and Greeks established themselves in Europe early in the 19th century and handled most of its trade with Turkey. In agriculture, millets were particularly active in such important cash crops as silk and cotton¹³.

In other activities, the percentage breakdown for 1912 was as follows:

<u>Economic Activity</u>	<u>Turks</u>	<u>Greeks</u>	<u>Armenians</u>	<u>Others</u>
Internal trade	15	43	23	19
Industry and crafts	12	49	30	10
Professions	14	44	22	20 ¹⁴

Another, Turkish account of the economic activities of Greeks, Armenians, and Jews in western Turkey (mainly Istanbul and Izmir) provides a more detailed description of their involvement in foreign export trade--in this case the shipment abroad of agricultural products:

¹² . Issawi Charles., *The Economic History of the Middle East and North Africa*, New York 1982, p. 6.

¹³ . Issawi Charles, *The Economic History of the Middle East and North Africa*, New York p. 89-90.

¹⁴ . Indzhikyan O. G., *Burzhuaziya osmanskoi imperii*, Yerevan, 1977, p. 211-14, cited in Issawi C., *The Economic History of the Middle East and North Africa*, p. 90.

Almost all the produce from a vast segment of Anatolia connected with Izmir used to come there and fill the large area from the Fruit Market as far as the Customs. And in this area swarmed people of all nations and also those whose origins were unknown but who used to be known as the residents of Izmir. These people carried various papers of identification, as if they were Europeans, but their hive consisted of Greeks, Armenians, and especially Jews. This hive had a ceaseless activity, its members buzzing around and endlessly sucking the available honey supply to the extent of flooding their gizzards. There were also a few Turkish shops here and there....

When the producer in Anatolia was not bound by contract to a foreign export merchant, he would bring the remainder of his crop to the middlemen at the Fruit Market.... Thus, the Turkish merchants constituted mostly, in fact wholly, this class of people who satisfied themselves by being the middlemen between the producers and the export merchants...

In this commercial battleground, the producers were the victims; the foreign and semi-foreign elements the profiteers; the Turks the onlookers. Certainly, the strongest, most active, and cleverest were the Jews¹⁵.

Thus, as the above partial, Turkish account of the role of ethnic minorities in the Ottoman formation clearly demonstrates, the Armenian, Greek, and Jewish tripartite ethnic enclave in Ottoman Turkey came to be viewed in Turkish eyes as a "semi-foreign element," having interests contrary to that of the vast majority of the Ottoman population and the Turkish nation in general. Strong, ideologically-ridden nationalist views similar to the one expressed above were instrumental in the hands of the Young Turks in fueling feelings of resentment among the Turkish population against all non-Muslim ethnic minorities in Ottoman society, especially against Armenians, given their close proximity to centers of Ottoman state power during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

¹⁵ Uşaklıgil Halit Ziya. *Kırk Yıl*, 5 vol, Istanbul, 1936, Excerpted in «The Economic History of Turkey», Charles Issawi. Chicago 1980, p. 72-73.